

# **Our Freedom to Learn in Practice: A Description and Analysis of the International Language School Group**

**Leslie Simonfalvi**  
**International Language School, Budapest, Hungary**

## **Abstract**

The author introduces his orientation to the person-centered approach and describes his experience of founding and serving as director of the International Language School Group with its person-centered style. He explores how Rogers' (1961) personal thoughts on teaching and learning are fulfilled within this context. The author suggests that the school represents a unique, mature example of a Rogerian educational institution and way of being.

## **Introduction of the Person to the Person-Centered Approach**

I am Leslie Simonfalvi, founder and director of the International Language School Group. I teach English for speakers of other languages and train teachers to do the same. I have to tell you sincerely that up till the summer of 1984 I had never heard of Carl Rogers or humanistic psychology. It was at that time when the organizers of the first Cross-Cultural Communication Conference invited me to Szeged in southeastern Hungary. They wanted me to help in the translation and interpretation and offered me a place as a participant.

The topic itself, i.e., "The Person-Centered Approach" neither attracted nor repulsed me since I could not associate anything to it from my earlier studies. In the end, my curiosity triumphed and I accepted the offer. As I soon learned, this decision changed my own life a great deal, as well as the lives of many people around me.

The author may be contacted at [ittdc@mail.tvenet.hu](mailto:ittdc@mail.tvenet.hu).

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At the beginning of the conference, I fell into the trap that quite a few newcomers fall into when they first meet the Rogerian principles in operation within a group. I came from the private sector, from a very competitive field where time is money and where money can buy time. I first felt very uneasy and then nervous because “nothing was happening” for a long time. My focus was zoomed in on how many useful things I could have done instead of just sitting here.

I had no preconceived ideas about the unique quality of time, i.e., the notion that besides its length we are all very conscious of, time has an unquantifiable quality, as well. I had no idea, either, about the great number of very important happenings there and then under the surface, since I did not have eyes and ears for them. I had to wait for all these, and a great deal more, till the small-group sessions where our facilitator, Dave Buck, gave us a very sketchy overview of the most important ideas and principles mentioned repeatedly in the big group and in private conversations. It was nothing more than an attempt to create a conceptual framework, and he did it as an answer to the request of many teachers in the small group.

I founded my school in Budapest largely as an antithesis to the British Teacher Training Institute in which I was trained. There I first did not like, and then later came to despise, the star-trainer attitude that reduced trainees into untalented imitators of the great star. One step further, it resulted in newly trained teachers’ attempts to reduce intelligent, albeit beginner, students into slugs. In my new school, I wanted to get rid of all these and wished to apply a different approach to the language, to teaching, to learning, to students, to colleagues, and to myself. It was so different from my earlier experiences that I could not even name it.

During the conference I consciously chose Dave Buck’s small group simply because it was most geared to education. I was looking for something I had no direct experiences of before, and I could only vaguely define it through its opposites.

When we talked about the basic principles in the small group, I had serious difficulties with the translation. The language itself did not pose any problems. The real problem came from becoming and being involved. My involvement produced a lot of thoughts, and the thoughts brought in an uncontrollable number of associations. My

mind turned into a human ROM – read-only memory – meaning, “Leave me free of your thoughts. I have enough myself.” My job was, or would have been, to translate the thoughts of others.

Instead of translating, I wished to transmit the message to anybody and everybody: “This is exactly what we want to do! This is almost exactly what we have been doing!”

Instead of translating, I also wished to transmute the dirt — our successful practice that has not been proved by theory, and has not thus far been approved by Hungarian academia — into gold. Our practice proves Rogers’ theory.

It was difficult to translate others’ thoughts and opinions and to keep out my own thoughts. It was almost impossible not to try to “help” some group members who aired a high number of killer phrases of the “not here,” “not now,” “not with them,” and “not me” type. I wanted to dissolve their doubts on the basis of my experiences, and I wanted to answer their questions instead of translating them, thinking that “these are topics we have been through and we know some of the answers.”

Luckily, these storms were mostly in me, and the members of the group did not recognize much of my problem till later when I told them in detail. These storms made an otherwise enjoyable job extremely hard work. Almost 20 years later, I found myself in a very similar situation when I translated Carl Rogers’ “On Becoming a Person” into Hungarian. I needed a higher-than-average level of conscious attention so as not to filter my own associations into the translation. If possible, this task was even more difficult than the first because I had 20 years more experience, coupled with 20 years of conscious learning, in putting Carl Rogers’ ideas into the daily practice of language teaching and teacher training.

In many books and articles, Carl Rogers gives us enough ideas through which the person-centered approach can be applied to education, teaching, and teacher training. He stresses repeatedly that these are his views that have proved to be true for him, and he also warns us from overgeneralization. He does not give a closed set of rigid dogma but rather a very logically built up set of criteria. When we go at it, however, we may realize with a shock that the practical

realization of Rogers' system is on the borderline of the very difficult and the impossible.

### **Description in Light of Rogerian Assertions**

In what follows, I will attempt to describe my school and its teacher training college in the light of the Rogerian criteria. There are some we have managed to apply and apply well. There are others that have not been, or have not as yet been applied successfully. In a Rogerian manner, I have to state that this is the way we operate, but it is not a model for anybody else to operate by. There might be a number of other ways to apply Rogers' ideas to education, and those ways might as well be called Rogerian.

The International Language School Group operates as a symbiosis of the International Language School and the International Teacher Training & Development College. We do not train masses, we do not want to be big, and we do not take part in "the-big-fish-have-eaten-the-small-fish-and-now-the-sharks-are-eating-the-big-fish-and-the-barracuda-has-already-started-to-taste-some-of-the-sharks" popular movement.

#### *Integration of Pupils*

We are ready to teach the "problem child" and difficult, or difficult-looking, adults, but only when integrated into normal groups. In this way, the "special cases" have a chance to learn how to integrate themselves, and the group also has a chance to learn how to integrate differences. Here are some examples to these special cases:

- Students with dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia, or students who are stigmatized by their schools as dyslexiac, dysgraphiac, or dyscalculiac, are very often exempted from language learning, and some of them come to learn with us if the parents are caring enough not to accept the stigmas on their children and try to find a way out;
- Students with hyperactivity, hypoactivity, or attention deficit, or students who are stigmatized as such, are very often sent to us

by their schools if their teachers are caring enough not to accept the stigmas as final;

- Drop-out students who are given a “second chance” are very often sent to us by their school where teachers do not quite know what to do with them;
- Roma or Gypsy students, who come to us and stay if the family can tolerate the great deal of changes in attitudes and daily routines these students will show in a short time;
- Students with mild cases of autism, Asperger’s syndrome, or semantic-pragmatic disorder who can only come to us if their doctors or psychologists do not ill-advise them to stay away from language learning;
- The concrete child and the concrete-thinker adult student.

In the teaching of the more difficult cases, the teacher’s mentor role is very strong, so our teacher training includes the mentor training, as well.

### *Symbiotic Elements*

The International Language School is a symbiotic element in the relationship if we can provide an ideal field for the teaching practice of the teacher training. It is a basic interest of the language school, since teachers who meet Rogers’ definition of a teacher can only be trained through very conscious and concerted efforts. Without such teachers, a school that meets Rogers’ definition of a school is not possible.

The optimal size of the language school is such that it contains all sorts of students whose teaching and learning we teach at the college. In such a school, we can show everything in practice, including the teaching of students with different levels of motivation, different attitudes, and different kinds of difficulties in learning. If the language school cannot fulfill this role, we are a parasite in the relationship. The International Teacher Training & Development College is also a symbiotic element in the relationship if we can serve all sorts of needs that are felt in the language school and if we find pedagogical answers to all sorts of difficulties. In other words, the trainees will learn how to

teach real groups of real students and find real solutions to real problems. If the teacher training college cannot fulfill this role, we are a parasite in the relationship. The entire operation functions within Rogerian principles in all its activities, processes and relationships.

*Point-by-Point Consideration of Rogers' "Tentative Meanings"*

Now I will consider Rogers' "tentative meanings" one by one as they are applied to the International Language School Group. They are quoted from "Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning" from *On Becoming a Person* (Rogers, 1961, p. 276-277) [italics Rogers].

(1) *"In my experience, I cannot teach another person how to teach."*

This principle is totally fulfilled, since we do not want to teach our trainees how to teach. Instead, we show them how we teach, and through this we want to suggest that a certain pedagogical problem is not impossible to solve. We let them be different; what is more, we suggest to all trainees to find their individual ways. There are no suggested answers to any one of the questions.

We teach persons rather than books or languages.

(2) *"Anything that can be taught to another person is relatively inconsequential, and has little or no significant influence on behavior."*

This principle is totally fulfilled for the transmission of information. What we do teach is beyond the information and will only be useful for any student or trainee if they can realize and formulate the rules themselves. We teach in an indirect way that the students or trainees and the teacher who learns with them are not the objects of someone's teaching, but the subjects of their own learning. The worth of the teacher and the teaching is not, or is not primarily, related to the information-giving, but more to the quality of the attention they can give to the students or trainees. All these mainly act upon the behavior of the students we learn together with.

(3) *"I realize increasingly that I am only interested in learnings which significantly influence behavior."*

Here are a few examples for the learning, induced in the other, significantly influencing behavior:

- I dare to learn in the presence of, and very often from, my student;
- I radiate that for me learning together, or as they see it my teaching, gives me a lot of joy, and this is an absolute precondition for their joyful learning;
- Exactly the same way, I radiate that for me learning together, or as they see it my teacher training, gives me a lot of joy, and joyful teacher training is an absolute precondition of their joyful teaching;
- I show assertive behavior, and avoid by all means to be seen as a martyr, or to be felt as an aggressor;
- I do my best to get rid of both anger and fear in our learning space for our whole learning time, and this is an absolute precondition of feeling joy;
- If either anger or fear is present, getting rid of this is the next most important job, rather than trying to learn and seeing what happens;
- Joyful language learning, or joyful learning of anything, has therapeutic force and therapeutic value;
- I only deal with the students or trainees who are present and avoid pouring the frustration I may feel about the persons who stay away onto the persons who are present;
- I do not spend time on trying to “mend the past” if at the same time I ruin the future.

When dealing with very difficult cases, I often act upon the other by not doing something, e.g.:

- The others would secretly back out of doing their tasks, or even out of our relationship, and would do everything and say everything that would result in an attack in their other relationships according to common rituals;

- They want me to do the same, to attack them, but I am prepared and I do not do that;
- I accept them unconditionally, show unconditional positive regard, and they are not prepared for that and fall out of their usual choreography, or;
- In a similar manner, the other persons would like to clam in self-pity and want me to shame them;
- Instead of shaming them I show empathy, and they are not prepared for that and fall out of their usual choreography, or;
- The others would secretly give themselves up and would like to be dependent on me and want me to manipulate them;
- Instead of manipulating them, I show unaffected, coherent behavior, and they are not prepared for that and fall out of their usual choreography, or;
- The others would like to feel isolated and rejected, and toward this end they do everything that would result in their total annihilation according to their common rituals;
- They want me to totally neglect them, too, but instead I show unaffected, coherent behavior.

Overall, they are not prepared for these facilitative efforts and fall out of their usual choreography, thereby learning and growing more whole.

(4) *“I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.”*

Here are a few examples of learning that significantly influences behavior:

- horizontal learning – only acquired if it is accepted as equally valuable;
- learning that is comprehension-based rather than knowledge-based;
- learning in which comprehension is an advantage but not a source for pride;

- learning in which lack of understanding is a disadvantage but not a sin;
- learning in which we can supportively wait for the comprehension if the lack of understanding is obvious;
- learning in which we do not test the comprehension if the lack of understanding is obvious;
- learning in which nothing is taught or defined with itself, i.e., every new bit of learning is made comprehensible by previously learned and digested bits;
- learning for which the teaching is micro, or pico, or nano, so as to be able to bridge the gap from knowledge to comprehension rather than the risky jump;
- learning that can be different for each and every student induced by the same teaching;
- learning that can be similar or the same for more students due to the different teaching styles applied, depending on the learning strategies;
- learning for which the teacher uses only methods the teacher can learn by.

(5) *“Such self-discovered learning, truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience, cannot be directly communicated to another.”*

This point is realized from the entrance exam onward, which is two-way and mutual. All new applicants, both potential students and potential teacher trainees, are invited to spend a day with us and see what we understand by learning together. When working together, they also show how they learn, their strengths as well as their weaknesses. They can experience how we learn, and they have the right to know why we learn in the way we do, to what extent it can be different, and for what other reasons it cannot be totally different. In the end, the applicant can decide whether they want what we offer and whether it is our offer they really want.

(6) *“As a consequence of the above, I realize that I have lost interest in being a teacher.”*

As a consequence of the above, I realize that I only want to be a teacher if both the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn are assured and only in a teaching-learning environment where these are assured both for myself and for my students.

(7) *“I have come to feel that the outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful.”*

The outcomes of teaching, i.e., learning together with my students, can be important and useful. When it is like this, it proves the truth of Carl Rogers’ opinion rather than questioning it.

(8) *“When I look back at the results of my past teaching, the real results seem the same — either damage was done, or nothing significant occurred. This is frankly troubling.”*

If I look back at the results of my past sessions of learning together, some of them were useful and a few of them were very important. This fact proves Carl Rogers’ point rather than questioning it. When it is like this, it is the result of what we have learned from Rogers. At this point, Carl Rogers was seriously handicapped since he did not have a mentor who was called Carl Rogers.

(9) *“As a consequence, I realize that I am only interested in being a learner, preferably learning things that matter, that have some significant influence on my own behavior.”*

It is totally realized at the International Language School Group since our sessions of learning together are very often full of “aha!” or eureka experiences, and the accompanying joy we feel today is the basis of the motivation for learning tomorrow.

(10) *“I find it very rewarding to learn, in groups, in relationships with one as in therapy, or by myself.”*

In our case, joyful learning and mentoring have, or may have, therapeutic value.

Autonomous learning needs a self-directed learner. In Hungary, self-directedness is generally only on the wish-list for both teachers and students because we are a very unassertive society. Slowly but surely, we are learning the skill and our students can learn it fast from us as role-models.

(11) *“I find that one of the best, but most difficult, ways for me to learn is to drop my own defensiveness, at least temporarily, and to try to understand the way in which his experience seems and feels to the other person.”*

This point is especially important in our teacher training, and toward this end we have included emotional intelligence and social intelligence in our training program.

(12) *“I find that another way of learning for me is to state my own uncertainties, to try to clarify my puzzlements, and thus get closer to the meaning that my experience actually seems to have.”*

At this point the greatest help is to follow the listening > speaking > reading > writing routine for skills training. Because of this, by the time we write something down, the speed of writing is a great deal closer to the speed of speech and the speed of thinking, and it makes writing a great deal less frustrating.

Our aim is very similar to a reading technique in which we enter into a dialogue with the writer and add many of our associations to the conversation. We will find that the thoughts of the writer are of secondary importance after our own thoughts, and they are only there to trigger the new thoughts and new feelings.

(13) *“It seems to mean letting my experience carry me on, in a direction which appears to be forward, toward goals that I can but dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current meaning of that experience.”*

This sort of experience comes most easily in a synergic group. Here the importance of the study material is secondary since we mostly learn ourselves. It is very important to realize that the depth of the learning is most important, rather than the speed of fingering the book.

### **Rogers' Conclusions from the Meanings**

Based on the 13 points, Rogers (1961, p. 277-278) draws the following conclusions. Again, I will consider our situation in relation to these points:

(1) *"We would do away with teaching. People would get together if they wished to learn."*

With adult students, it is exactly like this. However, it is very different with small kiddies and teenagers to start with, since kiddies are not and teenagers are not necessarily motivated at the entry. Their parents are motivated to bring them here. As we learn together, they get motivated, and this changes the parents' roles as well. The parental push is over and the parents will let them come.

In the initial period, there are lots of problems with the different definitions given for such basic terms as teaching, learning, teacher, school, etc. It is a major investment to come to a consensus on these terms.

(2) *"We would do away with examinations. They measure only the inconsequential type of learning."*

I think Carl Rogers underestimates examinations. Besides measuring inconsequential type of learning, examinations can measure the stress they themselves cause. We have really done away with internal examinations. If examinations are still very important for any reason, we will find an external examination body. We do not run internal examinations because we know something better.

If I learn a few hundred hours together with a student, I will know a great deal more about them than through any formal examination. The examination becomes a two-way process, and we share the profits and we share the losses. This learning-together examination gets rid of the old slogan: "If you know it well, I am a very good teacher. If you know nothing, you are good for nothing, but I am still a very good teacher."

In the case of teacher-trainees, I know a great deal more about them if we learn together a few thousand hours than through any formal examination, however sophisticated it might be. Without formal examinations, the joyful side of teacher training dominates, and teaching as a profession has a higher chance to give joy for all concerned. Here the amygdala principle applies, i.e., fear or anger and joy mutually exclude each other. To make this already complex picture even more complex, whatever we learn in fear or with anger will go to the short-term memory and leave the body according to the metabolic cycle. It will not be available for any association, and what we will remember is only the fear or anger that accompanied the learning.

(3) *“We would do away with grades and credits for the same reason.”*

There are no grades at the International Language School Group since we know something better. We do not compare students horizontally. We only compare students with themselves, like, “How does your present best compare with your yesterday’s best?” If the trend is positive, the absolute level is secondary, and it is only a question of time and it will be high.

There are no credits at the International Language School Group either since we know something better. We do not compare trainees against each other. We only compare trainees with themselves, like, “How does your present best compare with your yesterday’s best?” If the trend is positive, the absolute level is secondary, and it is only a question of time and it will be high.

(4) *“We would do away with degrees as a measure of competence partly for the same reason. Another reason is that a degree marks an end or a conclusion of something, and the learner is interested in the continuing process of learning.”*

I have no problems whatsoever with anybody’s degrees of any kind. I think so in spite of the fact that in Hungary politics has still too much influence in education, and, as a result, “university” is quite often an adjective of place rather than a qualifier in “university professor.”

There is another, very interesting aspect of this conclusion I want to mention here. Working for, and even craving for, a higher degree is

neither good nor bad in itself. To be able to decide whether it is good or bad, we have to see what the new, higher degree does compared with the one that preceded it. Here are relevant questions for consideration:

- Will it help me understand concepts and theories I could not understand before?
- Will it help me solve problems I could not solve before?
- Will it help me link my original field with neighboring/overlapping disciplines, thus giving a unique insight into both?
- Will it make my successful practice easier to further develop?
- Will it make the theories behind my successful practice easier to understand?
- Will it make the theory of theories even more theoretical?
- Will it make my inefficiency more easily defensible?
- Will it give me a winning point in some power games?
- Will it take me further away from students, teaching, and ultimately from work?

The continuing process of learning, i.e., lifelong learning, is a very important buzzword today. I do believe that learning should first become enjoyable and enjoyed, and the resulting knowledge and understanding should first become practically useful and used before we extend the length of the learning process.

Most probably, the idea above can be applied to the level of intensity, as well. We have, just to give a small example, two lessons per week, and it is a great deal of stress. Our learning together brings no result. Some authority up there decides that the number of lessons should be doubled to show results. The balance, as you can imagine, will be four lessons per week with a great deal of stress and still without any results.

I strongly believe that two hours of stress per week is better than four hours of stress per week. It may sound cynical, but it is true that our efficiency is higher if we reach the nothing in a mere two hours per week rather than in four.

(5) *“It would imply doing away with exposition of conclusions, for we would realize that no one learns significantly from conclusions.”*

This point is most relevant for conclusions that try to, and more and more regularly do, scapegoat the student. Let us take the “LD child” as a small example.

We can read “LD” in at least three different ways in English:

- LD – learning disabled, read unable to learn. If this is the final conclusion, then we cannot do anything. Give him his Ritalin and lock him up on his ghetto. This is the conclusion in most schools in Hungary.
- LD – learning difficulty, read the conclusion is that this student has lots of difficulties and with his limited chances he can survive only in a special class. This choice is the second best.
- LD – learning difference, read he can learn but differently from most of the others. The first step is to recognize this different learning as learning, and then we have to learn how to learn in his way. This is the real bottleneck toward learning how to teach in his way and ultimately to teach him how to learn in our way.

Carl Rogers’ definition of a school above does not go into details about the chances for such a school or teacher training institute to fit into the system of non-Rogerian schools and teacher training institutes. Neither does it say anything about the chances of accreditation and ways of running such ventures without any financial backing from the state educational system.

It is an especially hot topic in Hungary, where you are welcome to innovate if:

- the new ways bring all the promised new results, and;
- they meet all the vintage specifications that have been considered valid since out-of-date times.

### **Conclusion: Broad Stroke Relationships to the Person-Centered Approach**

Some final unstructured thoughts on how we are linked to Carl Rogers and his lifeworks:

- The traditional tripartite role-model of the teacher, i.e., being a source, being a manager, and being a facilitator, has a fourth element added in our schools: being a mentor. We need to add mentoring mainly because the students have changed a great deal over the last two decades or so. In mentoring, the Rogerian principles are fully recognized;
- The facilitator-teacher does not teach in the traditional, didactic sense of the word, but rather he or she creates an optimal learning environment, helps in setting up objectives/goals/aims, helps in finding the delicate balance between the intellectual, social, and emotional intelligences, and probably most importantly, takes an equal part in the learning process.
- A school that operates according to Rogerian principles is a great deal more efficient than a traditional school. This efficiency is the best answer to such cynical statements as “person-centered school = full heart + empty head.”

### **References**

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