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Teaching Media Literacy through Task-Based Instruction

SNEZHANA ZHELTOUKHOVA

1. Introduction

This teaching practice report explores ways to apply the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach to teaching media literacy as a module in a Russian bridge course. The abundance of misinformation and propaganda flooding the Internet due to the Russia's invasion of Ukraine makes it necessary to teach media literacy to Russian language learners as early in their academic journey as bridge courses. A bridge course is defined as a third-year semester-long class where the goal for students is to move from Intermediate to Advanced proficiency. According to deBenedette, "such a course would be largely content-driven but not entirely content-based and would aim for a balance of content- and language-driven work" (deBenedette, 2020, p.188). The purpose of a bridge course is to equip students with learning skills and tools to interact with authentic materials marking a shift from language-based instruction to content-based upper-level courses. The module I present in this article is one quarter of the 11-student bridge course I taught in the spring semester of 2022. I designed the media literacy module for three weeks, which equals roughly eight contact hours. The additional three modules were organized around the topics of education, prominent figures' biographies, and cultural geography.

I chose the TBLT approach because it fulfills the dual purpose of teaching media literacy and improving students' Russian proficiency. At the same time, TBLT has been recognized as an effective method for teaching content, and it has been implemented in all-level second language classrooms¹ (see, for example, Ellis et al., 2020; Long, 2015; Nunan, 2004; Nuss & Whitehead Martelle, 2022). U.S. government language programs have found TBLT to be effective (Leaver & Kaplan, 2004), as have

¹ All references to proficiency levels in this article are based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012).

immersion programs (Nimis et al., 2022). In this article, I describe a set of tasks designed to facilitate student engagement with Russian language media and to develop media literacy. I begin with an overview of TBLT methodological principles and provide a summary of the media literacy education principles I adapted for my module. I then offer a description of the module's goals, tasks, materials, and assessments. I also highlight successes and challenges of this task-based module by summarizing students' comments from a post-module survey.

2. TBLT

TBLT is a multifaceted approach that encompasses multiple methodologies and a variety of syllabus types. The core characteristic of the approach is its focus on learning a language by actively using it while completing a real-world task (Ellis et al., 2020; Long, 2015; Nunan, 2004; Willis, 2004). In other words, the main focus of the TBLT approach is the use rather than the knowledge of a language. The scholarship on TBLT varies in its definitions of the task. While providing a comprehensive list of task definitions is beyond the scope of this article,² for the purpose of the module design I use the definition offered by TBLT scholar David Nunan (2004), who summarizes the field's views:

A pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. (p.4)

Nunan's definition of task emphasizes that task-based performance assessment targets "a student's ability to *do* real tasks, or simulations thereof" (Long, 2015, p. 330) rather than positioning language knowledge as the object of scrutiny.

The major theoreticians and practitioners of TBLT emphasize the adaptability of the TBLT framework and encourage educators to create

² For more information, I would refer readers to the recent volume *Task-based Instruction for Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language* (2022), edited by Svetlana Nuss and Wendy Whitehead Martelle.

and customize tasks according to the specific goals and learning outcomes of each class (e.g., Nunan, 2004). Below are the main principles I used as my guidance in task type design based on works by Comer (2007), Ellis (2003), Long (2015), Nunan (2004), Nuss and Whitehead Martelle (2022), Willis (2004), and others. I chose these particular principles as they are central to TBLT and provide a clear pedagogical framework for me as a module designer.

First, a task should reflect real-world language use and incorporate authentic materials. Second, linguistic scaffolding should be provided according to learner proficiency level. Importantly, a task should have clear outcomes besides language skills. In the case of my module, one of the goals was to enhance the students' media literacy. The learning outcomes related to this goal were measured with can-do statements (see Section 3 of this article). Finally, a task should promote interaction in various forms, including peer interaction and interaction with the outreach community.

One of the cornerstone principles of designing a task and planning a task-based lesson is reflection (Nunan, 2004). As an instructor, I reflected on the module in the form of the analysis provided in the present article, while students provided their formalized reflection on the task through end-of-semester open-ended survey responses. Therefore, reflection will inform and modify my future instruction of the module.

Another guiding TBLT principle for this module was task repetition. Just as within-task repetition has been widely recognized as a beneficial principle for improved proficiency (e.g., Bygate, 2018; Kogan & Bondarenko, 2022), researchers argue that task-type repetition similarly improves learner oral and written performance (DeKeyser, 2018; Hu, 2018; Nitta & Baba, 2014). I actively recycled certain tasks within the module following this principle. According to Nunan (2004), the main benefit of task repetition is due to naturally occurring language recycling that "allows learners to encounter target language items in a range of different environments, both linguistic and experiential" (Nunan, 2004, p. 36).

In the recent volume *Task-Based Instruction for Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language*, most contributors "noted connections between their implementation of tasks and the concepts of authenticity, cultural awareness, learner-centeredness, and motivation in language learning" (Whitehead Martelle & Nuss, 2022, p. 210). Those concepts guided my

module design as well. Specifically, the reading input for the module was an excerpt of discourse from Russian speakers intended for a Russian audience in accordance with the authenticity concept. Some complex vocabulary and syntactic structures created extra challenges and required sustained motivation on the part of students to complete tasks. Additionally, certain phenomena discussed on the news required supplemental cultural commentary. The cultural component was intrinsically included in the learning materials, thereby allowing students to increase their cultural awareness.

Within the field of TBLT, multiple classifications and typologies coexist based on task nature, purpose, and implementation.³ For the purpose of the module, I utilized cognitive tasks and information-gap tasks. Cognitive task types usually aim at major cognitive processes and vary in the levels of difficulty and creativity involved. They range from listing, sentence sequencing, and comparing to reasoning, evaluating information, debates, and research. The primary purpose of information-gap tasks is for learners to acquire specific information through interaction with peers in order to complete the task (Leaver & Kaplan, 2004). I provide more details on the module task types in Section 3.

3. Media literacy

Educators worldwide recognize the importance of teaching media literacy because “media literacy competencies are directly connected to democratic rights, active citizenship, and technological literacy” (Wilson, 2019, p.4). Learning the main concepts and principles of media literacy is part of the university curriculum at my institution, and a number of initiatives focus on improving information literacy skills among students. The institutional Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), “Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Information Literacy,” provides faculty with resources and training to enhance lower-level courses with “the critical skills of information literacy and critical analysis” through course redesign and expansion (Stetson University). Thus, I envision teaching media literacy in the target language not as an isolated effort but rather an inseparable part of the higher education curriculum. Student reflections on the module reconfirmed the existence of the connections between this

³ The typologies are summarized in Ellis (2003).

Russian language course and other courses that tacitly develop skills for a responsible and informed use of media.

The QEP initiative encourages faculty to employ any of the six frames listed in the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL Board, 2016) as a guiding mechanism for designing media literacy components integrated in student education. The six main interconnected frames of the Framework are: Authority is Constructed and Contextual (ACC); Information Creation as a Process (ICP); Information has Value (IV); Research as Inquiry (RI); Scholarship as Conversation (SC); and Searching as Strategic Exploration (SSE) (ACRL Board, 2016). These frames are the lenses through which faculty members view and teach media literacy. The *Framework* does not prioritize any particular frame; rather, it encourages its flexible or partial implementation in an interdisciplinary curriculum. The coursework for the module under discussion mostly implemented the ICP frame due to its focus on understanding the information creation process and the resulting range of information formats and modes of delivery. The ICP frame emphasizes the learner's ability to assess the unique constraints of each information creation process and to recognize the implications of information formats (ACRL Board, 2016).

Other frames were left out of the module's scope due to insufficient time or participant proficiency level. For example, the SC frame involves contributions to scholarly conversations and "the ability of students to express their own voices through diverse media" (Schwarz, 2005, p. 11), which requires Superior-level proficiency. According to the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012), speakers at the Superior level are capable of producing abstract elaborations in scholarly conversations, while speakers at the Advanced level are more comfortable discussing concrete matters.

Within the ICP frame, I define media literacy as the ability to understand the functions of media, to critically evaluate their content, and to make informed decisions about media content. For learners, it is important to recognize the following principles of media creation put forth by Wilson (2019): all media outlets are constructions; the reality reflection is distorted by multiple determining factors in all media; media constructs versions of reality; media content contains ideological and value messages; and media messages contain social and political implications.

While teaching media literacy through the ICP lens, I targeted the ability to analyze texts for reliability as one of the module's goals. Wilson (2019) suggests questions to enable media consumers to detect possible constraints that influence the creation process. Students were required to analyze the following questions while working with a news article for the class:

- What is the source of the information? Can you verify the source? Who owns the media platform or information source?
- What is the main message of the article? What facts are presented to support the main message?
- Who will benefit if people accept this message? Who will lose?
- Whose point of view does the media text present?
- Does the platform allow for sharing different points of view?
- Does the message appeal to logic or emotion?
- Which values and priorities are conveyed as a result?

Next, students were asked to identify the political and/or ideological position of the authors or to identify political groups who benefit from that text. This required that students pay attention to whether texts provided alternative views for a well-balanced coverage of events. These questions and tasks were intended to help students make an informed decision about the messages conveyed in this information source.

4. Application of the TBLT approach in a Russian media module

This section describes the main features of the Russian media module and its main task characteristics. First, it provides the rationale for using the TBLT and media literacy frameworks for the module. Second, it describes the module's goals, learning outcomes, and assessment. Finally, it provides specific task examples.

Russian media space is drastically divided. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there have been dueling media messages between government-controlled television channels as well as other news-generating media (newspapers and Internet-based organizations) and opposition news outlets. Although public activists, educators, and researchers have been concerned about the limited possibilities for those in

the opposition to freely express their views in Russia since as early as 1990 (Dunn, 2008; Liebschner, 2017), the situation has worsened since February 2022. Once the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, it immediately became clear that the state had complete control over the media and was using it to promote a particular political agenda by suppressing any opposing voices. Consequently, it has become critically important for students of Russian culture and language to be able to discern various media sources and to have an approach that would allow for rational interpretation and analysis of information. Hence, the media literacy competencies I target in this module include the ability to search for information, evaluate media content, and analyze it for possible propaganda in order to participate in a conversation with peers and the public.

While designing the module, I used the definition of propaganda from Renee Hobbs' *Media Literacy in Action* (2021):⁴

Propaganda is the use of media symbols in a systematic effort to influence attitudes, reinforce or change beliefs, and inspire action among a large number of people. Propaganda is carefully designed to tap into people's hopes, dreams, and fears, and it is commonly used in politics, business, and activism. (p. 114)

Propaganda is a form of persuasion that involves using language, images, and other symbols to influence the public's opinion. Another salient feature of propaganda is strict content control for the purpose of transmitting one-sided messages. Among highly used propaganda techniques are the activation of strong emotions, attraction of attention, simplification of information, and attacks on opponents (Hobbs, 2021).

My goals for the module on media literacy were for students to master a set of skills required to search for information in the target language, identify signs of possible propaganda, objectively evaluate the credibility of the information source, and participate in discussions with

⁴ While the concept of propaganda has been extensively researched, it is beyond the scope of the article to provide an exhaustive definition. In the course, I use the resource assigned in introductory media classes at my university, *Media Literacy in Action* by Renee Hobbs (2021). The author is an internationally recognized authority on media literacy education, and the book's content is timely, compelling, and thought-provoking (personal communication with faculty, 2023).

peers. These goals corresponded to the core concepts of the *Framework* (ACRL Board, 2016) discussed above.

The module's language-learning goals were informed by the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012). The purpose of a bridge course is to help students move closer to the Advanced proficiency level. At the Advanced level, learners demonstrate the ability not only to communicate on familiar topics related to their daily life, but to discuss topics of community, national, and international interest. As readers, they are expected to understand "the main idea and supporting details of authentic narrative and descriptive texts" (ACTFL, 2012, p. 22) as well as to recognize the main argument from a text.

I outlined the following student goals for the module:

- Intensive practice of language skills integrated in the module's curriculum;
- Development of basic media literacy skills in the target language.

4.1 Task characteristics

The task goals for students were to produce new and original work, such as oral presentations and discussions, based on texts and video materials. While the main focus of the module was on the reading materials, available online in open access, students were encouraged to watch the supporting video materials for a better understanding of the content. I limited the materials to newspaper articles available through open-access websites, which were sometimes supplemented by video- and audio-recordings, images, and viewer comments.

The task types used in class are information-gap tasks and cognitive tasks. The four tasks described below all fall under the focus-on-form task type in the dichotomy of focus-on-formS vs. focus-on-form. In contrast to the focus-on-formS principle, which prioritizes the acquisition of individual language elements such as declension patterns over meaning, the focus-on-form principle's primary focus is on meaning, or communication, rather than grammar. Focus on meaning alone has been shown to be insufficient for attainment of Superior-level speaking proficiency. Therefore, classroom instruction should shift learners' attention to linguistic features whenever students experience problems with their communicative tasks (Long, 1998).

I introduced the module learning outcomes to the students in the form of can-do statements such as the following to encourage regular self-reflection and to boost motivation:

- I can present on a piece of news (1- to 2-minute oral retelling of the articles);
- I can present on my analysis of information (2-3 oral presentations followed by Q & A);
- I can recognize possible propaganda;
- I can interpret and infer meaning from a range of sources in different modalities (written text and video);
- I can interact and negotiate with my peers to resolve matters while working on collaborative tasks.

The assessment artifacts for the module included individual oral presentations of news articles and small-group collaborative reports on specific news items. The assessment was predominantly content-based and did not specifically target grammatical concepts. It implicitly targeted key vocabulary, equipping students to make an informed decision on whether the article contained propaganda. The formative and summative feedback for the module ranged from low-stakes informal oral comments to a high-stakes formal grade according to the grading rubric for Task 3. The task assignments did not include vocabulary/grammar quizzes or a traditional grammar-based written exam.

The following section provides a description of sample tasks. Additionally, it provides the specific instructions and student handouts used for in-class and homework assignments (see Figures 1-4). I deliberately used simplified language for the task instructions and prompts to mitigate the cognitive load students experience in trying to comprehend assignments and rubrics provided in a language other than English. Some of the instructions have English translations for extra scaffolding.

4.2 Task examples

Since the beginning of the war, Russian state-run media holdings replaced the word *война* [war] with the word *специальная операция* [special operation], or used the preposition *на* [on] exclusively when speaking of

Ukraine (roughly equivalent to “the Ukraine” in English). To examine the phenomenon of propaganda-dictated vocabulary in more detail, I created a list of words that would help students evaluate the news sources (see Figure 1). For Task 1, I asked students to examine several news websites. After scanning the article titles, students were required to specify the overall style of content presentation and infer whether the source was pro-Kremlin/pro-Putin or independent. Then students skimmed the introductory paragraphs of the articles from the main webpage of each source, searching for words from the vocabulary list to support or disprove their original assumption regarding the source. I used this task type in March and then recycled it in April, with an updated vocabulary list reflecting the rapidly changing events.

Figure 1

Task 1 with Accompanying Vocabulary List

Задание 1.

- Прочитайте заголовки статей и рубрик на этих сайтах:
<https://www.dw.com/ru>
<https://www.gazeta.ru>
<https://www.hrw.org/ru>
<https://iz.ru>
<https://www.kommersant.ru>
<https://novayagazeta.ru>
<https://ria.ru>
<https://www.svoboda.org>
- Определите, какие из этих новостных ресурсов пропагандистские.
- Прочитайте первый абзац некоторых статей. Обращайте внимание на использование слов из списка ниже. Какие слова вы увидели?

Подконтрольные СМИ	Оппозиционные СМИ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Спецоперация • Военная операция (военный – military, война – war) • СВО (специальная военная операция) • Спецоперация «Z» • Присоединение • Воссоединение • Освобождение • Нацистский, нацисты • Беженцы с Украины • На Украине • Иностранные наёмники • Белоруссия 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Война • Агрессор, агрессия • Аннексия • Страна-террорист, государство-террорист • Террористический режим, террор, спонсор терроризма • Путинский режим • Вынужденно перемещённые лица • Оккупация/Оккупированный • В Украине • Вторжение • Беларусь

For Task 2, students read excerpts from different news articles on the same events and compared the information. Next, they worked on producing a collaborative short oral report that identified propaganda.

Figure 2

Task 2 Instructions

Задание 2.

- Прочитайте отрывок из статьи.
- Ответьте на эти вопросы по статье:
 - 1) О чём статья?
 - 2) Какая точка зрения у автора статьи?
 - 3) В этой статье есть элементы пропаганды, по вашему мнению?
- Сравните ваши ответы с ответами студентов из другой группы.

Task 3 involves scanning the article titles, choosing an article of interest, reading the article as a homework assignment, and summarizing the news report in class. I demonstrate the task in Figure 3. I recycled this task three times, as task-type repetition is highly encouraged in TBLT (see Bygate, 2018; Nunan, 2004). The reuse of the task types stimulates student oral proficiency (De Jong & Tillman, 2018), and it also makes students feel more comfortable each time they perform the task. For the purpose of scaffolding, I provided a list of high-frequency introductory words that help structure the report on an article, such as *в статье говорится* [the article talks about].

Figure 3

Task 3 with Accompanying List of Introductory Phrases

Задание 3.

- Выберите любой независимый источник информации.
Прочитайте несколько заголовков.
- Выберите самую важную или интересную для вас новость.
Найдите эту новость (если возможно!) в подконтрольном (syn. прогосударственном) (=state-run) интернет-ресурсе.
- Расскажите эту новость. Используйте текст, который вы прочитали. 1-2 минуты.

Вот список новостных сайтов на русском языке:

<http://aif.ru> Аргументы и факты – прогосударственная газета

<http://www.bbc.com/russian> BBC Русская служба новостей
(заблокирована в России)

<http://kp.ru> Комсомольская Правда – прогосударственная газета

<http://lenta.ru> прогосударственные СМИ, интернет-издание

<https://meduza.io/> Медуза интернет-издание на русском языке
(заблокировано в России)

<https://republic.ru/> Часть медиахолдинга «Дождь» (заблокирован в России)

Используйте слова и выражения из этого списка в своём пересказе:

Статья называется...

Автором текста является...

В статье говорится...

Главный вопрос в статье...

Автор пишет, что...

В дальнейшем автор утверждает, что...

В заключении статьи говорится, что...

Автор делает вывод, что...

По-моему,...

Во-первых, во-вторых...

С одной стороны, с другой стороны...

Task 3 activates the useful media literacy skill of strategic or iterative searching for information. By having the students retell the news on the topic, I verified that the students were able to successfully create with language and able to form skeletal paragraphs. As expected, students initially struggled with the assignment due to media language that is unabridged, unadapted, highly formalized, and sometimes overflowing with military terms. However, the possibility to do this assignment three times helped students feel more confident in their ability to scrutinize the propaganda of the pro-Kremlin sources.

Task 4 is more challenging: it involves meta-analysis of the article subtext in order to evaluate whether the text contains propaganda. Students are required to choose an article, read it, and answer eight questions about its contents. These steps help students construct an informed opinion on the article's validity and plausibility. In class, students worked in small groups and shared their conclusions regarding the text's trustworthiness.

Figure 4

Task 4 Instructions

Задание 4.

Выберите статью в интернет-ресурсе в открытом доступе. Прочитайте ее один или два раза. Ответьте на вопросы ниже:

- 1) Какие у этой информации источники?
- 2) Оцените эти источники информации. Они проверенные? Известные? Им можно доверять? Нет? Почему?
- 3) Какие факты в этой статье?
- 4) Какая точка зрения у автора статьи?
- 5) Каким группам выгодно, если люди поверят этой информации? Каким группам эта информация повредит?
- 6) Представлены ли альтернативные точки зрения в этой статье? Возможно ли высказывать альтернативное мнение на этой платформе?
- 7) Есть ли в тексте слова, которые указывают на возможную пропаганду? Какие это слова?
- 8) Есть ли маркировка «иностранный агент»?

На основе ответов сделайте вывод:
Это объективная статья или пропаганда?

5. Challenges and implications

At the end of the semester, students participated in a short survey reflecting on the four course modules, including the one on media literacy. Their open-ended anonymous responses regarding the media literacy module tasks demonstrated a high level of student involvement, the ability to self-reflect on their progress, and their appreciation for the non-traditional assignments. The evaluations of the module were overwhelmingly positive, with overall praise of the module's pace, relevance, and its use for other classes on current events, media, and politics. One of the students named the module among their favorite ones in the course due to its relevance to their other professional interests. Another student mentioned how

they analyzed some *Novaya Gazeta* articles for their thesis and noted that knowing the words from the module made the task easier.

The most common benefit that students mentioned was their increased confidence in encountering an overwhelming amount of information and their ability to navigate the Russian news sources. One of the students specifically mentioned Task 1 as providing an opportunity to see how events were presented differently by various sources. Another student specifically commented on Task 3 as an assignment that had the feeling of a real-world task, which is one of the main characteristics of TBLT.

While reflecting on the course input format, some students expressed their interest in watching more videos of Russian news. I thus intend to include more video resources when I teach this module again. As a result, students will have an opportunity to employ visual, auditory, and gestural modes of meaning in addition to the linguistic mode; that will encourage better understanding (Liebschner, 2017).

One major challenge was in the content itself: in each class we dealt with tragic, cruel, and graphically depicted events that involve death, extreme levels of injustice, grief, and misinformation. Another challenge arising from the content was the abundance of highly specific military vocabulary in some of the reports in pro-Kremlin media. I noticed a certain degree of demotivation demonstrated by at least two students in class, who expressed their thoughts in personal communications during the semester. Those students stated that they felt uninspired and uncomfortable learning about current events clearly portraying Russians as villains. They mentioned their desire to focus on positive representations of the country, culture, and people. They felt overwhelmed by the required level of political engagement based on the current situation and felt that the news reports on the Russia-Ukraine war were too numerous and too depressing for them to handle (personal communication with students, 2022).

Based on student feedback, I searched for ways to further motivate students to continue studying about propaganda in Russia and indeed to continue studying Russian. First, I made efforts to alleviate language-learning anxiety during the three weeks dedicated to current events while focusing on critical thinking and reasoning skills. For this purpose, I increased the number of low-stakes assessment tasks to reduce the stress level. The only summative assessment was done for Task 3. To increase the

level of personal interest, I regularly asked about students' autonomous engagement with and reaction to current events, emphasizing the connections between media discourses and students' personal experience. Personalization of the material fosters long-term motivation and results in the creation of positive emotional imprints that are necessary for further language learning toward Advanced and Superior proficiency (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Moreover, one way to recognize and fight propaganda in the media is to interview individual members of an involved community. This affords more personal involvement from the students. I organized a free-flowing conversation with an ethnic Russian, a Ukrainian citizen who was living in the U.S. at that time. The guest speaker willingly spoke Russian. Besides its ultimate importance in expanding student knowledge of the conflict, that conversation also helped contextualize the tasks, as students noted in end-of-semester reflections.

6. Conclusion

It has become critically important to teach media literacy in light of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the abundance of propaganda in public media spaces. The media literacy module described in this practice report aims to prepare students for informed consumption of Russian-language media so that they can differentiate Kremlin-backed and independent news sources. The TBLT approach described in this paper has proved to be an effective and engaging method according to student reflections and my observations as a teacher. The positive feedback from students emphasizes the module's relevance and real-world applicability, which empowered students to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways, such as reading media in Russian and applying for fellowships. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges of dealing with war-related content. This paper describes various strategies used in this course to keep students motivated throughout the module. Further studies on this important topic, along with practitioner reports on successful ways to keep students interested in Russian language and culture, are critical.

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