

A stage-by-stage approach to utilizing news media in foreign language classes at higher educational institutions

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Abstract

The importance of the media for foreign language learning is emphasized in this research. The multifunctional role of the media is described. The significance of a modern means of delivering news through the Internet is pointed out. A stage-by-stage approach to working with the media during foreign language classes is suggested and its efficiency is proved experimentally. Three stages, preparatory, procedural, and control, are proposed. The task of the preparatory stage was to select news articles that would cover most aspects of the socio-political life of the society, contain a representative vocabulary and meet the students' reading needs. The tasks of the procedural stage were to provide: an accumulation of socio-political vocabulary by students; development of their foreign language skills at the reproductive, reconstructive and creative levels; and the ability of free communication on socio-political topics. The purpose of the control stage was to assess learners' results according to the chosen criteria and indicators. The results of this experimental work strongly support that the proposed approach contributes to an improvement in reading, speaking, and listening skills, and the level of students' self-realization when utilizing media materials in foreign language classes.

Key words: foreign language, higher school, media, news, stage-by-stage approach

Introduction

The influence of the modern media on the young people's formation cannot be underestimated, as the media possess ideological, political, economic, moral, and organizational impacts on their behavior, values, and thoughts.

The consciousness of young people is sometimes characterized by instability, excessive criticism, maximalism, and emotional sensitivity. Therefore, they can be subjected to the most extreme influences. New approaches to forming students' attitudes and values are needed, and one of them is to use the news media as a powerful educational instrument.

In the current high-tech era, when in many homes it has become possible to receive television programs from abroad through satellite, tune in to any radio station, and read news from around the world on the Internet, language barriers often emerge as an annoying obstacle that precludes people from getting the information that interests them. Many students, as well as other adults often feel the need to learn a foreign language (FL) in a manner that would help them easily obtain the desired information from abroad.

A current analysis of FL courses that are popular among learners demonstrates that the socio-political aspects of language are not paid sufficient attention. Thus, the problem of developing students' skills to work with the news media is a necessary and desired topic in FL teaching.

The multifunctional role of the media allows their extensive use during FL classes, not only by helping to remove obstacles to accessing global information but also by ensuring students' learning of different layers of vocabulary, as the media provide the most up-to-date language across a variety of themes. Journalists, who usually attempt

to be maximally expressive and address their readership, use the most popular linguistic approaches. The media can be regarded as a practically inexhaustible basis for communicative activity, as events in socio-political life are often common topics for discussion by various layers of society, including young students.

Nevertheless, as the literature on this subject demonstrates, working with materials that focus upon the media is usually spontaneous and unstructured.

The aim of this research is:

- to specify the role and functions of the media in education
- to substantiate the effectiveness of the stage-by-stage organization of working with the media during FL classes
- to describe the technology required to implement this approach; and
- to present results of experimental work with media resources in FL classes.

According to Bell (1995) four practical and principled reasons explain why the language of media has been popular with linguists, applied linguists and sociolinguists. First, the media provide an easily accessible source of language data for research and teaching purposes. Secondly, the media represent linguistic institutions which output makes up a large proportion of the language that people use every day. Media usage shapes both language use and attitudes in a speech community. Third, how the media use language is interesting from a linguistic standpoint, in their own right. These include how different dialects and language are used in ads, or how radio personalities use language to construct their images and their relationships to an unknown audience. Fourth, the media present culture, politics, and social life-shaping and reflecting their formation and expression. Media discourse is essential both for what it reveals about society and for what it contributes to the character of the community.

Oroujlou (2012: 27-28) supports these ideas claiming that media's language is true to life and authentic source for accent, dialect, style, etc. – it can be used as a model in classes for language learners. The author points out the reasons justifying the use of the media in foreign language classrooms. First, using authentic language in language learning classes can enhance the proficiency of the students. Second, the media provide an easily accessible source of language data for learning purposes. Third, the media can familiarize students with real and authentic contexts that are necessary for language learning. Fourth, the media use different dialects and styles which can be interesting for language learners and can help familiarize them with various forms of a language.

But the implementation of the media sources can be successful only in case of effective didactic intervention. Otherwise, it leads to a non-productive language activity. «Professional activity of modern university teachers carried out in the information, and educational environment calls for flexible, productive thinking, creativity, highly developed innovative competence to work out and implement effective educational technologies» (Kubrushko et al., 2018).

Newspaper articles are considered to be the most suitable sources to communicate daily spoken language, cultural patterns and phrases or idioms (Vasbieva, 2015). To teach speaking effectively, the daily news can be read and debated orally in the classroom delivering news across the cultures and countries (Akdemir et al., 2012).

Media activate the visual style, but not all visibility will improve the effectiveness of learning, it should be a visual image that promotes theoretical thinking (Kubrushko et al., 2018).

Thus, the media presents the rich thematic and linguistic diversity of the most up-to-date educational material, and this cannot be ignored. Besides, the media help educate

a socially and politically active community, form political culture, and may even lead to developing a taste for politics.

The idea that classroom exposure to political issues predicts political engagement has been emphasized by Metzger, Erete, Barton, Desler, Lewis (2015), among other researchers. They found a positive relationship between high school classes that stressed civic responsibilities and the likelihood of collective problem-solving.

Beaumont (2011) came to the conclusion that the development of political agency among students utilizing political learning experiences is significant.

Implementing the course which will be targeted at pushing students to follow politics, to consider ways of addressing social issues, and stressing “solving public problems and building democratic society” (Boyte, 2008: 16), the universities can empower students to consider and take on the responsibilities of engaged citizenship (McMillan – Harriger, 2007).

In the learning process, the media can perform several functions. Undoubtedly, its primary function is that of providing information. Then we would mention the media’s role in the formation of the readers’ social consciousness, development of their analytical thinking, and perhaps even their social behavior. Additionally, we distinguish between the development of autonomy and cognitive interest, which is realized in the choice of the material that is of the readers’ interests. Some choose to read news from the sports section, while others may prefer the cultural pages, business section, or politics. The modern media tend to take into account the information needs of its consumers, while including news from the world of cinema, music, gossip, and so on. The subject matter of the media is very diverse, and this allows it to satisfy the needs of all kinds of readers.

The next role of the media to be highlighted is that of entertaining. Many readers, tired of senior, often dramatic or even tragic information, may want to rest, relax, and improve their mood. Therefore, all sorts of entertaining stories, trivia, and crossword puzzles, are typically included in newspapers and magazines.

In this modern age, people receive news from various traditional and increasingly digital sources. Printed materials, radio, television and of course the Internet, through which information is transferred to a large, geographically dispersed audience present modern mass media.

A recent study by Pew Research center (2010), demonstrates that after television, people use the Internet to obtain information about daily events, and traditional print newspapers are ranked as the third most common platform for receiving the news.

Online news sites seem to have significantly satisfied the expectations of the readers. Since most of the news found on the Internet is freely accessible, this has led to a decline in the promotion of print newspapers. There are other pitfalls in consuming news through internet sites, ranging from the proliferation of fake or questionable “news” web pages that are often indistinguishable from legitimate news sources, to the practice of search engines such as Yahoo! News and Google News to utilize a user’s patterns of news searches to modify the selection of stories that are prominently displayed on their computers.

Researchers have also identified that the link between citizens and news has become portable and participatory. About thirty-three percent of individuals tend to read news via mobile phones, and thirty-seven percent of individuals use social websites such as Facebook and Twitter to read newspapers. The number of people who use mobile phones and other web-based technologies has increased, and it is true that those on the younger end of the age-spectrum are less likely to use traditional news formats when compared to older age groups (Edmonds et al., 2011).

The younger generations are more interested in using modern devices when compared to other age groups, and most college students own a laptop and have access to the Internet via their mobile phones.

Since the Internet has become a vital tool for people who are interested in keeping in touch with each other and staying informed, it has simultaneously turned out to be a favorite source for civic engagement (Smith, 2013). For instance, about two billion users prefer Facebook or Twitter, and the majority use both to obtain news (Barthel et al., 2015). In addition to offering citizens the ability to follow the news, these social media platforms provide opportunities for citizens to group based on shared civic goals (Cherian, 2015), and to mobilize people to pursue real-world changes.

In sum, the functions of the Internet, especially in education can be listed as 1) warehouses of information, 2) communication without boundaries, 3) online interactive learning, 4) electronic/online research, 5) innovation in the new world, 6) improve interest in learning, 7) global education and 8) information catalogs (Park, 2009).

According to Dogruera, Eyyamb, Enevisab (2011: 606–607), when the educational aspects of Internet use are considered, it is evident that students or people in general, who seek information can access it quickly and at no or low cost. The Internet also provides students asynchronous education where they can reach any information anytime and anywhere. Also, the Internet can be used as a useful tool to learn up-to-date news all over the world as well as obtaining any information that serves different purposes.

Information from the Internet can be downloaded, printed, and processed as training material. It should be noted, however, that sometimes news articles have limitations that must be considered by a teacher/professor before using them in the classroom.

Efe, Demiroz, Akdemir (2011) remark that written material should be revised and simplified if needed before using it in the classroom and this process requires both time and effort.

According to the results of our survey working with the media, the material is generally spontaneous and carried out unsystematically from time to time. The forty-eight teachers they surveyed were asked the following questions: With what purpose do you work with the media? How do you get prepared for this work? What criteria do you use to select the content of news articles? How do you organize the work with the news text? What kinds of tasks do you prefer? What forms of work do you use? What learners' skills do you think should be developed while working with the media? In what way do you try to form students' interest to media in foreign languages and the need for self-education? Do you consider it expedient to use a methodologically grounded approach to work with the media material?

The survey shows that teachers have some experience in using media in FL classes, but the methods they use are not systematized. Typically, they have been developed without any scientific grounding, and they are mainly based on the intuition of the teacher.

When answering the question about how they get prepared to work with the media material, 78% of respondents said they just cut out articles from newspapers that are accessible to students in a content and language aspect. Another 22% process the materials somehow, that is, they may write out keywords and phrases without which students do not understand the text, or reduce the version, think over questions that check their understanding. However, all respondents consider it appropriate to use well-grounded approaches and ready-made resources to work with the media and understand its importance.

In the same survey, seventy-six students of a non-linguistic faculties were offered a questionnaire with, seven questions on the goals they set by reading or listening to news media in general, and in a foreign language in particular.

The students responded that listening or viewing the news: expands their horizons (18% of respondents); allow them to analyze complex political and socio-economic processes taking place in the society (15%); they are taught to be tolerant of points of view different from their own (13%); increase their general level of culture (12%); keep informed on the development of new technologies (11%); provide valuable information that allow them to foresee the future development of society (10%); provide ample material for communication with interlocutors (9%); allow them to reconsider their attitude towards particular things (5%); make it possible to know the language at the level that provides access to international media (48%); expand their circle of communication with potential business partners (36%); become acquainted with a FL in its most popular current version, thus giving the opportunity to communicate on equal terms with native speakers (16%).

Methodology

Throughout a two-year course, an experiment was conducted at some non-linguistic faculties to study the efficiency of the stage-by-stage organization of utilizing media resources in FL classes. An experimental group (E – 78 students) and a control group (C – 76) were created; the experiment was conducted in the natural conditions of the educational process and included the ascertaining, formative, and control stages.

To assess the effectivity of the proposed approach, the following criteria and indicators were chosen: 1) formation of skills: reading as a significant method of obtaining information from the media (indicator: the level of understanding the written material); speaking as an essential skill necessary for oral communication (indicator: quality of monologic speech which is the basis for both the dialogue and the polylogue); listening – understanding of sound material (indicator: perceiving news on a global, detailed, and critical levels); 2) students' self-realisation while working with media materials (indicator: positive attitude to working with the media).

The formative experiment implied giving classes in the experimental group with the use of media materials in a specially organized manner. In the control group, the use of media materials was not systematic and organized.

The work with the media as a planned, structured process was realized at the three stages: 1) preparatory; 2) procedural; 3) control.

The tasks of the preparatory stage were: a) selection of the media content taking into account the students' reading and professional interests; b) processing news articles in order to construct them as training texts, that is, (a selection of vocabulary, development of pre-text and post-text tasks, communication and problem situations); c) familiarizing students with the structure of media texts, their genre, and stylistic features.

The key task of the preparatory stage was to select news articles that would cover as many aspects of the socio-political life of society as possible, contain a representative vocabulary and meet the students' reading needs.

It seems that it would be enough to pick up articles regularly on different topics and offer them to students (as some teachers do). However, to enable students to communicate on the issues of the articles, a lot of preparatory work is required, including processing each article as a training text, but this takes too much time for each lesson, and often news becomes outdated by the following day.

Therefore, an idea emerged to develop a textbook that would include articles with content of a never-lasting character (those that describe meetings, negotiations, exhibitions, accidents, events that could take place in any country and at any time), remove references to specific dates, locations, personalities (or make them impersonal), adapt them, process them as training texts and teach students on this material. Such articles were taken from periodicals such as *The Guardian*, *Daily*

Mirror, and Daily Express, among others and popular Internet news resources such as BBC, CNN, and Euronews. They were adapted and processed to make them "timeless" so that they could be used as training material at any point in the future.

The next task of the preparatory stage was the processing of news articles to construct them as training texts by developing pre-text and post-text tasks, communicative and problem situations.

Another step in this stage was to familiarize students with the peculiarities of media texts. Students were acquainted with typical media styles and genres, drawing their attention to some features of media texts translation, for example, transliteration, calquing, extra-linguistic aspects of interpretation, and translation of phraseological units.

At the procedural stage, the following tasks were solved: a) accumulation of socio-political vocabulary; b) development of reading, speaking and listening skills at the reproductive, reconstructive, and creative levels; c) ensuring free communication on socio-political topics.

Each article was preceded by a glossary intended for compulsory learning. Since we had a mono-national audience, the words were given with the translation into their native language. If the audience is multinational, an English-English vocabulary can be offered. The vocabulary contained lexis that correlated with a specific topic and was likely to be encountered in another context. For example, the glossary to an article about holding an exhibition of Chinese goods contained the words "exhibition, fair, conclude an agreement, goods, exhibit, strike a bargain, trade turnover, bilateral relations, and negotiations," all of which are words with obvious frequency.

The work with each text started with a so-called "pre-reading activity" of posing questions of a general character related to the topic of the article, encouraging students to express their views on certain statements, "agree" or "disagree" with some assertions, and ground their answers.

After reading the text, the students completed post-reading tasks at three levels: reproductive, reconstructive, and creative, with the aim of developing such skills as reading, speaking, listening. A fourth necessary skill (writing) was also addressed, but because of short time limits for studying a foreign language at non-linguistic faculties, it was not a priority.

An additional effective method of actualizing the media vocabulary was listening to the news in FL or viewing news on the Internet with a subsequent discussion. Listening, as well as speaking, plays a crucial role in achieving the goal of language learning and forms the basis of communication.

Online news cannot be adopted as printed text, but at the initial stage, they can be downloaded if they are freely available and used as samples. Then, proceeding to listen to online texts with a subsequent discussion becomes possible.

During the experimental work, we used both traditional and innovative methods of work with the media. A standard conventional method of working with the media is the so-called "political information", which can be of the following types: surveys (a chronicle of events taking place in the world); thematic, devoted to specific issues of socio-political life; and problematic, during which the controversial political processes and phenomena were considered and debated.

Another method of work with the media was political disputes that helped cultivate the culture of political polemic. To organize political disputes students were divided into groups that defended different points of view. Such a method as a "roundtable" was based on the exchange of thoughts on controversial situations, case-studies simulated events, and people's activities.

One particular form of work with socio-political sources at the advanced level that appealed to students was a dramatization. Performers were to assume the images of

their heroes understand their psychology, the logic of behavior and show them in the most naturally.

One example of this kind of dramatization was titled "trials of history," during which political and moral analysis of real historical events was carried out while role-playing. Participants in this game, according to their tastes, abilities and political beliefs, took on the roles of defendants, lawyers, prosecutors, judges, witnesses, and jurors and tried to speak in favor of their characters.

Contests of "political erudite" assumed that the "erudite" selected by each team were asked questions by the audience or special jury that required profound analysis that went well beyond the reproduction of information available in the media.

As innovative technology, we used Web 2.0 tools that have proliferated in recent years and are considered ideal for language learning. At the heart of Web 2.0 is the blog, which, as an online journal, was used for publishing information about the results of work with media resources. The other online platform popular with students was "wiki." The wiki is similar to the blog in that it allows for quick and easy publishing, but the more flexible structure of the wiki means that it is suitable for projects with the media.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the control stage was to assess the learners' outcomes according to the chosen criteria and indicators.

The level of understanding of the media texts was taken as an indicator of the development of reading skills. Several unfamiliar media texts were selected, and a series of tasks to check the completeness of their understanding were developed. Then, the number of correct answers for each student was calculated, and the level of reading skills was determined. If the number of correct answers was more than 80%, the level was assessed as high, 60–80% – as sufficient, and less than 60% – as elementary.

The dynamics of the change in the number of students with different levels of reading skills is presented in Fig. 1

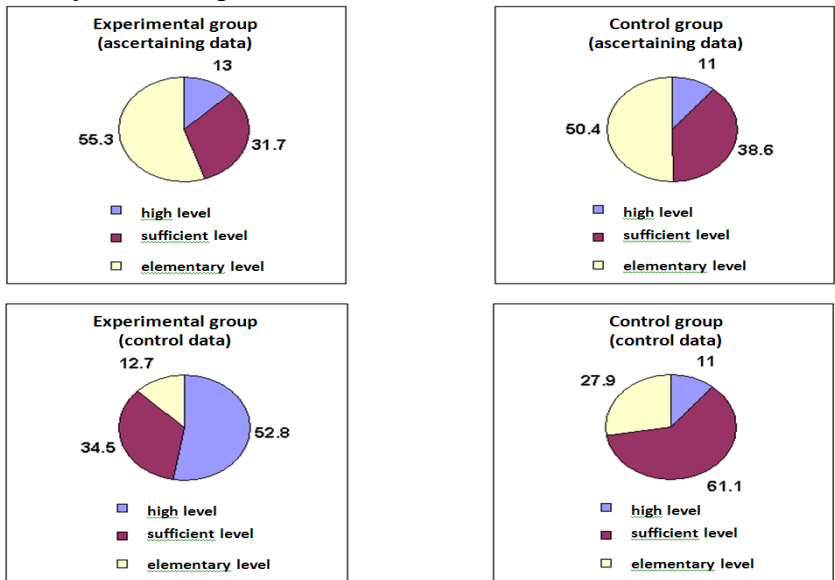


Fig. 1. Changes in the number of students with different levels of reading skills

To assess students’ speaking skills, such factors were considered as: 1) the speed of speech (i.e., the number of statements per unit of time); 2) the use of phrasal units, communicative blocks, and idioms; 3) the degree of syntax complexity; 4) the completeness of answers; 5) non-standard character of expressions; and 6) the number of mistakes per unit of statement.

The following method was used to assess the students' ability to speak. They were given a certain socio-political topic and only one minute for deliberation. The student was asked to talk about this topic for two minutes. The answer was recorded, and then deciphered and evaluated according to the following system of points: one meaningful statement – 1 point; one phrasal unit, idiom – 1 point; the degree of the syntax complexity was estimated 1–2–3 points, depending on the complexity of the sentences (3 –the highest score). Also, the number of semantic and grammatical mistakes in the statement was counted (1 mistake – minus 1 point).

The total number of points in the whole group was calculated, the arithmetic mean in each group was determined before and after the experiment, the indicator of the growth of the speaking skills formation was derived as $G = P2/P1$, (1) where P1 is the mean point before the experiment; P2 is the mean point after the experiment, and in the control group P1 is the average score for the ascertaining data and P2 is the mean point of the control data.

The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Assessment of speaking skills

Group					
E			C		
Ascertaining data, P ₁	Control data, P ₂	Growth	Ascertaining data, P ₁	Control data, P ₂	Growth
9.8	20.9	2.1	9.5	12.3	1.3

The primary purpose of listening as a type of speech activity is the understanding of perceived information. Galskova and Gez (2009) suggest the following gradation of levels of understanding while listening: 1) the level of global (general) understanding; 2) the level of detailed (complete) understanding; 3) the level of critical understanding.

To assess the level of understanding after a one-off listening to the news, it was necessary to give an answer to the questions related to the text of both a general and detailed character, choosing one correct answer from the four proposed options (multiple choice) and deducing the listeners’ opinion on the problems raised in the piece of news. The level of global or detailed understanding was evaluated by percentage ratio of all answers to the total number of correct answers. To determine the level of critical understanding, the number of accurate judgments regarding content and grammar was calculated, the average number of judgments in the group before and after the experiment was drawn, and the index for increasing the number of views was determined. The data collected has been presented in Table 2.

Table 2**The level of listening skills formation**

Level of listening skills formation	Group			
	E		C	
	Ascertaining data	Control data	Ascertaining data	Control data
Global understanding(%)	42.6	90.0	43.1	52.4
Detailed understanding(%)	35.7	83.2	34.9	47.7
Index of critical understanding	2.1	4.1	2.7	3.2

The experiment demonstrates to what extent the proposed approach affected the student's self-realization, which is considered as a very desired result of education.

In the frames of our approach, we used methods that required the students' creative activity: brainstorming, empathy, problem-solving, project work, and case-study.

It should be noted that recently the tendency of transforming the media into the sphere of a person's self-realization is intensifying due to communication via the Internet. The active use of Web 2.0 has contributed to the involvement of students in doing authentic tasks, combining both situational and interactional authenticity, and articulating different linguistic activities defined by the CEFRL, thus resulting in the development of a plurilingual and pluricultural competence (Martins, 2015).

In order to find out how the proposed approach affects learners' self-realization, we considered the students' attitude to working with the media, which was revealed in their ability to solve creative and problem tasks; to take the initiative in the preparation of political information and organization of discussions; to perform independent work on reading, referencing, and listening to media sources; and finally, to realize the connection of their future professional and social activities with the need to receive and transmit information on socio-political issues.

To receive the indicator of self-realization the students were asked to answer the following items of the questionnaire with the rank ordering from 1 to 10: Do you try to obtain information in a foreign language from the media on your own?; If you come across the point of view different from yours, do you try to discuss a controversial question?; Would you like to make your point of view on some socio-political issues public in a social network?; If you have a chance to communicate with a native speaker of a foreign language, estimate how important and interesting it would be for you to interact with them on socio-political topics?

Points scored by each student were summed up and the arithmetic mean for one student in the group was determined by the formula:

$$X = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n x_i, \quad (2)$$

n is the number of students in the group; x_i is points of the i -th student.

Changes in the character of self-realization were evaluated according to the Stoeffler's ratio, which can be presented as $D = X_2 - X_1$, where D is the result of the change, X1 is the average point before the experiment; X2 is the average point after the investigation. Thus, for the experimental group, the average point X1 before the experiment was 32.6, and after the experiment $X_2 = 75.7$, which means that $D = 43.1$. In turn, for the control group, X1 was 32.3, and X2 was 45.5, and, accordingly, the value D was 13.2. The difference of values D in both groups strongly supports the effectiveness of the proposed technology.

Conclusion

The use of media sources during foreign language classes can be considered as a means of developing students as informed citizens who are capable of critical thinking, analyzing social problems, predicting dynamics and effects of political events, assuming social responsibility, conducting political debates logically and with reason. In this research, the effectiveness of using the media resources in foreign language learning was ensured by a scientifically grounded, stage-by-stage approach to organization and technical realization of this work.

The results of the experimental work confirm that the proposed approach contributed to the improvement in the skills of reading, speaking and listening, based on the materials of the media, and the level of students' self-realization.

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