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TASK-BASED APPROACH IN TEACHING BRITISH CULTURE  
TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS

The role of culture studies in foreign language learning can't be overestimated as acquiring a foreign language is closely linked to understanding the culture of the

societies in which the language is spoken, while cultural competence in its turn enriches communicative competence. According to B. Tomalin and S. Stempleski, authors of books on developing cultural awareness, the cognitive, educational and personal aspects of cultural instruction involve helping students to understand the social variables such as age, class and conventional behaviour in the target culture, as well as the cultural connotations of the language. It's also important to stimulate students' intellectual curiosity and encourage empathy towards its people.

By teaching culture to foreign language students teachers have to accomplish the double mission:

- to facilitate the foreign language acquisition;
- to expand the student's experience of the target culture.

Culture teaching does not aim at only giving factual information about the target society. It encourages the learner to develop the knowledge, awareness and competence that will lead to better understanding of the foreign culture and will provide the learner with the framework for comparisons in order to reflect on their own cultural identity.

**Task-based learning** (TBL) has many advantages over the more traditional Present, Practice, Produce (PPP) approach. In a task-based class the teacher doesn't pre-determine what language will be studied, the lesson is based around the completion of a central goal and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students complete it.

There are many definitions of a **task**. For example, D. Nunan, the author of «Designing Tasks for a Communicative Classroom» defines it as a «piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form».

J. Willis claims a **task** is an activity «where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome». On the whole, a task has the following features: being goal-directed, having a primary focus on meaning, relating to real world needs, having a clearly defined outcome.

Task-based learning revolves around the completion of meaningful tasks and offers many advantages because it:

- encourages critical thinking and sustained learner activity;
- is holistic to specific;
- focuses on the authentic use of language for genuine communication;
- is learner-centred, students of different levels can participate;
- encourages autonomous learning;
- is highly communicative, involves spontaneous and planned speaking;
- is related to real-world activities.

Traditionally TBL consists of three main stages:

- pre-task (where standards and expectations are set out);
- task (that includes planning and presentation);
- review (with assessment and monitoring).

It involves a wide range of activities such as *listing* (brainstorming, fact-finding), *ordering* and *sorting* (sequencing, ranking, categorizing, classifying), *comparing* (matching, finding similarities and differences), *problem solving* (analysing real or hypothetical situations, reasoning, and decision making), *sharing personal experiences* (narrating, describing, exploring, and explaining attitudes, opinions, reactions) and others.

This method can be successfully applied in teaching British culture to foreign language students. A course of British Culture at university usually includes such topics as the British character, the problem of national identity, the system of government (monarchy), religion, education, welfare, arts and others. By applying a task-based approach in this course teachers help students develop skills to organize information about the target culture, draw generalizations and make cross-cultural comparisons.

There's a series of tasks that can be assigned to students while they study these topics. For example:

- to create a cultural tour around a UK country (county);
- to present a part of Britain they would choose for residence or travel;
- to compare the British and Belarusian national identities;
- to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the NHS.

Task-based assignments may also be centered round British history and geography:

- establishing a link between the geographical position of the UK and its historical development;
- tracing the developments in history that formed the British character;
- choosing a century (decade) in British history in which you would like to live, etc.

The tasks should always follow the three abovementioned stages (pre-task, task and review) and may involve information-gap, opinion-gap and reasoning-gap activities.

For instance, students may be assigned the task to «predict» the future of monarchy in the UK. In the first stage the teacher should point out the main goal (to forecast the status of UK monarchy in the next 20 years) and specify minor goals (to study the past and current situation with monarchy in the UK, analyse statistics, consider the arguments of royalists and republicans). During the pre-task stage the form of presentation (debate, role play, report, interview) must be indicated. After the presentation it's essential to give and get feedback (assessment) that may take different forms (formal, summative and criterion-referenced, peer assessment, open discussion). Fair and detailed assessment encourages students to set achievable goals for themselves and objectively measure their progress. Assessment may involve mind-maps, flow-charts, quizzes, grading or ranging.

Overall, TBL makes classroom and out-of-classroom studies more student-centred, as a wide range of tasks let the teacher give individual assignments; the tasks address real life needs and allow students to use their bag of language

tools to meet those needs. Additionally, the use of tasks allows variation in the classroom, omits boredom, and encourages students to use a wide variety of communication styles and techniques, such as comparing, debating, and persuading.