



Information Literacy Section, Africa Section, Access to Information Network - Africa

IFLA RIGA 2012
INFORMATION FOR CIVIC LITERACY
The Small Guild Hall, 3/5 Amatu Street, Old Town, Riga, Latvia
8-10 August 2012

Use of media resources in critical and civic literacy development

Balyasnikova Natalia
Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, Saint Petersburg
Saint Petersburg, pr. Nastavnikov 25-3-116, 195030
n.balyasnikova@gmail.com

Abstract

Using Media Resources to Build a Critical Literacy for Responsible Citizenship in a Russian Foreign Language Classroom

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia found itself among nations that experienced an influx of images portraying lifestyles abroad, sometimes viewed as exotic and intriguing. Now, 20 years later, foreign media cultural presence in Russia is indisputable. It is even more obvious when talking to younger generation, who base their knowledge of Western cultures and societies on Hollywood movies and popular TV shows. At the same time public access to foreign media (such as TV talk shows, news, newspapers and public radio broadcasts) is often limited to Internet or paid TV channels. Many foreign language teachers use media resources in their classes for a variety of reasons, I see them as a source for visual and civic literacy development and potential responsible citizenship encouragement.

Russian educational system recognizes competence approach as a new innovative way of teaching foreign languages, there is a demand for new teaching practices that allow development of multiple literacies, including critical thinking skills. First, I discuss contemporary Russian education, with an emphasis on changing role of English language education, in terms of its civic literacy potential. Second, I present critical literacy approach to teaching a foreign language, placing the emphasis on the importance of participatory action encouragement through education. Third, I present practical examples of using media for critical literacy development along with language objectives. And fourth, I acknowledge

challenges that educators face while developing critical literacy and offer some suggestions for overcoming them.

Civic education is a wide field that allows focus on various components that comprise civic literacy. One of these components is critical thinking skills. This article examines use of video advertisements and public service announcements (PSAs) to foster critical thinking in foreign languages. It is suggested that through foreign language education these skills can be projected onto real-life situations and serve as foundation for broader civic literacy development.

Background

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia became one of many nations to be inundated by images portraying lifestyles from abroad, expressed through advertisements, news clips, travel documentaries, and other media. The novelty of these images created the impression that these lifestyles are somehow exotic and intriguing. Now, twenty years later, foreign media's cultural presence in Russia is indisputable. While direct public access to foreign media (such as TV talk shows, news, newspapers and public radio broadcasts) is often limited to the internet or paid TV channels, Russian television is heavily dominated by popular foreign music, Western (typically American) movies, reality shows, or comedy programs, and Russian analogs of popular Western programs.

It is clear that these images carry a certain cultural message, and that every culture has its own set of standards and beliefs that affect the public's understanding of individual values, opportunities and rights. However, the conventions reflected in media have begun to affect the Russian public while lacking the necessary cultural and societal context. This may lead to undesirable outcomes, such as the presentation of Western cultures as immoral, corruptive, threatening, and untrustworthy. These stereotypes can be projected not only upon the people who represent this culture, but also upon the information received from news sources, images, photographs, or videos from foreign media outlets. The low foreign language proficiency of most

Russians also affects their understanding of foreign media. Foreign journalists, if quoted in the Russian media, are often portrayed as biased and propagandist. The inability of many Russians to check the sources of reported news may lead to skeptical attitudes towards foreign informational sources. Public trust in the Russian media, however, is also declining; a survey conducted by the independent analytical agency “Levada-Center” shows that, while 84 percent of Russians watch TV more than once a day, only 29 percent profess absolute trust in the news presented there (Levada, 2011). At the same time there is an increase in open public access to online foreign newspapers, magazines and news channels.

This information revolution and the popularity of internet resources are driving more Russians to learn foreign languages with a focus on information access. For example, 73 percent of internet users in Russia claim that they use English-language search engines without translating them into Russian (Ustinova, 2005). Many foreign language teachers use media resources in their classrooms for a variety of reasons: they are entertaining, they add a native-speaker’s flare to their classes, and they serve as a source for new material that can illustrate topics studied in class. Careless use of these resources, however, raises concern about the positive and negative influence of media on young people. Of course the main function of media is to spread information, be it through news programs, documentaries, or analytical programs, but we cannot overlook the fact that media also projects opinions, norms, values, and morals. Since media shapes students’ opinions in different ways, we must teach them to process this information critically. This presents us with the challenge of balancing the media’s presence in our classrooms, developing students’ critical thinking skills, and providing them with the tools necessary to achieve these goals (Vorobieva, n.d.; Pavlova, 2007).

Theoretical framework

Use of media resources in education is an interest of many social sciences. For language teachers, these resources primarily serve as methodological tools for practicing conversation,

listening, vocabulary training, or grammar reference in their most common linguistic and pragmatic function. Meanwhile, advocates of civic education encourage use of these media resources in civic literacy development. In examining the ways in which these messages are presented, we must use the methodology of media education. For the purposes of this article, civic and media education need to be defined.

Civic education is a multifaceted process. If civil society is understood as a solitary sphere of community members (Alexander, 2001), then schools must prepare students to function in this community with respect for all its members. At the same time, civic education can be used to develop students' autonomy, critical literacy, and independent thinking, which would allow them to become more valuable members of such a community. Many reports issued by UNESCO on the state of civic education around the world define it as education that is aimed at promoting human rights, democracy, liberty, equality, equity, and peace (UNESCO 1995; UNESCO 1997; Banda, 2009). Filonov (2000) describes civic education as "the development of individual qualities, resulting in compliance with the law, patriotic devotion in service to the Motherland, free and honest dedication to generally accepted norms, and moral values including interethnic and interpersonal relations" (Filonov, 2000, p.35). In the text of the conference "Present Goals of Civic Education in Russia", held in Saint Petersburg in September, 2002, civic education is defined as "the educational system of upbringing of an individual that fosters conditions for the establishment of moral- and civic-mindedness, civic competence, and the gaining of experience in civic action that is valuable to the community" (Memorandum, 2002). While there is no singular definition of civic education, within the literature there appears to be general agreement that it comprises three main elements: knowledge about a certain political system, its elements and functions; a range of positive attitudes towards one's own community and country; and a set of skills that allow an individual to critically examine his own citizenship and enable him to be an active member of the community.

Since civic education is a wide field that comprises a number of components from political knowledge to moral values and interpersonal interaction, it allows teachers the freedom to work in the areas that they find most relevant to their subject. Suggestions and techniques presented in this article address the change in students' attitudes towards interethnic relations in a multicultural society and the development of tolerance that are considered a particular component of civic education.

Levada-Center surveys show that 29 percent of respondents display a dislike for people of southern Russian origin, and 15 percent displayed an annoyance with them. Furthermore, 39 percent of all respondents expressed the need to limit the number of people from the Caucasus in their community, while 54 percent have felt an increase in nationalistic sentiment in Russia (Levada, 2011). Given the fact that the Russian Federation is a multiethnic state, these statistics cause alarm. These tendencies, however, are not limited to Russia alone, and with the understanding that this is a global concern teachers of a foreign language can approach the issue in their classrooms through media resources in the language they are teaching.

Media education as defined in the Russian social sciences includes: education about media patterns and their influence on people; understanding and processing presented information; knowing the proper linguistic and visual tools required to transmit such information; conveying moral and aesthetic values and political engagement; and establishing references to social power and control. Since ideas about status and control are not objective, but formed by a specific group of people, Stolbnikova (2007) highlights the importance of a critical component in media education. In order to give students the understanding needed to challenge the information given to them by authorities, Stolbnikova (2007) suggests that through media education students can be taught to observe the facts they are presented with; to see how they are similar or different in various sources; to analyze the structure of the media text; to be able to name given events; and to establish connections within the various elements of the text (Stolbnikova, 2007). To use the texts in everyday interaction, Comber (2003) specifies that there

are many critical components that should be embedded into educational practice (Comber, 2003). While using media resources in language classrooms, we can relate the information to local realities and focus on the use of local cultural texts. By analyzing language–power relationships we can examine how power is exercised and by whom.

Theorists of both media education and civic education distinguish critical thinking as an important part of their educational practice. Once combined, these models can provide a framework for creating educational media resources aimed at developing critical thinking skills alongside foreign language education. In other words, this ensures the development of multiple skills in the language classroom.

Contemporary education calls for a new teaching model that fosters critical thinking skills expressed through critical self-awareness, as well as a critical evaluation of information presented in the media. This would allow us to make civic education an essential component of every subject that is taught in school. Defined in Bloom’s taxonomy cognitive skills of identifying, describing, explaining, analyzing, and evaluating (in this case media information) as well as affective skills of receiving, responding, valuing and characterizing values can be well developed within any educational context, including foreign language education (Anderson et al., 2001).

As Larson (2006) suggests, by encouraging critical evaluation of text by their students educators create a framework for implementing a variety of techniques that will encourage students to actively participate in democratic society (Larson, 2006). Rooted in Freire’s theory of critical pedagogy, this educational philosophy challenges educators to transform students’ ways of thinking in order to question power relations in society, rather than to simply impart knowledge of a certain subject (Larson, 2006). At the same time, by redefining teacher-student roles and acknowledging students’ valuable experiences and opinions, critical pedagogy encourages an atmosphere of true democracy, influencing students’ behavior outside the classroom. Freire advocates for reflection, and stresses the importance of action in the

transformation of society (Freire, 2000). By implementing Freire's work in a more specific area of teaching practice – such as the use of media resources in foreign language classes – we can achieve the following goals:

- Develop students' listening and speaking skills in a foreign language (linguistic skills);
- Engage students in a discussion of how the information is presented (linguistic and media skills);
- Allow students to express their opinions freely, and to argue and debate respectfully (linguistic and civic skills)
- Encourage students to critically evaluate information, seek out different opinions and resources, and analyze and compare facts (critical, media and civic skills);
- Empower students to challenge media images and be confident and active in confronting a certain opinion (civic skills)

This will make language education an environment conducive to the development of skills that will establish students as confident members of society, who are willing to constructively engage with their community and beyond.

Another key component is the use of a variety of authentic "texts" for its development. It challenges the traditional understanding of literacy as the ability to read a text in its classic form. Critical literacy theorists usually consider anything that can be read as an educational text. Books, letters, and other publishable media are considered as printed text; discussion and conversation as live text; and emails, blogs, and other internet resources as digital text (Anstey & Bull, 2006). Such approach allows teachers to use unconventional resources – from advertisement in a newspaper to protesters' posters and slogans – as classroom material.

Thus critical thinking and civic literacy skills, once developed in the classroom, can be put into practice in real-life situations. When students encounter contradictory articles in the

media, come across an internet post about a protest movement, or see controversial graffiti, they will be able to interpret and question the information they are confronted with.

The choice of methodological tools needed to develop critical thinking skills among students depends heavily upon the content of the class itself. The instructor's task here is difficult because, while working towards specific linguistic and pragmatic objectives, students may form a new worldview and establish a new set of values. The instructor's job is to ensure students' mastery of new skills and abilities, but they must also be familiar with the basics of critical thinking theory, be ready to engage in a dialogue with their students, and help their students understand the values of citizenship, tolerance, open-mindedness and critical self-reflection.

Examples of practice.

Since there is a great number of media resources available in the open access on Youtube and other online sources, this article will examine the use of video advertisements and PSAs in foreign language education and their potential for developing tolerance and positive attitudes toward all community members. Advertisements are appealing and persuasive because they actively employ specific linguistic and visual manipulation techniques. Instructors may take advantage of public service announcements' linguistic, social, and civic literacy potential by incorporating these resources into a foreign language class. PSAs are essentially advertisements without commercial goals; they are typically meant to raise public awareness of specific social issues, to address an existing or potential societal problem, or to change attitudes about these problem. PSAs that address questions of social justice, equality, tolerance, and public action are of primary interest in the framework of critical and civic education.

Moreover, PSAs are emotional; they try to inspire empathy, changes in attitude, and commitment to certain issues. This is why they serve as an ideal tool for developing critical literacy skills and strategies. Students should be taught to deconstruct an announcement by

examining and evaluating elements such as the introduction, the music, the name of the organization, etc. These techniques as well as factors of how the actors are shot, use of light and colors in the video, editing and other visual elements are assumed to have an impact on the audience (Corbett, 2003). While describing how visual aid is used in the English language classroom, Corbett (2003) stresses the importance of active discussion, deconstruction and interpretation of the “text (Corbett, 2003). Once students understand the specific social and cultural context of the announcement, they can begin to examine the announcement through their own social and cultural lens. The following strategy should include components of self-reflection and analysis of how this particular announcement may affect an individual emotionally or logically. Being able to ask questions about the content of the announcements and understanding power relationships as they are presented in the text will enable students to evaluate the credibility of the source and reflect on the announcement’s effect on their own emotions and attitudes.

One of the first things students learn in a foreign language class is how to describe their day. The main linguistic and pragmatic goals of these “my day” exercises are to use adverbs of frequency, cohesion words, and verbs that describe routine (to wake up, to have breakfast, etc.). One might question the efficiency of using this topic in the development of civic attitudes of tolerance and social equality. However, such goals can be achieved by providing the proper visual support. For example, in a Spanish language lesson, the instructor could use an advertisement for the football club Atlético de Madrid (available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXQiIgCcIVQ&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PLBC05690A98CFF22B), in which a migrant worker from Latin America writes an optimistic letter to his friends and family about his daily routine as a worker Spain. The video’s imagery, however, is dramatically different from the text of the letter. The video shows the everyday difficulties of a lonely migrant, where his ethnicity, behavior, and even clothes make him an alien in a hostile society. Thus, while illustrating the desired linguistic tools and pragmatic

language skills, the advertisement also brings attention to the difficulties associated with living and working in a foreign country, the reasons why people seek employment abroad, the living conditions of migrant workers, and the sense of segregation and other emotions that these immigrant workers experience.

It should be noted that at no stage during this entire exercise should students be made aware that they will be viewing a video with some kind of moral lesson or propagandistic value. Students will feel the ultimate impact of the advertisement when they are presented with both the audio and video components together. As a follow up task, which may be offered as independent or bonus work, students are invited to answer questions about the causes of ethnic segregation of migrant workers, and their own attitudes towards this phenomenon.

We must also pay close attention to other aspect of advertising, such as humor. As a technique of social advertising, humor is often used to make the message more memorable. School children usually enjoy humorous stories, which means humorous advertisements and PSAs can be a useful and effective tool in the language classroom. The following example shows how a comedic PSA aimed at preventing discrimination against French citizens on racial grounds could be used in a French language classroom while studying the topic “Sports” (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-INwF44zeg>). This video depicts a dark-skinned French woman trying to earn the respect of others by playing football. In the final sentence of this advertisement, the audience is presented with the question, “do all immigrants have to become football stars just to be accepted?” This video can be used as supplementary material in the study of content vocabulary, as well as for testing certain grammar points, such as the conjugation of verbs.

As a civic education resource, this video focuses the audience's attention on the fact that ethnic minorities, while citizens of a multicultural society, often earn the respect of their fellow countrymen only once they have reached a certain status or celebrity, as athletes, for example.

Students' self-reflection in the form of essays or discussions can provide a platform for addressing this phenomenon in Russian society.

Change of attitudes can be attempted while studying any topic, even if students are learning about seasons. One might argue that this mundane topic does not give teachers the opportunity to develop civic literacy. However, the following video can aid teachers in development of respect and tolerance of all community members (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGICpiCR1BA>). During an English language lesson, students are presented with a PSA directed against ethnic discrimination in the United States. This very simple video clip shows a scene from nature during different seasons of the year, and the message of the video is summarized in the final phrase: "In a world where all colors are beautiful and equal, why can't people be too?" The video is silent, but can be used in the background of a presentation or during instruction of lexical and/or grammatical material related to studied subject. Students can also analyze the way the video is shot, the use of music and color to affect the audience, discuss the message, and evaluate its effectiveness in their particular classroom, in other words "deconstruct the meaning" (Corbett, 2003, p.169).

Conclusions

Many countries acknowledge the importance of media literacy as a set of skills, knowledge, and understanding that allows the public to use media effectively. Students are taught to understand and process media content critically. Most importantly, media education in Europe is a part of civic education because it allows students to become active and responsible citizens through the evaluation of information that they are presented with. In light of this, media education should be approached from the theory of critical thought, which encourages students to question ideologies and everyday realities (Stolbnikova, 2006). Students should understand whose interests are being served by the information they are presented with, evaluate how the

information is presented, and be critically literate in order to examine how the text is constructed. All of these skills can be developed through foreign language instruction.

This brings us to the understanding that using media resources in foreign language education presents an opportunity for both critical and civic literacy development. Foreign language teachers, if committed to incorporating elements of civic education into their general teaching practice, have a significant advantage over others. They have broader access to foreign language resources necessary for the development of civic literacy, which is published or uploaded on-line.

Along with their linguistic value and civic education potential, media resources, especially advertisements and PSAs, provide infinite possibilities for incorporation into instructional material. These resources are plentiful and can be modified or adapted according to the goals of the class. Texts can be used in reading classes, individual sentences can be used to illustrate grammar rules, speeches and videos can serve as material in conversational classes, and so forth. These teaching practices can create a unique educational environment, and establish social, moral, and civic goals for developing responsible citizenship among students and teachers. This undoubtedly will facilitate the growth of civic literacy within Russian society.

References

1. Alexander, J.C. (2001). The past, present and future prospects of civil society. In Bron, A. & Schemmann, M. (Eds.), *Civil Society, Citizenship and learning* (p. 15-29). Münster – Hamburg – London: LIT Verlag.
2. Anderson, G.L. & Irvine, P. (1993). Informing critical literacy with ethnography. In C. Lankhsear & P.L.McLaren (Eds.), *Critical literacy: Politics, praxis, and the postmodern*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press

3. Anderson, L. W., Krathwohl, D. R. et al. (2001). A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: a revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives. New York: Longman.
4. Anstey, M. & Bull, G. (2006). Teaching and learning multiliteracies: changing times and changing literacies. International reading association: Newark, DE & Australian Literacy Educator's Association, Australia.
5. Banda, F. (2009) Civic Education for Media Professionals: A Training Manual. UNESCO Series on Journalism Education. Retrieved April 29, 2012 from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001804/180402e.pdf>
6. Baranov, P.A. (2006). Fenomen grazhdanskogo obrazovaniya: problemi i perspektivi. Grazhdanskoe obrazovaniye – pedagogichesky, socialny i kulturny fonomen. [Phenomena of civic education: problems and perspectives. Civic education – pedagogical, social and cultural phenomena]. Saint Petersburg: Soyuz.
7. Cadiero-Kaplan, K., & Smith, K. (2002). Literacy ideologies: Critically engaging the language arts curriculum. *Language Arts*, 79, 372-381.
8. Comber, B. (2003). Critical literacy in the early years: What does it look like? In N. Hall, J. Larson, & J.Marsh (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 355–368). London: Sage.
9. Corbett J. (2003). An intercultural approach to English language teaching. *Languages for intercultural communication and education*. NY: Multilingual matters Ltd.
10. Fedorov, A.V. (2007) Razvitie mediacompetencii i kriticheskogo mishleniya studentov pedagogicheskogo vuza. [Development of mediacompetency and critical thought in students of pedagogical university]. Moscow: UNESCO “Information for all”.
11. Filonov, G. N. (2000). Civic Education Russian Education and Society; October 2000, Vol. 42 Issue 10, p34-45.

12. Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary edition). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).
13. Larson, J. (2006) 'Multiple literacies, curriculum, and instruction in early childhood and elementary school', *Theory Into Practice*, 45: 4, 319 — 329. Retrieved April 12, 2012 from http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4504_5
14. Levada Center (2011). Annual report: Obshesvennoe mnenie [Public opinion]. Retrieved April 20, 2012 from http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/levada_2011_0.pdf
15. Memorandum “Aktualniye zadachi grazhdanskogo obrazovaniya” [Present goals of civic education]. Resulting document of the national academic and research conference “Aktualniye zadachi grazhdanskogo obrazovaniya v Rossii” [Present goals of civic education in Russia]. Saint Petersburg, September 25-28, 2002. Retrieved April 20, 2012 from <http://un-museum.ru/news/Memo1.htm>
16. Pavlova, E.D. (2007). *Sredstva massovoy informacii – instrument skritogo vozdeystviya na soznanie: socialno-filosofsky analiz*. [Mass media – the instrument of implicit influence: socio-philosophical analysis]. Moscow: Nauka.
17. Stolbnikova, E.A. (2006). *Razvitie kriticheskogo mishleniya studentov pedagogicheskogo vuza v processe mediaobrazovaniya (na material reklami)*. [Development of critical thinking among students of pedagogical university during media education (using advertisements)]. Taganrog: Kuchma.
18. UNESCO (1995). *Final Report. European Conference Curriculum Development: Civic Education in Central and Eastern Europe*. Vienna, Austria. Retrieved April 20, 2012 from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001161/116144eo.pdf>
19. UNESCO (1997). *A selected list of UNESCO practical and reference materials related to civics education*. Retrieved April 20, 2012 from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001115/111581eo.pdf>
20. Ustinova, I. P. (2005). English in Russia. *World Englishes*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 239–251.

21. Vorobyeva, E.I (n.d.). Formirovanie strategii kriticheskogo vospriyatiya mediainformacii v hode yazikovogo obrazovaniya studentov. [Development of critical information perception in language education of students]. Retrieved April 29, 2012 from <http://edu.of.ru/attach/17/71054.PDF>