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## The potential of task-based language teaching in developing university students' soft skills

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**Abstract.** The present article is concerned with the complexity of the development of university students' soft skills. The terms “hard” and “soft” skills refer to a number of industry-specific and non-industry specific skills that are widely discussed in professional and academic settings and are enclosed in competence-based system of university education in the Russian Federation. The complexity of the matter is shaped by a number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors presented and discussed within the article. As supporting evidence the author provides theoretical implications from the field of Second language acquisition, instructed second language acquisition, neuro-linguistics as well as the results of the author's own research. The findings regarding the way university students view language learning process and strategies they choose build the objective ground for the author to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of naturalistic and synthetic language teaching approaches in regard with hard skills and soft skills' development. The article suggests task-based language teaching and task-supported syllabus design as a potential solution to the contradictions and challenges outlined. The author then provides an example of a pedagogical task which can be built within a set university syllabus, supporting the suggestions made with description of the stages that the task can be broken into and rationale for each of them that would when put together guarantee university students' soft skills development.

**Keywords:** task-based learning, soft skills, hard skills, form-based instruction, meaning-based instruction, target language

### Introduction

The modern higher education system of our country is currently challenged by a number of factors. As the world is going through major economic and technological changes, labour market demands change accordingly. Though conceptually existing before, the terms “hard” and “soft” skills were coined in the 1970s and since then have exhibited increasing popularity. “Hard skills” refer to knowledge and abilities unique to a particular profession while soft skills are non-industry-specific (Donovan 2024). Thus, coding skills can be attributed to the “hard skills” of a programmer; the knowledge of grammar and phonetics to the “hard skills” of a language teacher, etc., while skills like critical and creative thinking, teamwork, time management, adaptability would be relevant for

both professions and are therefore attributed to the “soft skills”.

The academic reality of the Russian Federation higher education system is competence-based and is focused on a freer development of a person (Zimnyaya 2009, 7). The competences set by State Educational Standards and university programs can easily be broken down to a list of clear soft and hard skills that Bachelor degree graduates are expected to develop during their university course. Speaking of the modern trends in soft skills development L. D. Kozyreva suggests to classify soft skills in terms of three categories: skills defining personal traits (time-management, responsibility, discipline, etc.); skills defining cognitive development (flexibility, creativity, critical thinking, etc.); skills defining professional settings relationships (emotional intelligence, communicative skills, leadership, etc.). The

author concludes that soft skills act as a key factor of successful employment, provide competitive advantages (Kozyreva 2021, 107).

While the present research is primarily concerned with the development of students' soft skills, the data and implications made could not be fully objective if the development of hard skills was completely overlooked. Thus, the present article is aimed at:

- describing the complexity of soft skills development in university students;
- understanding the underlying difficulties of effective university syllabus design;
- analyzing the way university students view the process of language acquisition referencing hard and soft skills development;
- providing the justification supporting the potential of task-based learning in managing the challenges described.

### **Theoretical framework**

When it comes to the simultaneous development of hard and soft skills within competence-based university programs, a number of complications seem to arise. The necessity to develop university students' hard skills which are the ground of their future professions, often shapes the structure and the form of a university syllabus. When it comes to foreign language teaching, most of the courses are undoubtedly based on a specific (or a number of) course books. As Craig Thaine points out in his teacher resource book, most course books today subscribe to some form of the communicative approach, and are arguably now more standardised. Despite being regularly used and well-designed, modern course books still seem to raise a certain degree of concerns. The most common criticism relates to their inability to meet the needs of specific learner groups or to reflect the local context in which learning is taking place (Thaine, Thornbury 2020, 2). Tomlinson questions the sufficiency of evidence to indicate that course books do or do not bring about "durable language acquisition" (Tomlinson 2016).

Structural courses do evidently possess a wide number of benefits. They can easily be fit into a timeframe of a university course, they support the teacher, optimize their preparation time and consider the importance of measurable skill building. However, there are a number of drawbacks that cannot be overlooked. The theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) speak of the importance of distinguishing students' explicit and implicit competences. According to M. Paradis ex-

PLICIT knowledge is acquired consciously and can be verbalised on demand, while implicit knowledge is obtained incidentally, at the moment when a learner is focusing on something else (Paradis 2004, 8). R. Ellis supports this idea, agreeing that learning takes place both intentionally and incidentally (Ellis, Shintani 2014, 10). He admits the importance of focus on form but advises against synthetic approaches to language learning. Following his ideas, M. Long states that the analytic approach to language learning combined with focus on form captures the advantages of focus-on-meaning approaches while simultaneously avoiding their shortcomings (Long 2015, 29). The statements made above highlight the challenges that are to arise in case the linguistic skill building is treated as a mere process of converting input into output.

Additionally to hard skills development, as it was stated in the first section of the article, university teachers are also challenged to develop students' soft skills within the competence-based paradigm. According to the OECD report on skills and social progress, there is principal importance of emotional and communicative skills development for the students' future life and career success (Skills for social progress... 2015). Moreover, following the findings of the Third UNESCO World Higher Education Conference which took place in Barcelona (Spain) in 2022, A. Almazova, E. Erokhina, V. Chertov and O. Sharonova speak of the essentiality of academic freedom for students to take part in discussions to exercise solving challenging issues while studying at university. The authors also speak of skills like critical thinking, creativity and research being in the top five key principal actions which are needed if we are to modernise the field of higher education (Almazova et al. 2022). Expanding on the idea of academic freedom, the role of the teacher in the educational process comes into view. It has been stated that acting as a mentor and not allowing university students to openly disagree and engage in debates leads to them in their dependant position imitating knowledge acquisition which can subsequently transform into the underlying attitude to their future professional duties (Chevtaeva et al. 2020).

Considering the complexity of hard skills development within the findings of SLA theory and necessity to develop students' soft skills, teachers and methodologists may be driven to opt for less formal and structural but more naturalistic syllabuses and/or approaches to language teaching which would consider some of the aspects of hard skill development mentioned above and would certainly allow soft-skills development. However, as M. Long points out, university students are at the

age when their natural capacity for language acquisition is lower than that in children which makes naturalistic approaches to language teaching within a time-limited university course less effective (Long 2015, 50).

McGrath highlights the importance of making a distinction between a course book and the way it is used, saying that a course book resembles a map for teachers to follow; they can offer variety in terms of topics; and they can save teachers a lot of time (McGrath 2016). He provides a useful framework for course book adaptation:

- the teacher completely changes what is in the course book — the contexts, the language and the methodology (adaptation as change);
- the teacher adds to the course book material in some way either when planning the lesson during its delivery (adaptation as addition) which can be further broken down: Extemporisation: as spontaneous respond to a learning event during the course of a lesson; Extension: providing the students with supplementary materials; Exploitation: the teacher exploits the materials in the book in a slightly different way.

Teachers' professional lives are busy and changing material involves finding something that is appropriate and then creating tasks and activities that turn it into a learning resource. This is why the focus of the present research is on Task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the rationale behind task-supported syllabuses.

A task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning (Nunan 1989). The key concepts of pedagogical tasks were determined by P. Skehan back in 1998. According to which, within a pedagogical task the meaning is primary over the form; the task mirrors real world activities which are relevant to a specific course/training or a specialist; the assessment of the task is done in terms of its outcome not its linguistic accuracy (Skehan 1996).

There would usually be a gap in the opinion, information or reasoning for the students to fill and a communicative problem to solve. An opinion gap task suggests a difference of opinion between students which leads them into a discussion on the matter where they are to agree or disagree and/or give reasoning. An information gap means that the students possess different information/pieces of one concept/idea when they are working on a common goal. In reasoning gaps, students have to figure out the gap between current and future knowledge.

Tasks can be one-way, where the student possesses all of the information to complete the task; or two-way, where all the participants are simultaneously involved; open or close, based on whether or not they have a predetermined outcome; output-based and input-based depending on whether the task is set to produce the result by primarily engaging in either speaking/writing or reading/listening.

## Research methods and results

The theoretical observations provided in the previous section of the article set the ground for further research aimed at evaluating the complexity of soft skills development reality in university students of linguistics and foreign language teaching (LT). Thus, students of Linguistics and LT were asked a series of questions regarding soft skills development, form-based and meaning-based education after which the results were summarised, assessed and a number of conclusions were made. Our earlier research discovered that 85.7 % out of 35 students found it difficult to simultaneously control the meaning and the form when speaking in a foreign language (Powell 2023). This year we increased the number of participants to 93 and asked the same question. Surprisingly, the final result did not change much and remained at 84 %. The most interesting discovery, however, presented itself when the results were first filtered by the year of study and then by students' language abilities, both of which are presented below in table 1.

As it can be clearly seen in the table, there is no correlation between the year of studying and the degree of complexity that simultaneous meaning-based and form-based learning cause in students. This is an important discovery since when taught, university students are often generalised by the year of studying. However, when the same data is presented by the level of language aptitude, there is a clear tendency to be seen: the higher the students' level is, the easier it becomes and the more the proportion within the positive answer changes towards "sometimes" rather than the firm "yes". These findings are important because they represent the non-homogeneousness of the university groups. Despite their age, students come to universities with different language abilities. Then some of them may apply more effort than others when studying and therefore improve faster. Some might take a gap year and return later. Additionally, students have different cognitive abilities, learning experiences, psychological differences and they choose to apply different learning strategies. This suggests that instead of searching for an approach that would concentrate on students' similarities, it seems more

Table 1. The difficulty of simultaneous focus on meaning and form in students of linguistics and language teaching, %.

Is it difficult to simultaneously control grammar and vocabulary?				
	yes / sometimes			no
	Total:	yes	sometimes	
C1	71,4	14,3	57,1	28,6
B2	79,2	27,1	52,1	20,8
B1	92,6	40,7	51,9	7,4
Year 1	73,2	26,8	46,3	26,8
Year 2	92,9	42,9	50,0	7,1
Year 3	90,5	23,8	66,7	9,5
Year 4	84,6	30,8	53,8	15,4

desirable to provide opportunities to effectively address their differences.

Further in the research, we concentrated on the complexity of the soft skills development on its own. The first-year students were asked to tell which soft skills they experienced difficulties with before they started their university course. The most frequent answers are presented in fig. 1.

The data presented highlights the diversity of students' needs within one university year and therefore the importance of considering students' individual differences when building course syllabuses.

Another interesting tendency was discovered when the students of linguistics and LT of the second, third and fourth years were asked to state their current difficulties. When their responses were summarised, it could be clearly seen that as students

progress through their university courses, the number of soft skills that cause difficulties gradually decreases, while some disappear completely from the chart. These were: interpersonal and communication skills, creative thinking and team-work, while time-management remained, though the frequency decreased.

It is important to state that the language program at NSTU though following one general syllabus allows time and space for teaching variation and developing creativity in students. That is why it is generally not surprising that many of the students' soft skills are developed by the 4<sup>th</sup> year of studying. However, it suggests the importance of expanding the survey over a wider range of universities in order for the data to be more objective.

While there is a clear tendency to be seen, it is still a product of generalisation. The numbers

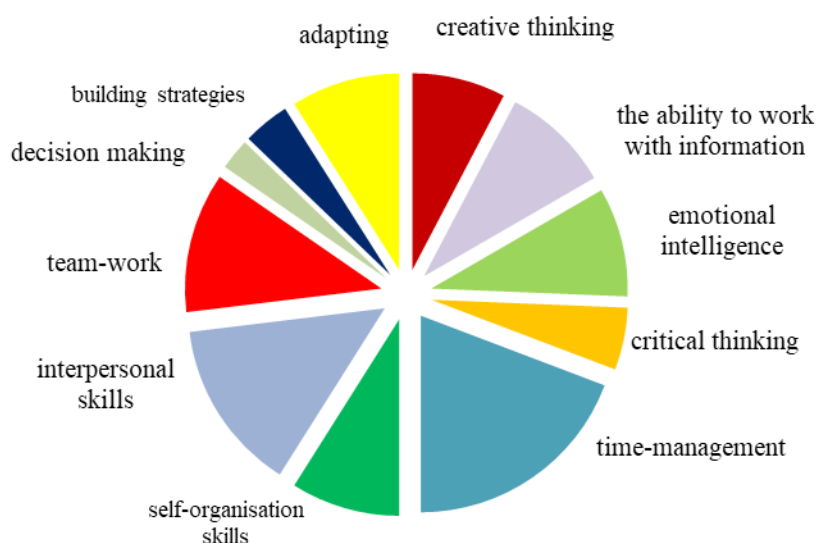


Fig. 1. Most challenging soft skills for first-year students of linguistics and language teaching

received and referenced represent real students, who made different choices when answering questions, though potentially studying within one group. Thus, offering little space for variation within tasks would benefit some of them and overlook the others. That is why there is a clear need to develop effective approaches to syllabus design that would simultaneously guarantee hard and soft skills development within a non-homogeneous and non-over-generalised groups of students.

Later in the research the participants were also asked whether in their opinion having predetermined target units to be used when completing a communicative task slows down the development of soft skills. The results were assessed both by the year of study and the language ability and there is a matching tendency. The further the students were in the university programme, the more of them gave a positive answer — from 34,8 % for year 2 to 41,7 % for year 4, while the first-year students divided equally. Nonetheless, by year 4 more than a half of the students still do not think that form-based learning slows down the development of their soft skills. The same tendency could be observed when the results are filtered by the language ability, meaning, the higher it is, the more students give positive answers, being at the level of 33,3 % in B1 students and reaching 50 % in C1 students.

The data received should undoubtedly be studied further as students of different years and language aptitudes may think of certain soft skills when answering this question which may affect the answer they give. However, it clearly shows their general attitude to the idea of form-based learning that once they progress through the university course and/or improve their language ability, they start to consider form-based learning to be slightly more limiting than they did before. It is also important to state that common soft skills should be specified and their additional components should be determined when it comes to educating the students of pedagogy as many of the common soft skills exhibit unique nature as professional skills for a teacher (Almazova et al. 2022).

Moreover, the participants were asked whether in their opinion having predetermined target units to be used when completing a communicative task contributes to the development of their hard skills. Repeating the same pattern, the results were assessed both by the year of study and the language ability. In the case of this question, when filtered by language ability and by the year of study, within each group the majority of the participants gave positive answers. Being at the level of 73,1 % in first-year students, the number went down to 65,2 % in second-year students before it started

to increase again, reaching 73,7 % in the third year and 75 % in the fourth. When filtered by language ability, the tendency is also complex, 66,7 % of B1 students think that form-based learning develops hard skills. This number peaks at 77,3 % in B2 students before it decreases slightly to 75 % in C1 students.

Interestingly enough, when asked whether or not they find having predetermined target units to be used when completing a communicative task beneficial, only 46,2 % of the students gave a positive answer. When contrasted to the findings presented above, where around 72 % of the students on average understand that form-based learning contributes to hard skills development and around 60 % of them on average do not agree that it slows down the development of soft skills a number of conclusions can be made.

Though university students understand the benefits of form-based learning for the development of hard skills, over a half of them find it limiting for various reasons. Thus, they do not stand against form-based learning as such; it is more likely that the way they should be instructed and assessed must be reconsidered. Additionally, fewer students gave positive answers to the question about the effects of form-based learning on the development of soft skills. Though, the majority of them disagreed with the statement, the number of students who did not think that form-based learning slows down the development of soft skills was lower than the number of students who agrees that it develops hard skills.

All of the results presented within the current article highlight the complexity of learning a foreign language within a university programme. Having one set formal syllabus for all of the students is not going to bring the desirable and expected results for all of the reasons stated above and we are of the opinion that language teaching approaches like TBLT and specifically task-supported syllabuses may possess a great deal of potential.

A task-supported syllabus is regarded to be a more conventional way to design a syllabus as opposed to a task-based syllabus. In this approach tasks play a supporting role to the set syllabus that can be based on a chosen course book. Within such syllabus, tasks are designed additionally to the course syllabus representing activities that enable the students to apply the language they have acquired, while completing a task that reflects certain real world situations. In this case, some of the course assessment can be done in terms of the tasks' outcomes that are set as a part of the course syllabus. The main difference between a standard controlled practice activity and a TBLT task within task-

supported syllabus is that the assessment of the task is done in terms of its meaning-based outcome.

For instance, when working with Roadmap course book set, Module 2B "Running wild", concerning problems that modern teenagers face; the students were working with the course book materials and the target language of the unit which included such collocations as "tackle the problem", "increase funding", "take action", "ban the use of", etc. Once the work with the module was completed, the students were asked to create a list of problems that young adults face today. The problems suggested were discussed with no specific focus made on the target language of the module. However, it is entirely up to the teacher to naturally insert target units into their speech as the topic of the pedagogical task is discussed. After the brief discussion the task was introduced. The students were asked to research one of the problems suggested. They were instructed to provide some statistics to prove the actuality of the problem and develop a 5-step action plan that can be taken in order to address the existing problem. A pedagogical task designed this way allows a great deal of soft skills development and hard skills application. It begins with the freedom in terms of decision making when choosing the problem to work with. Then the students are to work with information to support their choices, which may lead to more decision-making and critical thinking. Once the information was found they were instructed to develop a presentation to be delivered in front of the class. This stage clearly focuses on creativity and communicative skills. After the presentation there was group discussion and further questioning. All of the work was done in English, which allows free and contextual hard skills application within and outside the target language.

The work pattern outlined above can be broken down to the three generally accepted stages of a task-based sequence: a pre-task stage, a during-task stage and a post-task stage. A pre-task stage was concerned with the lead-in for the topic of the task and building of the motivation and interest which then proceeded to the instructions to the task. It is important to note that these instructions should strictly be meaning-based not to turn a TBLT contextual experience into controlled form-based practice. The work then continued with the during-task stage when the students began to work on the task searching for the statistics and evaluating the information they found. This work can be done in class or at home depending on various factors and aims but it is advisable to build a complex post-task stage. This stage should be concerned with the delivery of the task outcomes which can be pre-

sented in speaking through a public presentation or in writing. The further work with the task outcomes may include voting, discussion or brainstorming. This can also be the ground for team-work and leadership skills development. The post-task stage may also be built around form which eliminates the risk of students treating the task as mere target language practice or them being limited by the necessity to apply certain target language, though keeping this option open in case they willingly choose to turn to it.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it is principal to say that being in academic and professional focus, soft skills development alone comprises only a part of the competence-based reality of university education in our country. The data received from the present research highlights the complexity of language learning and skill development as viewed by students' of linguistics and LT. Along with the theoretical implications of the SLA and ISLA theories as well as modern labour market and educational trends these findings determine the evident necessity of simultaneous consideration of soft and hard skills development in students of linguistics and LT when working on the syllabus design.

Task-supported syllabuses provide great opportunities for soft skills and hard skills development that neither formal learning, nor freer but structural approaches can provide. It satisfies the complexity of language acquisition, considers students' individualities as they get to make their own decisions, organise their own work, and apply learning strategies of their own choice while also allows them to exercise and develop a wide range of soft skills.

When designing a task-supported syllabus, the types of tasks are to be referenced with the universal and professional competences that are to be developed within the university programme. This approach to syllabus design ensures that the educational process is relevant to the students' future professions and the changing world outside the classroom and undoubtedly provides them with competitive advantages both in terms of their hard and soft skills.

## List of Abbreviations

- ISLA — Instructed Second Language Acquisition
- LT — language teaching
- SLA — Second Language Acquisition
- TBLT — Task-based language teaching

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