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Learning English through news: a task-based approach to enhancing PR students' media literacy

1. Introduction

In the sphere of Public Relations (PR), the capability to communicate efficiently, examine media discourse, and reply to rapidly changing global narratives is fundamental. English, as the prevailing language of international media and professional communication, plays an essential role in modelling the skillset of future PR specialists. However, traditional English language training frequently fails to address the actual tasks that PR students face, for the most part in terms of understanding and generating language in authentic, media-rich settings.

In recent years, educators have increasingly accentuated the integration of authentic materials into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Among these resources, news texts have confirmed particularly valuable to the learners, as they render students to modern language use, diverse linguistic strategies, and culturally rooted meanings. Furthermore, working with news improves students' media literacy — a crucial competence in PR education, where the skill to distinguish bias, deduce framing, and respond to public discourse is actually essential.

This article offers a pedagogical model that combines Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) with the use of English-language news as a means to expand both language and critical media skills. By inserting tasks that duplicate everyday PR situations into the program of study — such as headline comparison, fact-checking, and press release drafting — this training aims to demonstrate how engagement with news can enrich the linguistic learning experience and better prepare undergraduates for the challenges of their future profession.

2. Literature review

The integration of authentic materials in English language education, particularly within English for Specific Purposes (ESP), has been widely approved as a means of increasing learner motivation, commitment, and real-world communication skills (Gilmore, 2007; Tafani, 2009; Pinner, 2013; Chemerys, 2022). News texts, in particular, provide a rich source of up-to-date lexicon, colloquial expressions, and linguistic structures that reproduce contemporary sociopolitical and sociocultural settings. For undergraduates in Public Relations (PR), such exposure is especially appropriate, as it allows them to engage with the varieties of media discourse with which they are likely to encounter in their professional lives.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as an effective method for supporting communicative competence through meaningful, goal-oriented tasks (Lai–Li, 2011, p. 500). According to Ellis et al. (2019), TBLT underlines language use in context and inspires learners to develop both fluency and accuracy through active involvement. When combined with authentic materials like news articles, TBLT creates an immersive environment where learners interact with language as it is genuinely used, rather than in artificially assembled textbook set-ups.

Media literacy, in the meantime, has turned out to be a key competence in PR education, interconnecting both language learning and professional training. As Buckingham (2003) and Livingstone (2004) note, media literacy involves the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of contexts. For PR students, this contains critical awareness of media framing, bias, agenda-setting, and persuasive techniques — all of which are inserted in news discourse. It is important to mention that media framing refers to the way the news media organises and presents a news story, emphasising certain aspects of reality while downplaying or omitting others. By emphasising certain details, words, images, or angles, the media can guide the audience towards a particular interpretation of an event or issue. For example, a protest could be framed as a "riot" (emphasising disorder) or as a "demonstration for justice" (emphasising legitimate grievances). Under the term *agenda-setting* we understand the media's ability to determine which issues are considered important by the public. The deep knowledge of all these aspects is fundamental in communication studies. It highlights the significant power of the media to direct public attention and shape public priorities, serving as a powerful force in shaping our understanding of the world and influencing what we deem important. Many researchers emphasise the role of education in nurturing these skills, particularly in digital and multilingual environments (Hobbs, 2010; Potter, 2022).

While there is broad research on TBLT and media literacy individually, fewer studies address their mutual application in the perspective of ESP for PR students. This study aims to explore the integration of authentic English-language news content as a tool for enhancing media literacy and developing specific communicative competence among students majoring in Public Relations.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted as part of a semester-long Professional Communication in English course designed for undergraduate students majoring in Public Relations and Journalism at Bohdan Khmelnytsky National University of Cherkasy. The primary objective of the course was to improve students' English language proficiency while simultaneously developing their media literacy skills. To achieve this, a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach was implemented using authentic English-language news materials.

39 fourth-year PR students participated in the course. Instruction was structured around weekly themes related to media and communication (e.g., crisis communication, political narratives, reputation management). For each theme, students engaged with curated articles from reputable English-language media outlets, such as *BBC News*, *The Guardian* and *Reuters*.

Tasks were designed according to the principles of TBLT and included:
- headline analysis and comparison across different news sources;
- identification of bias and framing techniques;
- vocabulary extraction and contextualization;
- rewriting news content into press releases or social media posts;
- fact-checking and evaluating source credibility.

Students worked individually, in pairs, and in small groups. Each task finished in a real-world communicative product, such as an imitation press briefing, infographic, or media response. Instructional scaffolding was provided through pre-task vocabulary support and post-task reflection activities.

We are able to illustrate the headline analysis and comparison across different news sources through an example of the activities provided. The students were asked to carry a Comparative Headline Analysis and were provided with the following topic: Ukraine at Munich Security Conference (14 February 2025). They were given such instructions:
1. Read both headlines carefully.
2. Identify and discuss:
   - The primary focus of each headline;
   - The tone and emotional impact conveyed;
   - Rhetorical devices used.

3. Analyse how each headline shapes readers' perceptions of Ukraine's role.
4. Create alternate headlines for the same event using different framing:
   – Highlighting Ukraine's demands in a neutral tone;
   – Emphasising diplomatic engagement;
   – Focusing on US–EU internal tension.

These are some of our findings. The first headline was taken from *The Guardian* (URL1):

"*Zelenskyy demands 'real security guarantees' before peace talks*" (*The Guardian*, Feb 14, 2025).

– Focus: Zelenskyy's demand for security assurances;
– Tone: forceful, emotional;
– Device: direct quotation ("real security guarantees"); it emphasises urgency and leadership.

The previous headline was compared with the second one from *Reuters* (URL2):

"*Vance attack on Europe overshadows Ukraine talks at security conference*" (*Reuters*, Feb 14, 2025).

– Focus: US Vice President JD Vance's criticism of Europe, marginalizing Ukraine's presence;
– Tone: neutral, reportive;
– Device: metaphor ("overshadows"); it suggests that Ukraine's situation became secondary.

Table 1. Comparative headline analysis

News outlet	Headline	Primary focus	Tone	Rhetorical device
The Guardian	*Zelenskyy demands 'real security guarantees' before peace talks*	Ukraine's security demands	Emotional, assertive	Direct quotation ("demands")
Reuters	*Vance attack on Europe overshadows Ukraine talks at security conference*	US domestic speech eclipsing Ukraine's agenda	Neutral, reportive	Metaphor ("overshadows")

Source: Created by the author

Therefore, the students came to the conclusion that in general *The Guardian* highlights urgency and leadership, while *Reuters* shifts attention to US internal politics.

Then the students were provided with the follow-up discussion:

- *How do headline choices influence public awareness of global events?*
- *Can tone and framing affect policy understanding or bias in media consumption?*

Data for this study were collected through classroom observations, qualitative analysis of student work (written tasks, media reports) and anonymous student surveys conducted at the end of the course.

The collected data were analysed to assess changes in students' language accuracy, critical reading skills, and confidence in dealing with authentic media content in English. Qualitative responses from the surveys were coded to identify common themes related to perceived learning gains, challenges, and relevance to their future profession.

4. Findings

The implementation of the task-based learning approach using authentic English-language news materials brought positive outcomes in some areas. The analysis of student performance and feedback demonstrated several key improvements.

4.1. Vocabulary acquisition and contextual understanding

Students demonstrated a significant expansion of their PR-related vocabulary, particularly terms associated with media discourse, crisis communication, and political narratives. Exposure to diverse news sources allowed learners to encounter words and idiomatic expressions in authentic contexts, facilitating deeper comprehension and retention.

To quantify vocabulary gains, a **pre- and post-course vocabulary test** was administered. The test included 50 media-specific terms (e.g., *press release, media kit, soundbite, brand image, target audience, reputation management, key message, communications strategy, message framing, agenda-setting, spin*). Each term was scored for correct usage in context. Students' scores were averaged, and the difference between the pre- and post-test scores indicated learning gains. On average, students' correct usage increased by 22%, reflecting measurable improvement in accurate application of PR-specific terminology.

4.2. Improvement of critical thinking and media literacy

Engagement with news articles enhanced students' ability to recognise bias, identify framing strategies, and assess source credibility. In structured classroom tasks, students compared coverage of the same event across multiple media outlets (BBC, Reuters, and The Guardian), highlighting differences in tone, emphasis, and framing techniques.

To evaluate improvements, a critical analysis task was scored using a rubric assessing (a) identification of biased language, (b) recognition of framing strategies, and (c) assessment of source reliability. Pre- and post-course performance was compared, and the proportion of students demonstrating mastery in at least two of the three areas increased by 30%, indicating a substantial gain in critical media analysis skills.

4.3. Advanced confidence and communication skills

Students reported increased confidence when working with authentic materials and participating in task-based activities that simulated real-life PR scenarios. For instance, after completing a series of assignments involving drafting press releases based on news reports, 73% of students rated their readiness to engage in professional communication as "high" or "very high" in post-course surveys.

4.4. Challenges encountered

Despite overall positive outcomes, some students encountered difficulties with complex sentence structures, culturally specific references, and abstract concepts embedded in news discourse. For example, terms like *soft power* or idiomatic expressions such as *to call the shots* required additional scaffolding through targeted vocabulary exercises and peer support.

4.5. Student feedback

Anonymous surveys indicated that 85% of participants valued the integration of news materials, emphasising that such tasks made learning more engaging and relevant to their future careers. Many students expressed interest in incorporating multimedia content such as video news segments and podcasts to diversify their learning experiences further.

Table 2. Student skill improvements following TBL implementation using authentic news materials

Skill Area	Improvement	Notes
Acquisition of media-related vocabulary	22%	Increased accurate use of specific terminology
Ability to detect bias	30%	Enhanced critical thinking skills
Confidence in professional communication	73% (high confidence)	After completing practical PR tasks
Overall student satisfaction	85%	Positive feedback on the integration of news materials

Source: Created by the author

5. Discussion

The findings of this study support the growing body of literature suggesting that the integration of authentic news materials into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction can significantly enhance both language competence and media literacy. For Public Relations (PR) students, who must operate in fast-paced, media-driven environments, this dual benefit is particularly relevant.

One of the most notable outcomes was the development of students' ability to engage with media language critically. The marked increase in their awareness of bias, framing strategies, and source reliability indicates that language instruction, when designed to reflect real-world contexts, can support broader cognitive and professional skills. This aligns with Hobbs' assertion that media literacy is not a supplementary skill but a foundational component of contemporary education, particularly in media-related fields (Hobbs, 2010, p. 15).

The application of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) principles proved to be effective for not only improving vocabulary and fluency, but also for promoting learner autonomy and task engagement. Students responded positively to tasks that mimicked professional PR scenarios, demonstrating improved confidence and motivation. Notably, the incorporation of authentic texts served as a bridge between classroom learning and workplace communication, a gap often reported in traditional language instruction.

While the results were overwhelmingly positive, the study also revealed some challenges. Difficulties with culturally embedded references and syntactic complexity in news discourse highlight the need for appropriate scaffolding, especially for learners operating at intermediate levels. The success of peer collaboration and targeted vocabulary support suggests that such challenges can be effectively addressed within a well-designed course structure.

Overall, the study illustrates that a task-based, news-integrated approach aligns with the communicative and analytical demands of PR education. It not only enhances students' linguistic ability but also prepares them to interpret and shape media narratives — a core skill in the modern public sphere.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how task-based learning through authentic news content promotes media literacy among PR students. By engaging with real-time news from authoritative sources such as BBC News, Reuters and The Guardian, students not only became familiar with specific vocabulary but also developed critical reading and analysis skills. To sum up the key findings, we need to underline that specific activities such as headline analysis, bias detection,

contextual vocabulary work and news rewriting were found to be effective in enhancing both language competence and media literacy.

The integration of news-based tasks encourages active learning and contextualises language learning. It supports the development of key 21st century competencies such as source evaluation, digital literacy and audience-sensitive communication, which are crucial for future public relations professionals. Additionally, the variety of news formats (written, audio, video) allows for differentiated instruction and accommodates different learning styles.

The development of media literacy skills is crucial nowadays. Throughout the course, students learn to identify bias, recognise framing strategies, and assess credibility. These analytical skills are transferable beyond language classes and are relevant to the global emphasis on responsible media consumption and production. Tasks such as comparing headlines from different publications or fact-checking controversial reports allow students to question narratives and think for themselves.

By modelling real-world tasks, such as writing press releases based on current events or summarising news stories for social media, students practise communicating in a way that reflects industry expectations. Exposure to media jargon, public message strategies, and journalistic norms prepares students for the nuanced demands of PR work in multicultural and digital contexts.

While the study highlights the benefits of news-based learning, it also acknowledges certain challenges: selecting grade-appropriate content, managing political sensitivities, and ensuring balanced perspectives. Future research could focus on developing structured curricula around these tasks, examining longitudinal effects on students' language proficiency and professional readiness, or comparing traditional English teaching methods with media-integrated approaches.

In summary, the use of authentic media in English for Special Purposes (ESP) classes offers a dynamic and interdisciplinary way to enhance both linguistic and critical competencies. It aligns language learning with real-world relevance and equips students with the PR tools to become not only effective communicators but also responsible and literate media consumers.

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Learning English through news: a task-based approach to enhancing PR students' media literacy

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The article explores the integration of authentic English-language news content as a tool for enhancing media literacy and developing domain-specific communicative competence among students majoring in Public Relations. The focus is placed on implementing a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach in combination with news analysis techniques within an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) framework. The study outlines the stages of an educational project that employed up-to-date headlines from authoritative sources as the basis for a sequence of tasks designed to build not only linguistic but also critical and professional skills.

Through task completion, students practiced relevant vocabulary, conducted semantic and pragmatic headline analysis, identified forms of media framing and manipulation, and adapted authentic materials into various PR genres. Working with real-life media also contributed to fact-checking and cross-source comparison. The project encouraged the development of soft skills, including public speaking and analytical argumentation.

The article presents the results of a student survey, which demonstrated increased motivation to learn English and a desire for continued engagement with current global issues through foreign-language media. Based on the findings, the author offers practical recommendations for enhancing ESP courses for communication-related fields, including

the integration of digital tools, student-led media projects, and the systematic use of critical news analysis as an integral component of language instruction. The project highlights the value of combining language education with media analysis to prepare socially responsible, globally minded, and professionally competent graduates.

Keywords: *authentic news, media literacy, English for Specific Purposes, public relations, Task-Based Language Teaching, framing, critical thinking, intercultural communication, digital skills.*

Вивчення англійської мови через аналіз новин: завданнєво-орієнтований підхід до формування медіаграмотності майбутніх фахівців із PR

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У статті досліджено інтеграцію автентичного англомовного новинного контенту як інструменту для підвищення медіаграмотності та розвитку предметно-орієнтованої комунікативної компетенції серед студентів, які спеціалізуються на зв'язках з громадськістю. Акцент зроблено на впровадженні підходу викладання мови на основі завдань (TBLT) у поєднанні з методами аналізу новин у рамках ESP (англійської мови для спеціальних цілей). У дослідженні окреслено етапи освітнього проекту, в якому використовувалися актуальні заголовки з авторитетних джерел як основа для послідовності завдань, спрямованих на розвиток не лише лінгвістичних, а й критичних та професійних навичок.

Шляхом виконання завдань студенти практикували відповідну лексику, проводили семантичний та прагматичний аналіз заголовків, визначали форми фреймінгу та маніпуляцій у ЗМІ, а також адаптували автентичні матеріали до різних жанрів PR. Робота з реальними ЗМІ також сприяла перевірці фактів та перехресному порівнянню. Проект сприяв розвитку м'яких навичок, включаючи публічні виступи та аналітичну аргументацію.

У статті представлено результати опитування студентів, які продемонстрували підвищену мотивацію до вивчення англійської мови та бажання продовжувати займатися актуальними глобальними проблемами через іншомовні ЗМІ. На основі отриманих результатів автор пропонує практичні рекомендації щодо вдосконалення курсів англійської мови для спеціалістів у галузях, пов'язаних з комунікацією, включаючи інтеграцію цифрових інструментів, медіапроекти, що проводяться студентами, та систематичне використання критичного аналізу новин як невід'ємного компонента мовної освіти. Проєкт підкреслює цінність поєднання мовної освіти з медіааналізом для підготовки соціально відповідальних, глобально мислячих та професійно компетентних фахівців.

Ключові слова: *автентичні новини, медіаграмотність, англійська для спеціальних цілей, зв'язки з громадськістю, Task-Based Language Teaching, фреймінг, критичне мислення, міжкультурна комунікація, цифрові навички.*

Angol nyelvtanulás hírek segítségével: feladatalapú megközelítés a PR-szakos hallgatók médiaműveltségének fejlesztésére

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A tanulmány az autentikus angol nyelvű hírtartalmak integrálását vizsgálja mint a médiaműveltség fejlesztésének és a PR-szakos hallgatók szakterület-specifikus kommunikatív kompetenciájának erősítését szolgáló eszközt. A fókusz a feladatközpontú nyelvoktatási megközelítés (Task-Based Language Teaching, TBLT) alkalmazásán van, amely a hírelemzés technikáival kombinálva, az ESP (English for Specific Purposes – szaknyelvi angol) keretében valósul meg. A kutatás bemutatja egy olyan oktatási projekt szakaszait, amely naprakész, autentikus forrásokból származó hírcímeket használt fel egy olyan feladatsor alapjaként, amely nemcsak a nyelvi, hanem a kritikai és szakmai készségek fejlesztését is célozta.

A feladatok elvégzése során a hallgatók gyakorolták a releváns szókincset, szemantikai és pragmatikai szempontból elemezték a hírcímeket, azonosították a médiakeretezés és a manipuláció formáit, valamint az autentikus anyagokat különböző PR-műfajokhoz igazították. A valós médiatartalmakkal való munka hozzájárult a tényellenőrzési készségek fejlődéséhez és a források közötti összehasonlításhoz is. A projekt ösztönözte az úgynevezett soft skillek – többek között a nyilvános beszéd és az analitikus érvelés – fejlesztését.

Emellett a tanulmány egy hallgatói kérdőíves felmérés eredményeit foglalja össze, amelyek nagyobb angoltanulási motivációt és az aktuális politikai kérdésekkel való további, idegen nyelvű médián keresztül történő foglalkozás iránti igényt mutattak. Az eredmények alapján a szerző gyakorlati ajánlásokat fogalmaz meg a kommunikációs területekhez kapcsolódó ESP-kurzusok fejlesztésére, beleértve a digitális eszközök integrálását, a hallgatók által irányított médiaprojektek megvalósítását, valamint a kritikai hírelemzés szisztematikus alkalmazását mint a nyelvoktatás szerves részét. A projekt rámutat arra, hogy a nyelvoktatás és a médiatudatosság elemzésének ötvözése hozzájárul a társadalmilag felelős, globális szemléletű és szakmailag felkészült szakemberek képzéséhez.

Kulcsszavak: autentikus hírek, médiaműveltség, szaknyelvi angol (ESP), közkapcsolatok (PR), feladatközpontú nyelvoktatás, megfogalmazás, kritikai gondolkodás, interkulturális kommunikáció, digitális készségek.