Взаимосвязанное развитие межкультурной компетенции и гибких навыков с помощью заданий в иноязычном образовании в университете

**Введение.** Формирование универсальных компетенций (гибких навыков) является императивом современной системы образования, а одной из ключевых компетенций современного специалиста является владение иностранным языком. Иностранный язык как предмет обладает большим потенциалом для взаимосвязанного развития как предметных, так и метапредметных, универсальных компетенций.

**Цель исследования** – проанализировать учебные пособия и онлайн курсы, которые активно используются преподавателями университета, и оценить структуру используемых заданий и их потенциал для взаимосвязанного формирования межкультурной компетенции и гибких навыков.

**Методология и методы.** В опросе приняли участие 21 преподаватель Петрозаводского государственного университета. Для оценки учебных материалов были разработаны критерии на основе структуры межкультурной компетенции и гибких навыков. На основе предложенных критериев было выделено 6 групп заданий, которые способствуют взаимосвязанному развитию межкультурной компетенции и гибких навыков (культурологические материалы; задания на развитие критического мышления; задания на анализ и интерпретацию информации; задания с опорой на опыт обучающихся; задания на генерирование собственных идей и продукта; задания для взаимодействия (в парах, группах) и создание совместного продукта).

**Результаты.** Исследование показало, что 85,7% преподавателей иностранных языков Петрозаводского государственного университета (Российская Федерация) согласны, что возможно и необходимо взаимосвязанное развитие межкультурной компетенции и гибких навыков. Однако лишь 42,1% респондентов удовлетворены количеством и качеством заданий, предлагаемых в учебных пособиях. При этом все опрошенные используют дополнительные задания, а 95,2% делают то регулярно или часто. Анализ учебных пособий подтвердил, что у респондентов есть основания для неудовлетворенности количеством и качеством заданий. Лишь 19%-25% заданий, предлагаемых в учебных пособиях и(или) онлайн курсе могут быть использованы для развития универсальных компетенций и межкультурной компетенции. Более детальный анализ заданий выявил, что наименее представлены задания на создание собственного продукта (индивидуально) и групповые задания с созданием группового продукта.

**Заключение.** Полученные результаты позволили разработать классификацию заданий для использования на занятиях по иностранному языку в университете для взаимосвязанного развития предметных и метапредметных компетенций. Предложены формулировки заданий для достижения интегрированных результатов в иноязычном образовании.

**Ключевые слова:** полифункциональные задания, межкультурная компетенция, универсальные компетенции, гибкие навыки.

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Introduction. The formation of universal competences (flexible skills) is an imperative of the modern education system, while foreign language proficiency is one of the key competences of a modern specialist. A foreign language as a subject has great potential for the interconnected development of both subject and meta-subject, universal competences.

The research purpose is to analyze the textbooks and online courses that are actively used by university teachers and evaluate the structure of tasks used and their potential for the interconnected formation of intercultural competence and soft skills.

Methodology and methods. Twenty-one teachers of Petrozavodsk State University took part in the survey. Criteria based on the framework of intercultural competence and soft skills were developed to evaluate learning materials. Based on the proposed criteria, six groups of tasks were identified that contribute to the interconnected development of intercultural competence and flexible skills (culturological materials; tasks for critical thinking development; tasks for information analysis and interpretation; tasks based on students’ experience; tasks for generating one’s own ideas and products; tasks for the interaction (in pairs, groups) and creation of a joint product).

Results. The study showed that 85.7% of foreign language teachers of Petrozavodsk State University (Russian Federation) agree that the development of intercultural competence and soft skills is possible and necessary. However, only 42.1% of the respondents are satisfied with the quantity and quality of tasks offered in textbooks. Moreover, all respondents use additional tasks and 95.2% do it regularly or often. The analysis of the textbooks confirmed that the respondents have reason to be dissatisfied with the quantity and quality of tasks. Only 19%-25% of the tasks offered in textbooks and/or online courses can be used to develop universal competences and intercultural competence. A more detailed analysis of the tasks revealed that the least presented were tasks for creating one’s own product (individually) and group tasks for creating a group product.

Conclusion. The results obtained allowed to develop a classification of tasks to be used in foreign language classes at a university for the interconnected development of subject and meta-subject competences. The formulations of tasks for achieving integrated results in foreign language education were proposed.

For Reference:
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Introduction

21st-century education is aimed at preparing students to learn throughout their lives and to function effectively in changing, diverse. The achievement of these outcomes implies, among other things, the student active involvement in intercultural communication when they learn and develop through interacting with diverse cultures. From this point, the contribution of foreign language education in whole personality development is obvious.

Learning another language offers us an opportunity to step into another culture, to broaden considerably the picture of the world, and foster significant personality traits, gradually moving “towards greater understanding of otherness and, simultaneously, deepening self-understanding” [24, p. 22]. The assumption is that, if attained on a personal level, intercultural competence will help learners deal with current states of diversity and globalization [24] as well as provide a deeper insight into their own culture and themselves [23], becoming interculturally competent.

As the designers of the CEFR underline, "language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences" [9] including intercultural competence as one of them. If we look at the potential of a foreign language as an academic course, we can see that it can foster all soft skills [3; 27], such as analytical and critical thinking; active learning strategies; complex problem-solving; creativity, originality, and initiative. To this end, encounters with diverse cultures allow for multiperspectivity, that is the ability to consider other people’s perspectives in addition to one’s own, engaging as a whole person and addressing one’s intellectual, emotional, and physical potential.

The article aims to assess the task potential of a few English language coursebooks and an online course used in Russian universities from the point of view of the interrelated enhancement of intercultural competence as part of foreign language communicative competence and as one of the soft skills / general competences.

Literature review

The core concepts around which our research unfolds, are intercultural competence, soft skills (universal, or key competences), and related tasks in university foreign language education.

Intercultural competence is defined as “the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions” [12]. This combination applied through action enables one to use the multiple cultural resources which are available to them to actively construct and negotiate their own meanings and interpretations of the world [19, p. 15].

Intercultural competence promotes interaction with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself [15, p. 458]. So, it is closely connected with language competences which determine how people interpret the world and communicate in intercultural encounters [19, p. 17]. Thus, intercultural competence manifests itself in appropriate actions, communication, and work with people from different cultural backgrounds [21], tuning one’s own behaviour according to the comprehension of other
cultures [25]. As it is grounded on certain values and personality qualities of the individual [18], it is evident that cultural attributes are personalized and also manifest themselves in a huge variety of ways, affecting the quality of both intercultural communication and personal development in general [17]. It results in both seeing the world from different perspectives and understanding one’s own culture. In sum, students need to learn to see diversity as an asset in helping individuals, organizations, and society to succeed rather than regarding it primarily as a source of [1].

Considering culture and intercultural communication from both a broad and a personal perspective leads us to the conclusion that intercultural competence has a great role to play not only in communication of people from different countries, but also in the interaction of people sharing the same national/ethnographic culture and simultaneously belonging to a variety of sub-cultural groups, people from different regional, linguistic, ethnic or religious backgrounds, or people who differ from each other because of their lifestyle, gender, social class, age or generation, etc. [19].

A brief overview of intercultural competence shows that its effective functioning is affected by and interrelated with soft skills which are called for in multiple real-life activities and contexts. Actually, some researchers regard intercultural competence as one of the soft skills which, along with multilingual (or plurilingualistic) skills, contribute to the making of a competent professional [11; 14]. Social soft skills (communication, collaboration, teamwork, and leadership) form the foundation of intercultural communication. Digital, information search, and information processing skills, combined with literacy and multilingual skills, contribute to the formation of a comprehensive picture of the world that emerges through one’s whole life in interaction with diverse cultures. Effective intercultural communication considerably relies on thinking (logical, critical, and creative) which promotes understanding, negotiation of meaning, interpretation, decision making, and problem-solving [11]. They are used not only to identify differences, but also similarities, or common grounds, simultaneously manifesting individual’s attitudes and traits which are classified as soft skills too (openness, respect for others and their opinions, tolerance, etc.) [11].

It is evident that soft skills are abilities that maintain any human activity [16], including intercultural communication and competence development (learning) as well.

Based on the description of intercultural competence, we need to define the main ways of its development. The most effective learning activities engage learners as whole persons and address their intellectual, emotional, and physical potential, emphasizing multiple perspectives [19, p. 30]. In all the related research, the emphasis is placed on expanding students’ personal experiences of intercultural communication, both real and “imagined” [2; 24]. Such experiences are gained by learners while performing different activities in relation to culturally significant content, being engaged in the dialogue of cultures. Among the tools used for intercultural competence development, many researchers [11; 24] list discussions, role play, simulations and drama, theatre, poetry, and creative writing, film, media, concept maps, ethnographic tasks aimed at real-life exploration [7]. Applied on a regular basis to culture-specific information, these techniques and tools involve learners in intercultural communication and reflection.

One common feature of the techniques, tasks, and other didactic tools under discussion is that all of them draw upon a variety of skills, not exclusively on those that relate to intercultural competence. The soft skills described above encourage understanding texts and utterances, both oral and written, as well as expressing ideas and discussing them with others while using the foreign language as a means of communication (foreign language communicative
competence) [9] Researchers underline, directly or indirectly, the possibility of simultaneous development of metacognitive strategies, soft skills (general or key competences), and foreign language communicative competence [4; 9; 28] (which allows to achieve cumulative outcomes of foreign language education. Due to this strategy, teaching takes a holistic, learner-centered approach and focuses on diverse educational activities aimed at integrative outcomes [10]. Nevertheless, a major limitation with up-to-date research is that there has been little focus on particular didactic instruments that promote cumulative learning outcomes including research in the field of foreign language education. In most cases, task functions are limited either to some subject-specific results of language education or to a single soft skill, neglecting the possibility of their interrelated development.

**Rational for the Study**

We suggest that, in case tasks evolve around culture-focused content, covering different cultural aspects of both the people speaking the foreign language and the student native culture, they can promote the simultaneous interrelated development of the target subject-specific competences and soft skills. Then, soft skills can function as a valid mechanism for intercultural and foreign language communicative competence development, on the one hand, and, on the other, be refined themselves due to intensive student practices while applying them in meaningful activities.

Such tasks should be intentionally designed to involve students in purposeful activities that focus them on intercultural content and on processing, analyzing, mediating, and discussing relative information in diverse interaction formats, resulting in a variety of experiences (intercultural knowledge, skills, and values).

The sources of culture-specific information in tasks vary, ranging from written and oral texts, videos, graphics, statistics, social networks, etc., to communication with different people. The assignments may suggest searching, sharing, analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and discussing this information.

Thus, the problem question for the current study is: do modern university foreign language courses offer students tasks aimed at intercultural competence development activating and enhancing simultaneously student soft skills?

**Materials and Methods**

1. **Methodology**
   The research was aimed to find out
   (a) types of tasks present in coursebooks and an online course;
   (b) the potential of these tasks to foster intercultural competence and general competences development (criteria-based assessment and university foreign language teachers estimates-based assessment);
   (c) the proportion of tasks aimed at intercultural competence and general competences development in the coursebooks and the online course analyzed in the study.

2. **Research Design and Methods**
   During the research, the data were obtained by means of quantitative and qualitative methods: (a) through the analysis of the coursebooks in terms of using tasks aimed at
simultaneous development of foreign language communicative competence, intercultural competence, and general competences in foreign language university education in particular; (b) through classroom observations and analysis of the results of classwork; (c) through conducting a questionnaire among the university foreign language teacher participants in the project (21 respondents) which was designed to find out their opinions about the need for tasks aimed at intercultural competence and general competences interrelated development as well as the degree of the teachers’ satisfaction with the tasks offered by the coursebooks they use; (d) through gathering data related to the university context of foreign language teaching and learning.

The overview of the data gathered in the initial phase allowed us to articulate research questions for the study and to outline a few solutions to consider. The final phase consisted of the analysis of the results obtained.

3. Assessment Criteria

To come up with some constituents of intercultural competence and relative tasks, we looked at its structure suggested by Byram [6] and criteria to assess it by Boye [5].

| Byram’s constituents of intercultural competence [6] | Boye’s criteria to assess intercultural competence [5]: |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Savoir être (Attitudes): Curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own | Ability to reflect on experience and find learning points (from good and bad experiences) |
| Savoir comprendre (Skills of interpreting and relating): Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one’s own | Ability to reflect on experience and criticize self (if necessary) |
| Savoir s’engager (Critical cultural awareness / political education): An ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries | Awareness that cultures are different but no single culture is intrinsically better than another |
| Savoir apprendre / faire (Skills of discovery and interaction): Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction | Ability to think oneself into the position of the ‘other’ |
| Savoirs (Knowledge): of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction | Ability to reflect on a range of possible causes to any problems which occur |

Source: Compiled by the authors.

In Table 1, we italicized the key skills and abilities which form intercultural competence. As we can see from Byram’s concept and Boye’s criteria, intercultural competence, being a part of communicative competence which is a general competence, draws on openness, critical thinking, analysis and interpreting information, ability to acquire new knowledge, and to operate it. Consequently, we can conclude that tasks that foster the development of these aspects inevitably result in intercultural competence development as well, thus providing integrative outcomes.
Based on these factors, we define the following criteria to assess the coursebook materials and tasks:

- Culture-based materials (oral or written texts/videos), stimulating reading and listening.
- Tasks to use critical thinking.
- Tasks to analyze and interpret cultural information.
- Tasks based on learner’s experiences, fostering openness, curiosity, and creativity.
- Tasks that require learners to generate their own content, encouraging independent thinking, creativity, and independent learning.
- Tasks that encourage student interaction (pairs/mingles/group/teamwork/collaboration) and generate their own culturally relevant content.

The factors selected for task analysis unite those which contribute to the development of intercultural competence through activating student soft skills (general or key competences).

4. Research Materials and Stages

At the first stage, we conducted a questionnaire offered to university foreign language teachers to reveal their opinions on a) the need for specific tasks aimed at intercultural competence development and b) the number of tasks in the coursebooks they use. It should be underlined that the respondents apply a variety of coursebooks available in our country.

The questionnaire included the following questions.

1. To what extent do you agree that intercultural competence should be developed through specific tasks aimed at its development? (1- disagree completely, 2 more disagree, 3 doubt, 4 more agree, 5 agree completely)

2. To what extent do you agree that intercultural competence should be developed through specific tasks aimed only at its development? (1- disagree completely, 2 more disagree, 3 doubt, 4 more agree, 5 agree completely)

3. To what extent do you agree that intercultural competence can be developed through the use of tasks aimed at the development of such soft skills (general/key competences) as critical thinking, creativity, analytical and systems thinking, and communication? (1- disagree completely, 2 more disagree, 3 doubt, 4 more agree, 5 agree completely) (1- Not at all, 2- just occasional tasks, 3 -some tasks but not enough, 4 - enough tasks, 5 - a lot)

4. Do the coursebooks that you use offer the tasks aimed at the development of intercultural competence?

5. Do you add any tasks aimed at the development of soft skills (general/key competences) / intercultural competence? (1- never, 2- rarely, 3- occasionally, 4- often, 5- always)

During the second stage, we analyzed two units of each coursebook chosen for the study and one online course unit to single out the task types offered by the authors to develop intercultural competence and soft skills (general/key competences).

The current situation with COVID-19 put an additional strain on education and educators all over the world. Many of them have turned to resources and courses available online. The impact of e-learning is controversial, that is why we have chosen an online course to assess the potential of the tasks it offers.

To avoid influencing the reader with any preconceptions that might be created about the coursebooks evaluated in this study, their titles will not be revealed. The materials analyzed will be labeled as follows: coursebook 1 (CB1), coursebook 2 (CB2), and an online course (OC).
To consider a wider range of the tasks used, we chose courses designed for different purposes: general English / English for specific purposes (Academic English) / English for specific purposes (Business English).

Two units of CB1 were assessed: unit A deals with the topic of language and culture and unit B touches upon the topic of self-presenting. In the context of the study, unit A structure could be different and more related to intercultural competence, that is why we decided to look at each unit individually. We labelled them CB1(A) and CB1(B) respectively. CB1 and the OC are aimed at integrative subject-specific skills development within each unit (reading/writing/speaking/listening), while CB2 is structured into 4 modules, each focusing on a certain subject-specific skill (reading/writing/speaking/listening). Analyzing the latter, we looked at the module aimed at speaking skills development as it involves a variety of pair-work tasks. This module is divided into two units, the first one deals with socializing, while the second one focuses on academic presentations. In contrast to the first unit (socializing skills), the unit devoted to academic presentations at international events is based on the use of an individual learning path with a special emphasis on student learning needs. This focus is implemented through developing learners’ foreign language skills in expressing personalized content. To look at the potential of the use of the individual learning path [47], we consider these two units of the speaking module separately. To distinguish the two units of CB2, we labelled them CB2 (A) (socializing unit) and CB2 (B) (academic presentation unit).

At the final stage, we compared the results obtained during the coursebooks and online course analysis and the data we got from the questionnaire.

## Results

The results of the materials and tasks analysis are presented in Table 2.

| Coursebooks and online course characteristics |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Table 2**                                   |

|                         | Coursebook 1     | Coursebook 2     | Online course                        |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| **Content**             | General English   | English for specific purposes (Academic English) | English for specific purposes (Business English) |
| **Level**               | Intermediate      | Intermediate      | Mixed                                |
| **Focus**               | Integrative skills development | Speaking          | Integrated skills development        |
| **Topic of the unit**   | Language and Culture | Speaking about you | Socializing                        |
|                         |                    |                   | Academic Presentation (Individual learning path) |
|                         |                    |                   | Entering the job market             |
| **Number of tasks that draw on learner’s soft skills / general competences within the unit** | 10 out of 51 | 7 out of 43 | 12 out of 47 | 42 out of 61 | 7 out of 30 |
| **Percentage of tasks aimed at developing soft skills / general competences** | 19% | 16% | 25% | 69% | 23% |

Source: Compiled by the authors.
**Teachers’ assessment results**

21 university foreign language teachers with work experience from 5 to 30 years answered the questions using the google forms platform. The results are presented in Table 3.

| Questionnaire results                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Table 3**                                                                         |
| **Not at all**                                                                       |
| **Occasional tasks**                                                                 |
| **Some but not enough**                                                              |
| **Enough**                                                                           |
| **A lot**                                                                           |
| ICC requires specific tasks                                                          | 0% | 9,5% | 4,8% | 33,3% | 52.4% |
| Only specific tasks are necessary                                                    | 14,3% | 23,8% | 33,3% | 14,3% | 14,3% |
| Multifunctional tasks can foster ICC development                                     | 0% | 0% | 14,3% | 28,6% | 57,1% |

| No. | Not at all | Occasional tasks | Some but not enough | Enough | A lot |
|-----|------------|------------------|---------------------|--------|-------|
| 1   | 0%         | 9,5%             | 4,8%                | 33,3%  | 52.4% |
| 2   | 14,3%      | 23,8%            | 33,3%               | 14,3%  | 14,3% |
| 3   | 14,3%      | 23,8%            | 33,3%               | 14,3%  | 14,3% |
| 4   | 0%         | 0%               | 14,3%               | 28,6%  | 57,1% |
| 5   | 0%         | 0%               | 0%                  | 0%     | 0%    |

Source: Compiled by the authors.

**Coursebooks and online course task analysis results**

The coursebooks and the online course analyzed contain the following examples of tasks:

- **Culture-based materials (text/video for reading or listening):**
  - Read the text.
  - Listen to the interview.

- **Tasks to use critical thinking:**
  - Discuss the pros and cons of...
  - What behavior is appropriate in this situation in your culture?
  - Make a list of dos and don’ts.

- **Tasks to analyze and interpret (cultural) information:**
  - Discuss the statistics.
  - Think what you have studied in the unit.

- **Tasks based on learner’s experiences, fostering openness, curiosity, and creativity:**
  - What about you?
  - Speak about your experience.

- **Tasks that require learners to generate their own content, encouraging independent thinking, creativity, and independent learning:**
  - What do you think about...?
  - Comment on the quote/statement.
  - Prepare a presentation/project.

- **Tasks that encourage student interaction (pairs/mingles/groups/teamwork/collaboration) and generate their own culturally relevant content:**
  - With your partner, prepare a presentation / a project.

The frequency of the tasks which have a role to play in developing soft skills / general competences was further structured according to the skills and competences they aim at. The results are presented in Table 4.
Table 4

| Task Type                                                                 | CB1(A) Language and Culture | CB1(B) Speaking about you | CB2(A) Socializing | CB2(B) Academic Presentation (Individual learning path) | OC |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Total number of tasks with focus on soft skills / general competences    | 10 (100%)                   | 7 (100%)                  | 12 (100%)         | 42 (100%)                                              | 7 (100%) |
| Culture-based materials (text/video for reading and listening)            | 2 (20%)                     | 1 (14%)                   | 0                 | 0                                                      | 7 (100%) |
| Tasks to use critical thinking (critical thinking)                        | 1 (10%)                     | 1 (14%)                   | 3 (25%)           | 7 (17%)                                                | 0 |
| Tasks to analyze and interpret (cultural) information (analysis and interpretation) | 1 (10%)                     | 0                         | 1 (8%)            | 3 (8%)                                                 | 0 |
| Tasks based on learner’s experiences (openness and curiosity, creativity)  | 2 (20%)                     | 3 (43%)                   | 6 (50%)           | 22 (52%)                                               | 0 |
| Tasks requiring learners to generate their own content (independent thinking, creativity, independent learning) | 4 (40%)                     | 2 (28%)                   | 1 (8%)            | 8 (19%)                                                | 0 |
| Tasks to work in pairs/groups/mingles/team work/collaboration for generating their own content | 0                          | 0                         | 1 (8%)            | 2 (4%)                                                 | 0 |

Discussion

As today we witness a shortage of particular didactic instruments that promote cumulative learning outcomes, in our study we set out to analyze foreign language task potential for the integral development of student intercultural, communicative competences and soft skills as well. The aim of the study was to assess this potential from two perspectives: from those who teach and use the tasks and from the researchers’ view, considering task types, the soft skills they activate, and their frequency in the course.

As our study shows, this idea is shared by the university teachers in their answers to the questionnaire. The vast majority (86.7%) of the respondents agree about the necessity to develop intercultural competence through the use of specific tasks. 38.1% of the respondents claim these tasks should be exceptionally focused on the target competence. University teacher are not sure about the need for use of some very specific tasks to achieve it. Answering a more definite question about the possibility of interrelated intercultural and soft skills development, the correlation changes: 85.7% consider this option quite possible and only 14.3% find it doubtful.

As the respondents are university foreign language teachers who work with students from different departments and institutes, they use a great variety of coursebooks. It results in a variety of answers concerning the number of tasks and materials that these books contain. However, the majority of university foreign language teachers (57.9%) believe that
the coursebooks they use do not offer enough tasks and materials to boost intercultural competence development. 26.3% and 15.8% of teachers think that they have enough or a lot of such tasks and materials respectively. Finally, the majority of the teachers are not fully satisfied with the number of the materials and tasks to foster intercultural competence and soft skills development. Therefore, the largest part of the respondents (52.4%) always add some tasks to this end, though 19% do it occasionally, while only 4.8% rarely use extra tasks. The analysis reveals that the respondents are aware of the need to use a greater number and variety of didactic tools to achieve the goals.

The results of the second stage of the study show several trends. The first trend concerns the online course under review. A detailed analysis of all the materials offered in the online course showed that all of them (100%) are just texts or videos which can provide information and build the knowledge base without any skill development. The course does not include any 'higher-order thinking tasks' [22; 26]. or tasks recommended to build intercultural competence. The online course tasks completely ignore student-centered approaches, for example, such as individual learning paths [27]. or those based on the principle “diversity of students – diversity of materials and tasks [3]. Thus, it is evident the online course cannot foster a comprehensive development of intercultural competence in the full sense.

CB1 analysis has shown that only 19% and 16% of the tasks in unit A and unit B respectively can be classified as tasks to develop soft skills. Although unit A deals with language and a culture topic, the number of the tasks to foster their development is slightly higher in comparison with unit B. A positive feature of CB1 is the presence of all types of tasks which results in a more comprehensive approach, boosting the development of soft skills in versatile ways. A major disadvantage of CB1 is the absence of student collaboration and teamwork. The tasks which involve pair-work are more language-focused and do not allow learners to generate their own culturally relevant content.

CB2 turned out to be quite different from CB1. Firstly, CB2 is characterized by a higher number of general competence-focused tasks overall. Secondly, the distribution of these tasks within units A and B is quite uneven, the number of these tasks accounts for 25% in unit A, while unit B includes 69% of such tasks. CB2 does not contain any culture-specific materials, but it offers learners the opportunity to reflect on their own culture getting an insight into it. As was shown in the literature review above, understanding one’s own culture is much deeper and more comprehensive in case students have a chance to compare it with others’. Another distinctive feature of CB2 is its focus on learner’s experience, 50% and 52% of the tasks in units A and B respectively deal with it, involving students in pair work and in tasks to analyze ideas or compare them with the partner’s.

CB1 and CB2 make use of five task types out of six which, in the context of our study, can be assessed positively as an attempt to offer a variety of tasks aimed at the interrelated soft skills and intercultural competence development.

Nevertheless, the results of the study demonstrate that the coursebooks analyzed cannot be relied on entirely to foster integral learners’ intercultural competence and soft skills development. They are characterized by a) predominance of teacher / coursebook-generated content with rare cases of learner-generated content; b) insufficient amount of culture-specific information and learners’ experience-based tasks; c) insufficient use of tasks that involve teamwork and collaboration and encourage student higher-order thinking (logical, divergent, and critical thinking).

The online course we analyzed appears to be unable to boost learners’ intercultural competence development due to its focus on the knowledge base and lack of appropriate
tasks. In addition to providing culture-specific materials, online course designers should place more emphasis on task selection to involve learners in diverse activities.

Though we analyzed a few foreign language courses which is a limitation of the study, the findings that we got seem to relate to a variety of coursebooks and online courses used in Russian university foreign language education. Online and offline course designers have to elaborate more sophisticated tasks to engage students as whole persons, addressing their intellectual and emotional potentials, and emphasizing multiple perspectives.

We admit that the problem of the present study needs further exploration. As the results of the study are partly based on the teachers’ reflection and personal estimation of the coursebooks they use, further research of the issue can be conducted with the help of close classroom observations and a more detailed account of the results.

Conclusion

The study shows that university foreign language courses offer students tasks aimed at achieving intercultural competence development, though they often neglect the possibility to simultaneously activate student soft skills. Therefore, the number and sometimes the quality of such tasks are not sufficient.

While culture-related materials are the starting point, giving impetus to learning, it is specially designed tasks activating student soft skills that make a major contribution to the development of intercultural competence. While completing such tasks, students get access to relevant culture-focused information, get involved in higher-order thinking and interaction, and shape their own attitudes, exercising openness, respect, and tolerance. The integral development of intercultural competence and soft skills, therefore, definitely expands student personal resources required for efficient life and work in the 21st century. In our view, this assumption holds true in any educational context, regardless of the academic course.

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