

## **Methodical Forms of Studying a Writer's Biography at Russian as a Foreign Language Classes (A Case Study of L. N. Tolstoy)**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

This paper deals with methodological tasks and forms of teaching Russian as a Foreign Language when working with authentic multi-genre and multi-style texts. The study is focused on the individual style and the personality of the Russian novelist, the largest thinker of the second half of the 19th-early 20th century L.N. Tolstoy. Special attention is paid to the Kazan period of the writer's life and activity. The proposed author's methodological model to study a writer's biography as a tool to enhance the mastery of the Russian language helps achieve the following objectives: didactic purpose (familiarization of foreign students with the personality and works of L. N. Tolstoy), cross-cultural goals (familiarization with the Russian cultural and historical realities of the nineteenth century), and the methodological objectives proper (the development and activation of analytical reading and speech communication skills according to the literary standards, active vocabulary build-up). The paper is intended for advanced foreign students of Russian, philology students, as well as for teachers of Russian as a Foreign Language and teachers of Russian literature. The paper materials can be used both in various courses on reading, communication, and as part of independent work of students and teachers.

**Keywords:** L. N. Tolstoy, text-biography, literary text, methodology, Russian as a foreign language, communication, linguistic analysis of the text.

## **1. Introduction**

Leo Tolstoy's work is of particular interest to foreign readers and is an integral part of the programs for teaching the Russian language to foreign philology students. The use of biographical and literary texts in Russian as a Foreign Language classes facilitates constant enrichment of students' stock of language means, the formation of skills and improvement of reading skills, the formation of socio-cultural, linguistic, and cross-cultural competencies (Salakhova & Burtceva, 2017; Makleeva et al., 2018; Erofeeva et al., 2019; Paran, 2008; Edmondson, 1997). Teachers pursue several pedagogical and philological goals as part of their classroom work to study the life and creative heritage of Leo Tolstoy: teaching foreign students to work with complex authentic texts, providing them with a clear idea of the personality and artistic endeavour of the great Russian writer, outlining the historical and cultural background of Russia of the nineteenth century, familiarizing students with the brightest and most significant works of the classic of literature, and instilling in them practical skills in mastering literarily correct Russian speech.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The study was based on the following methods: descriptive and analytical method, biographical method, continuous sampling method.

## **3. Results**

The material on Leo Tolstoy's life and work, presented in the paper, reflects the authors' methodological vision of how such creative and biographical topics should be studied by foreign students. First of all, this kind of material must be presented in chronological order, so that students have the opportunity to independently develop a picture of the writer's spiritual, moral, and creative evolution. The study should cover be texts of various genres and styles, representing the historical, literary, and linguoculturological information necessary for foreign students. The profoundness of mastering the educational material by the students will be controlled using an elaborate set of traditional and innovative forms of tasks: questions to texts in tabular and test form, aimed at controlling reading comprehension, as well as improving speech skills; a system of communicative and search-oriented tasks that are verbal stimuli and activate students' thinking, speech, and attention; work with illustrative and topographic material, etc.

The biographical sketch about L. Tolstoy should contain generalized facts of the writer's life, that illustrate the features of his worldview and contributing to the disclosure of the versatility of his personality. Biography study begins with reading of an educational text reflecting the main stages of Tolstoy's life and creative path, together with the students. The teacher gives a comment that helps to eliminate the predicted linguistic, cross-cultural, and stylistic difficulties.

For example: Look up the meaning of unknown words and expressions in the

dictionary: имéние, опеку́н (-ша), поме́щик, ю́нкер, о́рден, etc. (Shtyrlina & Kapralova, 2018; Le Tan et al., 2021; Le et al., 2022).

The post-text work is based on a system of tasks aimed at mastering the content of the biographical text, understanding and comprehending its units, identifying basic information, etc. An integral structural part of the study of a writer's life path is the discussion of the material read. Students are offered a system of problems arranged in a certain logical sequence: questions to check on the assimilation of factual material about the reasons and meaning of the writer's actions, his views on any events; tasks to reveal the students' own attitude to the writer's life experience, etc. Such tasks facilitate assimilation of basic information selection of the text's microthemes. In this way, the students acquire the ideas of the semantic parts of a biographical text and the linguistic means of their implementation, variants of the structural plan of the text of this genre.

Of special valuable in classroom work on biographical material is the stage of creative rethinking of what has been read on the basis of the students' own evaluation criteria. The development of reflexive thinking skills that establish a link between the new knowledge gained through reading and the students' personal experience can be facilitated by the following questions: 1) Why do you think Leo Tolstoy started his literary career with a diary? 2) What is more important - to get a degree and study without interest or to learn on one's own and do what you love without a diploma? Do you think leaving the university helped or hindered the formation of the writer's personality? 3) What, in your opinion, are the underlying reasons for Leo Tolstoy's rejection of the aristocratic lifestyle? Would you be able to do the same if you were in the writer's place? Etc (Shtyrlina & Kapralova, 2018).

The recitation can be complemented with a set of additional meta-subject tasks. These may include exercises of a reproductive and analytical nature, creative tasks, research tasks: compilation of chronological tables; drawing an emotional and psychological portrait of the writer; creating a verbal portrait of the appearance of Tolstoy based on the illustrations given; selection of facts that vividly reveal the individuality of Tolstoy, his life and writing principles; comparison of biographical facts with the events reflected in the author's works, etc.

Intersubject connections are of great importance in the biography classes. Teaching methods based on the use of works of art, musical compositions, fragments of films provide a deeper emotional impact of biographical material on students. In this regard, artistic and visual means play a crucial part in presenting the image of the writer, the historical environment in which he lived and created his works, the atmosphere of the social and literary environment that influenced the writer's worldview and creativity: portraits of Tolstoy; reproductions of paintings depicting certain episodes of his life; photographs of places associated with the writer's life and work; copies of biographical documents, etc. It is important to note that this material should be involved in a system of tasks aimed at both mastering the previously taught material, deepening and expanding it, and improving the speech skills and abilities of students, for example: 1) There is a large collection of Leo

Tolstoy's portraits (paintings by I. Kramskoy, I. Repin, N. Ge, etc.). Which of the paintings, in your opinion, most accurately reproduces both the appearance and the spiritual qualities of the writer? Justify your opinion. 2) Make up a story about L. Tolstoy's hobbies using the following photos: "Tolstoy riding with his grandson Ilya," "Tolstoy playing tennis," "Tolstoy at the skating rink in his Moscow estate," etc. (Shtyrlina & Kapralova, 2018).

Of special value is the work with local history material, which makes it possible to get in touch with the history of the writer's personality associated with Kazan. The study of the local history material requires focussing on the importance of Kazan for building the personality of the future writer, providing students with information of L. Tolstoy's student life, making a sightseeing tour about the places of the city, related with the writer, studying fragments of his works, which contain echoes of Kazan impressions of young Tolstoy, etc. To solidify knowledge, students may be required to design a tour about the places associated with Leo Tolstoy's stay in Kazan.

An important part of studying Leo Tolstoy's biography is referring to fragments from the memoirs of his contemporaries, the writer's diary entries, his statements on various issues of spiritual and social life. The fragments selected for the classroom work from the memoirs of contemporaries about Tolstoy should provide a vivid and holistic picture of the writer's personality: reflect the traits of character, convey his typical behavioral patterns, reveal his spiritual make-up. Memories of the writer, written by numerous authors, will allow presenting the variety of original interpretations of Leo Tolstoy's personality. Using the example of the memoirs of A.A. Bers about Tolstoy, we propose some communicative tasks that can be used in classroom work with foreign students:

***Read and comprehend the fragment of A.A. Bers' memoir about L. Tolstoy, complete the tasks given after the text:***

I remember him talking to me quite seriously about every scientific and philosophical question that I used to ask him. He answered to everything simply and clearly and never hesitated to say that one or another thing was not clear to him. The conversation with him often was like an argument which I engaged myself into with him, despite the huge disparity between us that I was aware of. Therefore, it was easy and pleasant to agree with him .... (Bers, 1978).

What kind of questions do you think A.A. Bers might have asked L. Tolstoy? Make up and role play a dialogue between Bers and Tolstoy, using typical Russian expressive means to show agreement and disagreement. Imagine you are a close friend, an ideological ally / opponent of Leo Tolstoy, the writer's son / daughter, wife, etc. Write your recollection of the days spent next to Tolstoy (Shtyrlina & Kapralova, 2018).

If a memoirist images L. Tolstoy through the prism of his perception, the diaries of the writer himself reveal his own world of feelings and thoughts. Diary entries allow discovering the writer's inner life, the development and formation of his personality and talent, so they should certainly be leveraged as material to be taught to foreign students. Thus, for example, fragments from L. Tolstoy's diaries, supplemented with a number of

communicative tasks, can be offered to the students:

Read excerpts from the rules formulated by L. Tolstoy for development of the bodily, sensual and rational will. Think about what new judgments you could add to the existing set of rules.

(1) Rules for development of the bodily will. Sleep as little as possible. Be as good as your word. Once having started any initiative, never give it up without finishing. (2) Rules for development of the sensual will. Always look for the good in other people, not the bad. Always tell the truth. Always live worse than you could live. (3) Rules for development of the rational will. Set out all your mental activities early in the day. When you study, try to have all your mental abilities focused on this subject (Tolstoy, 1937).

Which of the above rules of Leo Tolstoy's are close to you and why? What rules can't you agree with? Justify your opinion (Shtyrlina & Kapralova, 2018).

To facilitate assimilation of the material and in order to reach the communicative level, it is effective to use visual tasks according to a pre-proposed model. This is the following type of exercise:

Familiarize yourselves with a part of L. Tolstoy's life program developed in 1847, which the future writer intended to complete in two years. Read and analyze it. Think it over and write down your life plan for the next two years in the right column of the table (Shtyrlina & Kapralova, 2018).

1. Study the full course of legal sciences required for taking the final exam at the university.
2. Study practical medicine and part of theoretical medicine.
3. Learn French, Russian, German, English, Italian, and Latin.
4. Study agriculture, both theoretical and practical.
5. Study history, geography, and statistics.
6. Study mathematics, the gymnasium course
7. Write a thesis.
8. Achieve an average level in music and painting.
9. Write the rules.
10. Get some knowledge in natural sciences. [8]

After the students get acquainted with the writer's biography, his diary materials, and the memories of his contemporaries, in order to create a full-fledged image of L. Tolstoy, it is necessary to work with the author's own texts. To this end, the choice of the writer's statements that would be able to explicitly demonstrate his views on a wide variety of life issues is crucial.

*For example:*

Task 1. Share and justify your opinion about the sayings of Leo Tolstoy. Enquire other students about their point of view regarding the quotes that seem to you the most interesting or controversial.

About faith. "People live on love; love for oneself is the beginning of death, love for God and people is the beginning of life." (2). About knowledge. "Knowledge is knowledge only when it is acquired through the efforts of one's thought, and not by memory." (3). About life purpose. "If you don't have the strength to burn and shed light, at least don't shadow it." (Tolstoy, 2013).

Task 2. What is faith? What is the benefit of people? What is a word? L. N. Tolstoy had been looking for answers to these and other questions throughout his life. Reconstruct the phrases that give the answers to such significant questions.

(1).Согласие; вера; с; воли; это; совестью. (2). В; людей; благо; жизни. Работе; а; жизнь; в. (3). Есть; поступок; слово.

Task 3. Match the beginning and the end of L. Tolstoy's statements, explain how you understand their meaning (Shtyrlina & Kapralova, 2018).

<b>To believe in the good,</b>	<b>but no one thinks about how to change himself.</b>
It's easier to live without love,	than do nothing.
Everyone wants to change humanity,	but its quality.
It's better not to do anything,	one needs to start doing it.
It's not the amount of knowledge that matters,	but there's no point without it.

According to the proposed methodology, the consistent study of the writer's biography and philosophical views should gradually proceed to direct work with the literary text. A linguistic analysis of fragments from Leo Tolstoy's works should go along with not only all stages of pre-textual, textual and post-textual work, but also by terminological commentary and a historical background of the creation of the text under study. The following set of tasks can exemplify working with fragments of literary texts:

Read a fragment from Tolstoy's novella "Youth", complete the tasks after the text.

«Странно, как такой ясный вопрос: как же держать экзамен? – ни разу мне не представился. Но я был всю зиму эту в таком тумане, происходившем от наслаждения тем, что я большой и что я *comme il faut*, что, когда мне и приходило в голову: как же держать экзамен? – я сравнивал себя со своими товарищами и думал: «Они же будут держать, а большая часть их ещё не *comme il faut*, стало быть, у меня ещё лишнее преимущество, и я должен выдержать» (Tolstoy, 1935).

Find obsolete words and constructions in the text, comment on their use. Give examples of the modern use of these words and grammatical forms. Explain how they contribute to creating the atmosphere of the nineteenth century. 2) Explain the meaning of the

expression comme il faut. Why does the author use a French phrase instead of a phrase in Russian? How does this moment reveal the specifics of the linguistic and cultural situation in Russia at that time? (Shtyrlina & Kapralova, 2018).

## 4. Conclusions

The material offered for study is complex and in educational practice, a foreign reader's insufficient knowledge of the grammar of the genuine language of the text, particularly different-style texts in the original presentation, often determines the expediency of their gradual perception and study, which we have attempted to present in this paper. The relevance of the sequence and step-by-step presentation of new material should be noted as a methodological recommendation for the study of the writer's biography and creative work. In the described methodology, this is facilitated by the system of proposed tasks itself. The first stage is the pre-text work, annotated reading, commenting on the language challenges, introducing the necessary linguistic and cultural information. The second stage *is* the direct work with tasks, linguistic analysis, identification of deep, subtext meanings, author's axiological position, etc. Most of the tasks are of an open dialog nature and aim at reaching the communicative competence level by a foreign reader. Summing up, the practical orientation of the methodology is expressed in the focus of the system of educational tasks on the development of productive speech of students; on the formation of the skills of introductory, search, annotated, synthetic reading; on the consistent processing of text information, as well as enrichment and activation of the word stock.

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