



Teaching displaced learners

Irina Nosova

looks at the challenges and solutions for volunteers.

This article aims to elucidate the challenges faced by volunteer language teachers engaged in teaching Ukrainian refugees displaced by war in Europe, drawing from my experience as a methodologist in a volunteer language teaching project. Through an exploration of the most prevalent issues encountered by these educators, I will also propose effective solutions to address them.

Background information

Samantha Smith's Group comprises a substantial cohort of volunteer language teachers, predominantly of Slavic origin or possessing proficiency in Russian and/or Ukrainian as their first language, alongside

a contingent of other English speakers. Notably, this diverse group encompasses individuals with varied professional backgrounds, including those who may not be professional language educators but possess language proficiency coupled with a range of occupations such as teaching other subjects like chemistry or physics, students and enthusiasts. Furthermore, a significant portion of these volunteers maintain full-time employment in addition to their voluntary teaching commitments.

Pedagogical approach

Language instruction within the group is predominantly communicative, delivered in small group settings accommodating three–nine learners encompassing children, teenagers and adults operating primarily at the beginner to pre-intermediate proficiency levels. While some instructors adhere to a structured textbook syllabus, others adopt an approach devoid of systematicity. The duration of courses varies, contingent upon factors such as the

availability and motivation of volunteer teachers, with a recommended minimum course duration of four months, comprising twice-weekly sessions lasting 60 minutes each, equivalent to 32 astronomical hours of study. Notably, some volunteers have extended the duration of their teaching engagements to as long as nine months. The rationale behind the shorter recommended course duration compared to traditional textbook syllabi, typically spanning 120 academic hours, stems from the considerable demand for language learning coupled with a shortage of volunteer teachers.

Support mechanisms

Volunteer teachers are provided with an array of resources aimed at facilitating their transition into the teaching profession. These resources include: instructional articles; a series of webinars conducted by experienced educators; electronic teaching materials; interactive peer discussions via live

chats; and personalised consultations with methodologists (which constitute my primary responsibility within the project).

Challenges encountered by teachers

In general, the consultations I conduct reveal several prominent challenges encountered by teachers, encompassing both psychological and methodological domains:

Psychological challenges

A significant proportion of teachers grapple with pre-lesson anxiety, which encompasses concerns such as:

*'I'm worried . . .
they aren't going to like me.'
I'll make mistakes.'
they won't listen to me.'
my lessons will seem boring to them.'*

Methodological challenges

Teachers frequently seek guidance on various methodological aspects, including:

- What materials and textbooks to choose
- How to teach mixed abilities classes
- What do I do with slower learners?
- How to teach reading
- What is CEFR, and how does it help me in the classroom?
- How to teach groups – I've only taught one-to-one.
- I'm a trained professional, but I haven't taught in 5 / 10 / 20 years.
- What should I revise before going into the classroom?

Novel challenges arising from the war context

Amid the myriad of challenges faced by educators, a distinct set of issues emerge, elicited by the complex backdrop of the ongoing conflict. These challenges, intertwined with psychological and methodological dimensions, present unique hurdles that are highly sensitive and contingent upon individual perspectives regarding the war. Some illustrative case studies from consultations include:

- One volunteer teacher articulated a predicament encountered within her

teaching group of three middle-aged women. One individual hails from Eastern Ukraine, exclusively proficient in Russian, while another originates from Kiev, possessing fluency in both Russian and Ukrainian. Conversely, the third member originates from Western Ukraine, proficient solely in Ukrainian. Despite the teacher's proficiency in both Russian and Ukrainian owing to her dual heritage, toggling between the two languages poses no challenge. However, the teacher expressed apprehension regarding the impact of bilingual commentary on total teacher talk time (TTT). Specifically, the concern was that while addressing questions in both languages, one individual may be inadvertently sidelined while the others engage in discourse primarily in their respective first languages. This issue arose particularly during the explanation of new grammatical concepts, where inquiries were raised in multiple languages.

- Another educator expressed concern regarding the necessity to carefully assess the suitability of topics proposed by instructional materials, ensuring they do not inadvertently trigger emotional distress among learners. For instance, discussions centred around family dynamics or vocabulary acquisition related to familial relationships may evoke painful memories for individuals who have experienced loss or prolonged separation from their families due to the conflict. Similarly, exploring topics related to dwelling or home environments may evoke distressing recollections for those whose residences were adversely affected or destroyed during military operations. Such considerations underscore the importance of tactfully selecting instructional content that fosters a supportive and inclusive learning environment, while mitigating the risk of retraumatisation among learners affected by the war.

- Certain topics, such as discussions on countries and nationalities, may inadvertently include references to Russia through visual elements like flags or images. While the majority of learners, as per teachers' reports, do not express discomfort with mentions of Russia during class discussions, some individuals may find it challenging to maintain a neutral and polite demeanour in response to such references. This underscores the necessity for educators to exercise sensitivity and discretion when broaching topics that may elicit varied emotional responses among learners, thereby fostering an inclusive and respectful learning environment conducive to the diverse needs and perspectives of all participants.

Furthermore, teachers deliberate over the ethical considerations of integrating discussions on current affairs related to the war within the classroom context, balancing the potential therapeutic benefits of open dialogue against the taboo nature of politics as an instructional topic.

Addressing the challenges

Psychological support

The most effective approach to resolving psychological issues involves engaging in a friendly conversation with the concerned teacher. I have observed that when teachers agree to a video call rather than a voice call, they are reassured more quickly. This is likely because they rely not only on my words but also on my nonverbal cues, such as a friendly smile, active listening and expressive facial expressions. Through this interaction, teachers often begin to mirror my emotions and feel reassured and encouraged quicker.

In terms of content, I typically convey fundamental reassurances such as:

■ Volunteer teachers are provided with an array of resources aimed at facilitating their transition into the teaching profession. ■

- Learners seek guidance from you because they recognise your ability to share knowledge they lack, and they already trust and respect you.
- Mistakes made in the classroom are not catastrophic; the lives of learners do not hinge on your performance.
- They understand that you are not a professional educator, and I am confident they will not judge you.

Following this, I extend an invitation for teachers to reconnect after conducting their initial lesson to share their reflections and receive feedback.

Methodological solutions

Addressing methodological challenges often involves equipping teachers with relevant literature or providing access to webinars tailored to their specific needs. The selection of webinar topics in the project is guided by common queries raised by teachers. Additionally, video calls serve as an effective platform for addressing a myriad of questions, encompassing both psychological and methodological concerns. During these discussions, I provide a simplified overview of fundamental concepts lacking in the teacher's repertoire, supplemented by subsequent articles for reinforcement. It is noteworthy that teachers diligently take extensive notes during these sessions for future reference and independent research.

Addressing war-related issues

Resolving challenges stemming from the war context necessitates individualised approaches, ensuring the satisfaction of all stakeholders involved. For instance, to address the issue of heightened teacher talk time (TTT), a collaborative resolution was reached with the teacher to implement a flipped classroom approach. This entailed assigning learners the task of independently studying new topics at home, thereby optimising classroom time. The benefits of this approach extend beyond time efficiency, allowing learners the flexibility to review material at their own pace and access additional resources as needed. However, the implementation of this strategy necessitates additional preparation on the part of the teacher,

including the creation of prerecorded video explanations or sourcing suitable instructional videos from online platforms. Subsequent feedback indicated a positive reception from the group, with learners demonstrating accelerated progress and enhanced autonomy in their learning journey.

Addressing sensitive topics such as family members and home presented a challenge due to the unpredictable nature of potential triggers for learners. To mitigate this issue, I recommended that the teacher develop a contingency lesson plan to have a possibility to change the subject of the lesson. Additionally, the teacher implemented a proactive approach by soliciting input from learners, encouraging them to compile a list of topics they feel comfortable discussing. This proactive measure enables the teacher to navigate potentially sensitive subjects with greater sensitivity and awareness, ensuring a supportive and respectful learning environment for all participants.

Decisions regarding the inclusion or avoidance of references to Russia and discussions surrounding the war are contingent upon the prevailing mood within the group, with teachers exercising discretion based on their established rapport with learners. Additionally, learners themselves may express a desire to discuss current events during the warm-up stage, reflecting their perceived importance and relevance.

Similarly, regarding the decision to address or refrain from discussing the war in the classroom, each teacher adopts an individualised approach based on the rapport established with their learners. In some instances, this decision may not solely rest with the teacher, as learners themselves may initiate discussions during the warm-up stage, expressing the importance of addressing current events. This dynamic underscores the significance of fostering open communication and mutual respect within the learning environment, allowing for meaningful engagement with topics of relevance and significance to the learners' lived experiences. Ultimately, the decision-making process regarding the inclusion of war-related discussions reflects a collaborative effort guided

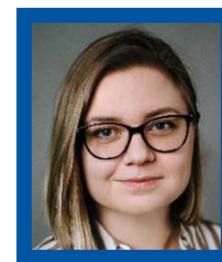
by the shared objectives of facilitating constructive dialogue and promoting understanding among all participants.

Conclusion

Navigating the diverse challenges inherent in volunteer language teaching for Ukrainian refugees affected by war necessitates a multifaceted and adaptive approach. By addressing psychological, methodological and context-specific issues, educators can effectively support learners and foster a conducive learning environment.

Through personalised consultations and reassurances, teachers can navigate pre-lesson anxieties and build confidence in their instructional abilities. Methodological challenges are mitigated through the provision of relevant resources and interactive discussions, empowering teachers to refine their instructional practices. Furthermore, addressing war-induced sensitivities requires sensitivity and flexibility, with tailored approaches to accommodate diverse learner needs and preferences.

Ultimately, the commitment to addressing these challenges reflects a dedication to providing quality education and support to Ukrainian refugees amid challenging circumstances. By embracing a collaborative and adaptive approach, educators play a vital role in facilitating language acquisition and empowering learners to navigate their educational journey with resilience and confidence. As the landscape of volunteer language teaching continues to evolve, the ongoing commitment to addressing challenges and fostering inclusivity remains paramount in supporting the diverse needs of displaced learners affected by war.



Irina Nosova is a freelance English teacher living and working in Birmingham, England. She holds a TEFL degree, CELTA and DELTA, and specialises in teaching speaking creatively and promoting learner agency. Her professional interests also lie in supporting teacher wellbeing through networking and peer learning.