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Teaching English during the War: Changing and Documenting the Changes

Three English lecturers from Ukraine explore the experience of teaching English at the university during the war through a series of meetings with each other. Teachers' reflections on the first online lessons since the beginning of the war in 2022 are compared to the lessons in 2024, after two years of the war. The teacher's research sheds light on the techniques which can be used in the situation of extreme emergency and uncertainty such as the onset of the war in the country.

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Introduction

This paper is about two cases of teaching English as FL after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine. Together with my colleagues from two universities located in the frontline city of Kharkiv we explored what was happening in their classroom after the teaching process was resumed and compared it to the lessons in 2024, after two years of the war. During the online meetings, which were set within the cooperative development framework, I worked as an Understander - I listened actively and empathetically, while my colleagues acting as Speakers reflected on those lessons with the attempt to articulate their concerns at that time. These sessions were recorded and afterwards we analysed the transcripts, adding our comments, exploring the problems deeper and drew the conclusions.

We found how the approach to academic load and number of tasks was changing as a situation did not get better. and being adapted to the learners and their circumstances of the direct and indirect consequences of the war. Our findings can shed light on the immediate steps which can be taken by a teacher in the situation of extreme emergency and uncertainty such as the onset of such situation as well as the ways to cope with stress and build resilience during the long-lasting war.

Background and Context

On the 24th of February 2022, the full-scale Russian invasion started in Ukraine. Air strikes, bombardments, destruction of the buildings brought disruption of all spheres in the country. To allow teachers and students to decide what to do, the universities suspended a teaching process after the beginning of war. Some Ukrainians decided to relocate farther from the frontline but stay in Ukraine, others opted to re-settle abroad. From April 2022 till now the universities located in the frontline city of Kharkiv, which has been a 30-minute ride from the frontline, work in the blended online mode. For English language lecturers it means regular online meetings with their students and synchronous mode of teaching through

different learning management systems, video conferencing platforms and social messengers. This can be Google classroom, Zoom meetings, Moodle, WhatsApp and Telegram. If the meeting is interrupted by air strike or was preceded by it at night the lecturers are allowed to switch onto asynchronous mode and send or post the materials and tasks of the cancelled lesson. Teachers' reflections on the first online lessons since the beginning of the war in 2022 often involve their personal experience of surviving and looking for the safe place to stay. According to US Association for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees approximately 3.7 million Ukrainians have been displaced within their own country, while nearly 6.5 million have fled seeking for refuge in other countries around the world. Based on the recent report on higher education in Ukraine (Nikolaiev, 2023) 25 thousand educators left Ukraine while some of them continue working online from other countries. The experience of travelling, living and returning to Ukraine becomes important part of the process of documenting changes of lecturers perceptions, ideas and beliefs about teaching language in the university. To explore these changes, we present the reflections on immediate events and lessons learnt from that experience by each lecturer chronologically: after the beginning of the invasion and two years after.

Method and Procedures

In this paper, we illustrate the process of documenting changes in teaching process explored with the help of cooperative development (CD) technique. CD framework was introduced by Edge (1992) and it enables teachers to reflect on their own experience and improve their professional practice in collaboration with other teachers in a non-judgmental environment. This interaction is based on a set of rules, which prohibits judging, criticizing, offering suggestions or opinions during the CD talk (Edge, 1992). This nature of CD communication reinforces teachers' intrinsic motivation to explore and discover their own ideas, thoughts, and solutions to the issues (Edge & Attia, 2014). Learning through articulation is at the heart of CD (Edge, 2002). As Mann (2002) points out, "through articulation we see connections that we had not seen before, and we make distinctions that had not seemed to be there".

With my colleagues – English lecturers from Kharkiv universities we held three CD sessions – May 2023, January 2024, March 2024. Based on non-defensive and non-judgmental interaction supported by our collegial relationship, we explored and developed ideas from concerns and most problematic areas of teaching to the lessons learnt while overcoming the challenges, i.e. we extrapolated from ordinary to higher levels (Edge & Attia, 2014). The extracts 1 and 2 will serve as a summary of the reflection on the delivering online lessons in the situation of acute emergency and uncertainty, extract 3 and 4 present the exploration process of the teaching during next year. Each extract is followed by the analysis of the session made by a lecturer.

Extract 1. Olena (May 2023):

When the war started, I left my home and went to Latvia. During the first weeks of my refugee's life, it was especially important to me to understand that I still had my job. First month of the war we did not work, we survived. The university suspended all activities and gave us a brief time to re-settle in our new roles of refugee. When the suspension period was over, we faced the reality - we needed to get back to our teaching. Since the pandemic year of 2020 the university has worked in blended mode supported by Google Classroom as a learning management system (LMS) and so the tasks for students continued to be assigned in asynchronous learning even during the first weeks of the war. However, eventually I had

to start online meetings with the students in synchronous mode in addition to the materials sent to them via Google classroom.

I will never forget those first online lessons. I was in front of a blank screen and there was no one there. It felt as if I was in a tunnel. Then I saw that there was one student who tried to connect and join the meeting. A glimpse of hope that they will get through and feeling of excitement when it finally happened. I was happy. I did not complain that there was only one out of fifteen usual attenders. Later, day by day, one lesson by another there were more students. Slowly the situation was changing, but that first lesson there was only one student. During those first days in each academic group, I faced one or two students. First thing to do on that day and days and weeks which followed was to ask about their health and safety, then ask what they knew about other students. Sometimes students had some information, sometimes they knew nothing about their group mates. I met students who were happy to see me and be back to study, they were far away from our city of Kharkiv. Also, I met students who were in Kharkiv which was at that time under constant bombardment or students who stranded in the occupied territory. None of those could manage to escape. They were very depressed.

After a good talk which repeated itself from one lesson to another, I realised that most of the students did not have regular Internet access in their places. Also, they were without laptops or computers because when they fled, they could take with themselves only necessities of life. Absence of connectivity and equipment would mean that they could not do homework as it was usually done using the LMS. Furthermore, I understood that it would be exceedingly difficult to assess them because they could not complete any online task.

Reflecting on what I learned about such situation in the classroom, I can name two crucial points:

1. It was important to understand the technical issues which our students had to face. This understanding came through the talk and sharing. There were all different circumstances for each student. Connectivity and energy problems influenced those who stayed in Ukraine, while those who left their places often did not have computers and/or Internet access in their temporary accommodation.

2. Feelings of anger and despair were all over our heads. We all - the students and I - felt anxiety and insecurity, suffering from loss and uncertainty. To talk about this was another important task. On the lessons students complained about depressive thoughts, the troublesome process of settling down in a new place and lack of motivation to continue their study. They wanted to be heard and to be understood by their teacher.

Analysis:

Trying to manage this I decided to reduce the number of tasks given to learners. I adjusted the type of activities to the circumstances. In the lessons I offered some short grammar blocks followed by my explanation and students' comments and examples on the topic. I asked students to write the tasks in their copybooks if they could not access links on the tasks.

To help students cope with stress and build resilience, I encouraged students to stay connected and follow the routine of learning, not to worry if they had to miss a lesson, and feel free to email me.

This allowed to lessen the amount of cognitive load and decrease academic pressure on the students.

At the same time, I learnt to maintain my own well-being: keeping a balance between long tough hours of online teaching and life in a new place, walking and shopping, staying in touch with my family and colleagues via messengers.

Extract 2. Yaroslava (May 2023):

The war found me at Kupiansk, a small town occupied by the Russian army during the first days of the invasion that left me stranded in the town immediately. As there was no safe opportunity to return to the city of Kharkiv, I decided to continue teaching online via Zoom and social messengers. I informed all my students that we will suspend our lessons for a while and reassured them that soon we will get more information on our next steps.

While I was communicating with the students via the messenger, the access to the Internet and telecommunication got worse and worse. Soon I received a confirmation from the department about resuming lessons in the blended learning mode. As soon as possible. In my situation when Ukrainian Internet providers were cut-off from the network, to get stable and safe connectivity was an exceedingly challenging task. At first, I tried to find a place with the Internet in Kupiansk itself. When I realised the Internet was currently unavailable in most areas of the town, I found the way to travel to the large town with a more stable connection. Twice a week I took an hour ride to the neighbouring town where I could use public networks and get access to the learning management system of our university. I would update the materials on the platform, send my feedback to the students, mark their assignments, and download all new messages and files that my students had sent before. Sometimes I had to spend hours wandering in the local supermarket where connectivity was one the best in the area. As time passed by, I made a friend with a local woman who offered me to stay at her place while I was working on my online routine.

Today, after a long and dangerous journey back to Kharkiv when I finally reunited with my hometown, friends and colleagues I think about that consistency and continuity of teaching as a main means to build resilience in my students and myself. I would like to emphasize two points:

1. Being committed to the routine of posting the tasks, sending feedback, and marking their works helped me to manage the asynchronous online learning. The students and I worked together and motivated each other - I was busy checking their assignments and preparing new materials while the students tried to meet the requirements and deadlines of the assignments. I saw that students checked each of my regular feedback, which I recorded as a voice message and sent back to the student. It was uplifting.

2. I did not decrease the academic pressure on the students. They knew that I would help them if they asked for help, but my idea was to give us the feeling of normality, at least in our lessons. My efforts to continue teaching gave me the right to ask for the efforts from the students and during the exam I saw the results of their efforts.

Analysis:

I believe that regular tasks with clear deadlines followed by teacher's feedback and the next tasks helped the students build their resilience. Apart from stressful and uncertain situations that happened in our real lives, all those wartime challenges we faced to provide our basic needs and restore physical safety and security, me as a teacher and all my students had something to do in our virtual classroom. It was vital to stick to routine and not give up, as if we had a magic world where life was still like before the war.

I learnt a lot about myself as a teacher during that time. I realized how important this job is for me. Every time when I sent the last message with my feedback, I felt relieved. I

think it was because the teacher's responsibilities and duties to stay with the students and support them mean a lot to me.

Extract 3. Olena (March 2024):

Two years of complete uncertainty and regular changes made me stronger. I have learnt how to adapt myself to the circumstances, I became more stress-resistant – if something happens and it puts me out of control I don't panic and take the situation as it is. For example – there is no electricity to hold the final online meetings or there is a new requirement from the students office about electronic logbook for those who attend the lessons. There is no fear an longer. We keep on going with our teaching routine: online meetings, links on the tasks and exercises which I can check later, submission of results to the student office, consultation and tutorials for the students who missed lessons.

I found a good balance between input I provide students with and output I expect them to present. So, at the moment the tasks I give to them are not too easy but not too time-consuming. The main point of any task is to let students stay in the flow with learning.

Another big achievement is our collection of online resources tailored for each module within our curriculum. I would never be able to accomplish this task on my own – but together with my colleagues we managed to form a kind of online course which contains materials from different platforms related to the topics we teach, adaptation of our own materials for using online, video materials to support self-study and vocabulary sets for each topic. We were doing it through all this time with idea to insecure our teaching, to make it less dependent on availability of the tutor or a learner at the lesson. As a result, we have a complete pack of resources for teaching online for next two years. It makes me feel relieved. When I reflect on the experience of teaching online during the war for last two years, I see how flexible and versatile my approach to teaching is now. I mastered many online platforms for teaching English, because I wanted to be sure that even if one day I cannot make online lesson, I would have good alternatives to provide input and control output. I had to find the solution for the challenges of wartime: not all students can be present, some of them are not at their homes and have to study and work at the same time, some of them can turn up in the end of the term willing to catch up what they missed.

Analysis:

I still believe that to stay connected and follow the routine of learning is a vital means to build resilience and continue learning.

I levered cognitive load and academic pressure by regularity and consistency of learning tasks. Our pack of resources gives me that flexibility to decide which materials to use and how many tasks to assign to each student.

My own well-being has finally improved. After long tough hours of online teaching, planning the lessons and managing the resources I finally can live my life. Staying in touch with the students via messengers, providing them feedback and setting achievable goals for them is a part of my teaching now and success of such communication impacts my wellbeing out of work.

Extract 4. Yaroslava (March 2024):

It is hard to believe that there have been two years since the beginning of the war. I don't think I changed my approach to teaching a lot. I would say I became stricter to my new students in terms of requirements of English proficiency. It seems now I don't need to explain to students who learn English as a foreign language how important this language is for us. After all hardships all Ukrainians faced when they had to leave their country in 2022, it is unarguably for everyone that English is not just a subject of BA curriculum. I can tell

hundreds of stories of how English proficiency helped my students to cross the borders and find shelter in Europe, get better jobs, settle down and become independent. My newly enrolled first year students listen to me and accept my approach: to study in university during the war costs a lot for their parents, so we take study very seriously and don't make excuses for missing lessons. Following this approach to study I rarely have issues with the students who don't attend the lessons and cannot pass the exam in the end of the term.

What has changed in my teaching is the tools. Before the war and during its first months I relied on written tasks as a way to check and assess the student's progress. Now I want to use the opportunity to meet students during live sessions for 100 per cent. Most of the task I ask students to complete are focused on spoken language, namely production of short texts or definitions. Today during the test, I expect students to be able to explain specific terms, processes and phenomena using vocabulary and grammar we have been learning. Module by module they accumulate vocabulary and grammar input so when asked they could talk on specific topics. I encourage them to experiment with the language, the forms, the words – we all now feel much closer to English speaking environment, and it motivates us.

Looking back at these long two years I see a huge difference between the asynchronous online learning and face to face live online lessons. The students and I still motivate each other but now our interaction tries to simulate the situation of communication needs in case they have to leave the country. The academic pressure on the students has been changed a bit in terms of nature of the tasks and assignments – they are mostly presentations, talks and discussions.

Analysis:

I believe that task-based learning works better in the situation when learner can see practical use of vocabulary and grammar in real circumstances when they live as refugees or work in another country or see it as a possible scenario.

I am absolutely sure that planning, management and regular checks of a short periods of our semester are essential steps in building resilience, maintaining well-being of students and a teacher and keeping optimal pace of learning.

I learnt to be more flexible and though I try to treat all my students equally I feel strongly attached to those students who went with me through those first months of the war. I respect their traumatic experience and keep it in mind when working with them.

Conclusion

In this paper we dealt with the reflections on one of the most challenging teaching experiences one can imagine - teaching during the war. Any war conflict has a massive impact on people's life because it threatens basic human needs of safety and security. Experience of teaching during the war demonstrates how teachers and students build their resilience by different means and one of them is continuing their commitments to teach and study. Two different perspectives on the approach to academic load were used by the lecturers in the beginning of the war and each individual case served one aim – to provide both a teacher and learners with consistency and continuity of teaching routine.

Based on the analysis above conducted by the lecturers after CD sessions we believe that the use of CD can provide a space for teachers' reflection on personal professional development. Using techniques of CD for documenting changes in teaching increases awareness of changes and achievements. It connects teacher's intellectual knowledge with practice, trials their beliefs and legitimates changes made to their teaching.

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