

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD: CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

### **Fostering Student Engagement and Motivation to Learn English Online Amidst Crisis: Insights from Wartime Ukraine**

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#### **Teaching Context**

Location: Odesa, Cherkasy, Kropyvnytskyi, and Kherson, Ukraine

Students: University-level, B2-C1 Level

#### **Problem**

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has precipitated widespread internal displacement and forced migration, profoundly disrupting the educational landscape in Ukraine. In response, many students have transitioned to online learning environments to continue their studies. Ukrainian students face a host of challenges—including infrastructural instability, emotional distress, and educational disruption—which collectively influence their learning behaviors.

To investigate the dynamics of student engagement and motivation to learn English in virtual classrooms under the extreme conditions of armed conflict, I administered an anonymous online survey (see Appendix A) via Google Forms to university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in four Ukrainian regions: Odesa, Cherkasy, Kropyvnytskyi, and Kherson. Each region has experienced varying degrees of conflict-related disruption, including power outages, frequent air raid alerts, and in the case of Kherson, direct military occupation and continued shelling. These conditions make Kherson one of the most severely affected areas, where access to stable internet and electricity remains highly erratic. The survey consisted of both closed and open-ended questions exploring students' experiences with online English learning. Items addressed areas such as internet reliability, engagement levels, motivational changes since the war began, barriers to participation, and preferred instructional methods. A total of 50 responses were collected, offering insight into student perspectives under wartime conditions.

The survey results revealed the following challenges perceived by the students.

#### **Technological and Infrastructural Constraints**

Students reported varying degrees of internet reliability, with most indicating “very reliable” or “somewhat reliable” connections. However, a significant minority faced frequent disruptions due to unstable electricity and damaged infrastructure—particularly in frontline regions like Kherson. These limitations hinder students' ability to attend classes regularly and maintain active participation.



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### ***Emotional and Psychological Impacts***

Psychological stress emerged as a significant barrier to engagement. Respondents cited anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and difficulty concentrating as major factors negatively impacting their ability to learn. These findings are consistent with broader data indicating increased rates of depression and trauma among Ukrainian youth during the war. Such mental health challenges reduce students' cognitive capacity for sustained attention and retention, thereby undermining learning outcomes.

### ***Patterns of Engagement and Motivation***

Despite the difficult circumstances, many students reported stable or even increased engagement. This resilience reflects a broader adaptive capacity among Ukrainian students. Interactive teaching strategies—including group work, language games, and multimedia tools—were frequently identified as effective in enhancing engagement. These methods helped to establish a sense of connection and routine amid chaos.

Regarding motivation, most respondents described themselves as either “somewhat motivated” or “very motivated” to learn English. Notably, several students reported an increase in motivation since the onset of the war. This shift appears to be driven by a pragmatic recognition of English as a critical tool for future career opportunities, global communication, and access to international education and resources. In contrast, demotivating factors included persistent technical issues, the unpredictability of daily life, and psychological fatigue.

### ***Perceptions of English Learning as a Future Asset***

Almost all respondents affirmed the importance of learning English during the current crisis. English was widely viewed as a strategic asset that could facilitate personal and professional advancement, particularly in the context of post-war reconstruction and potential emigration. This finding underscores the continued relevance of language education as a tool for empowerment and future readiness.

### ***Summary***

This study presents a nuanced picture of online language learning in wartime Ukraine. While students face significant technological, emotional, and logistical barriers, many continue to engage in their education with determination and resilience. Motivation remains high, driven by a future-oriented understanding of English as a means of socio-economic mobility and global integration.

### ***Solution***

The survey also asked students to suggest recommendations to meet the challenges they face. Students offered a range of suggestions to improve the online learning experience. These included:

- I. Greater use of engaging and interactive methodologies.
- II. Access to recorded lessons for asynchronous review.
- III. Increased emotional support and flexibility from educators.

Crucially, the role of the teacher was highlighted as central to sustaining motivation. Respondents emphasized the positive impact of instructors who demonstrated empathy, maintained flexible expectations, and employed diverse, student-centered pedagogies. In times of crisis, teachers function not only as educators but also as sources of emotional stability and encouragement.

To support these learners, it is imperative that educators, institutions, and policymakers:

- I. Address infrastructural gaps in digital access.
- II. Provide training and resources for trauma-informed pedagogy.
- III. Design flexible, engaging, and empathetic teaching approaches.
- IV. Prioritize mental health support and community-building efforts.

In doing so, the educational system can continue to function not only as a medium of instruction but also as a stabilizing force and symbol of hope during times of profound national upheaval.

### **Conclusion**

I hope that the survey results and teaching suggestions can inform pedagogical practices with effective strategies to enhance online English language instruction in times of crisis. As wars and conflicts are happening around the world, English language educators can continue teaching and reflect on new challenges in order to respond with strategies to support students. In this way, teachers can contribute to the broader discourse on educational resilience in conflict-affected contexts.

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### **About the author**

Elizabeth Basok is an English Language Fellow at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in English for Specific Purposes and General English. Prior to this role, she spent two years working remotely with English language learners in two regions of Ukraine and served as a Virtual Service Pilot Peace Corps Volunteer supporting Ukrainian educators. Basok has previously worked at The Ohio State University and attended The University of Texas at San Antonio.

Appendix A

**Student Engagement and Motivation Survey**

This form will take about ten minutes to complete.

1. What year of college are you in?
  - First year
  - Second year
  - Third year
  - Fourth year
  - Other
2. How would you rate your English proficiency?
  - Beginner
  - Intermediate
  - Advanced
  - Fluent
3. How reliable is your internet connection during online classes?
  - Very reliable
  - Somewhat reliable
  - Unreliable
4. How engaged are you during online learning?
  - Very engaged
  - Somewhat engaged
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat disengaged
  - Very disengaged
5. Has your engagement in learning changed since the war began?
  - Increased
  - Stayed the same
  - Decreased
6. What factors affect your engagement during online English classes? (Select all that apply)
  - Power outages
  - Internet issues
  - Emotional stress or anxiety
  - Family or household responsibilities
  - Lack of interest
  - Difficulty understanding the lessons
  - Other
7. What types of activities or teaching methods make you feel more engaged in online classes? (Select all that apply)
  - Group discussions
  - Interactive games
  - Video/multimedia content
  - Teachers explanation and examples
  - Assignments and projects

8. How motivated are you to learn English in an online setting?
- Very motivated
  - Somewhat motivated
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat unmotivated
  - Very unmotivated
9. Has your motivation to learn English changed since the war began?
- Increased
  - Stayed the same
  - Decreased
10. What motivates you the most to learn English during this time? (Select all that apply)
- Improving future career prospects
  - Interest in English as a subject
  - Support from teachers
  - Peer encouragement
  - Desire to communicate with others globally
  - Other
11. What demotivates you the most when learning English online? (Select all that apply)
- Tech issues (power outages, poor internet)
  - Stress or lack of focus due to war
  - Feeling disconnected from teacher or classmates
  - Lack of understanding the material
  - Other
12. What challenges do you face in participating actively in online English classes? (Select all that apply)
- Lack of access to electricity or internet
  - Stress from current crisis
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Limited time
  - Other
13. What kind of support would help you stay engaged and motivated in online classes? (Select all that apply)
- More engaging teaching methods
  - Access to recorded lessons or asynchronous options
  - Mental health support
  - Reliable access to electricity or internet
  - Other
14. What do you think your teachers could do to improve your online learning experience?
15. Do you feel that learning English during this time is important for your future? Why or why not?