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MEDIA LITERACY AND CRITICAL THINKING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES AS A TOOL FOR COUNTERING RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

The proliferation of disinformation as a deliberate instrument of hybrid warfare has fundamentally altered the information landscape in which modern education operates. In Ukraine, where russian information aggression constitutes an integral dimension of full-scale military conflict, the ability to critically evaluate media content has ceased to be merely an academic skill – it has become a civic necessity and a matter

of national security. Despite growing scholarly attention to disinformation and its societal consequences, however, the potential of foreign language education as a vehicle for counter-disinformation literacy remains considerably underexplored [2; 6]. This paper addresses that gap by examining how English language classes at Ukrainian technical universities can be purposefully designed to foster critical engagement with media content, equipping students not only with communicative proficiency but with the analytical tools required to identify, deconstruct, and counter disinformation narratives circulating in both domestic and international information spaces. Drawing on classroom practice during the period of Russia's full-scale invasion, it contends that the integration of media literacy into EFL instruction represents [5] not merely a pedagogical innovation, but a meaningful contribution to national information resilience.

Disinformation as a weapon of hybrid warfare: the Ukrainian context

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, has been accompanied by an unprecedented campaign of information warfare targeting both domestic and international audiences. Disinformation in this context is not incidental but systemic: it functions as a strategic instrument designed to obscure the nature of the conflict, delegitimise Ukrainian statehood, undermine Western support, and erode social cohesion within Ukraine itself. Research has documented the accelerated viral spread of fabricated content across social media platforms as a defining feature of the contemporary information environment [8]. Manipulated narratives, fabricated visual content, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour have become the weapons through which students live, study, and form their worldviews. For educators, this reality presents both an urgent challenge and a pedagogical imperative: to prepare students not merely to consume information, but to interrogate it [3].

Media literacy and critical thinking: a theoretical framework

Media literacy, broadly understood, encompasses the capacity to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media content across a variety of formats and contexts. When integrated with critical thinking – defined here as the disciplined application of reasoned judgement to assess the credibility, coherence, and intent of information – it constitutes a powerful cognitive toolkit for navigating complex information environments. Scholars have consistently argued that media literacy education must move beyond technical decoding skills towards fostering what Potter terms *active engagement* with media texts: an ability to question sources, recognise rhetorical strategies, and situate content within broader sociopolitical frameworks [7]. In the context of hybrid warfare, these competencies acquire an additional dimension – they become instruments of epistemic self-defence. Contemporary approaches further emphasise that media literacy interventions must be re-imagined as intentionally civic

– oriented towards the common good rather than mere individual skill acquisition [9;2].

The EFL classroom as a counter-disinformation space

The English language classroom at a technical university may not appear, at first glance, to be an obvious site for counter-disinformation education. Yet it possesses several characteristics that render it particularly well suited to this purpose. First, the use of authentic anglophone media materials – news articles, opinion pieces, broadcast transcripts, social media posts – is already standard practice in communicative language teaching, providing a natural entry point for critical media analysis. Second, the focus on discourse and language structure in EFL instruction aligns productively with the analysis of rhetorical manipulation: students trained to identify lexical choice, syntactic framing, and pragmatic implication are simultaneously developing the tools to deconstruct propagandistic language. Third, engagement with international English-language sources exposes students to the global information space in which narratives about the war in Ukraine are contested and negotiated, fostering an awareness of how the conflict is framed – and, at times, misrepresented – for foreign audiences.

Drawing on classroom practice at a Ukrainian technical university during the period of active hostilities, this paper identifies several pedagogical approaches that have proven effective in integrating media literacy into EFL instruction.

Source verification tasks require students to evaluate the credibility of English-language online sources using established fact-checking frameworks such as the SIFT method (*Stop, Investigate the source, Find better coverage, Trace claims*) [1]. Applied to materials relating to the war in Ukraine, these tasks develop both digital literacy skills and an understanding of how disinformation operates at a structural level.

Comparative discourse analysis involves presenting students with two or more accounts of the same event drawn from sources with demonstrably different editorial positions – for instance, a report from a reputable Western outlet alongside content originating from russian state-affiliated media operating in English. Students are guided to identify divergences in lexical framing, the selection and omission of factual detail, and the use of emotionally loaded or euphemistic language. This activity not only sharpens analytical reading skills but renders visible the mechanisms through which language is weaponised in information warfare.

Multimodal fact-checking projects invite students to investigate viral visual content – images, videos, and infographics – that has circulated in connection with the conflict, using open-source investigative tools such as reverse image search and geolocation techniques. The integration of such tools into language learning tasks bridges the gap between academic literacy and real-world digital competence, while simultaneously reinforcing the habit of evidential reasoning.

Collaborative production of counter-narratives constitutes a further dimension

of this approach: students are tasked with composing accurate, well-sourced English-language responses to specific disinformation claims, intended for hypothetical world-wide audiences. This activity develops productive language skills – argumentation, coherent exposition, appropriate register – whilst positioning students as active participants in the broader information ecosystem rather than passive recipients of it.

The implementation of media literacy education [4] within the EFL curriculum is not without its difficulties. The psychological weight of engaging with disinformation content related to an ongoing war – including graphic imagery, atrocity denial, and dehumanising rhetoric – demands careful pedagogical management and a sustained attention to student wellbeing. Educators must balance the imperative of critical engagement with the ethical responsibility of not re-traumatising students who are themselves living through the realities that disinformation seeks to distort. Furthermore, the integration of media literacy tasks into already demanding technical curricula requires institutional support and a willingness to reconceive the boundaries of language instruction. Time constraints, varying levels of digital literacy among students, and the rapid evolution of disinformation tactics present ongoing practical challenges that no single pedagogical approach can fully resolve.

Conclusions and practical implications

The evidence and classroom experience presented in this paper suggest that the integration of media literacy and critical thinking into English language instruction at Ukrainian technical universities is not a peripheral pedagogical concern but a matter of considerable educational and civic significance. Several practical implications follow from this analysis.

At the curricular level, institutions are encouraged to formally incorporate media literacy objectives into EFL syllabi, recognising counter-disinformation competence as a legitimate and measurable learning outcome alongside communicative proficiency. The systematic selection of authentic media materials, the adoption of source-verification frameworks, and the inclusion of comparative discourse tasks can be achieved within existing instructional structures.

At the methodological level, English language educators – particularly those working in technical higher education, where students possess strong analytical capacities readily transferable to media analysis – are well positioned to lead this work. Professional development initiatives, peer collaboration, and the sharing of classroom resources across institutions would significantly enhance the consistency and quality of counter-disinformation education across the sector.

At the institutional and policy level, universities, ministries of education, and civil society organisations are urged to recognise language education as a strategic component of national information resilience – one that deserves dedicated support,

research funding, and integration into broader frameworks of democratic civic education.

Yet beyond syllabi, frameworks, and policy recommendations lies a reality that no academic paper can fully contain. Ukraine's educators are not working in conditions of comfortable theoretical abstraction. They are teaching in a country under bombardment, in classrooms sometimes without electricity, to students who have lost family members, who have served on the front lines, and who nonetheless return to their studies with a determination that is, by any measure, extraordinary. The teaching of critical thinking and media literacy in this context is not merely an intellectual exercise – it is an act of resistance. Every student who learns to identify a fabricated source, to deconstruct a manipulative narrative, to articulate the truth of Ukraine's experience in the language of international discourse, becomes a participant in the defence of something far greater than a grade or a curriculum objective.

Ukraine is fighting – on the battlefield, in the information space, and in its universities – for the foundational values of democratic society: truth, sovereignty, and the right of a people to determine their own future. History has shown, repeatedly and without exception, that these values ultimately prevail over imperial aggression and organised deception. This paper is offered in that conviction. We shall not surrender – not on the front lines, not in the information space, and not in our classrooms. Glory to Ukraine!

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