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FOREIGN LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING SAFE DIGITAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND PERSONAL GROWTH OF STUDENTS DURING WARTIME

Abstract. The ongoing russian-Ukrainian war has dramatically transformed the educational environment in Ukraine, forcing educators to adapt to unstable conditions, digital dependence, and the psychological vulnerability of students. This paper examines how English language teaching can serve as a medium for fostering safe digital communication practices while simultaneously promoting students' personal growth under conditions of war.

Keywords: foreign language instruction, digital safety, personal development, wartime education, cybersecurity awareness

Introduction

In times of war, education systems often shift rapidly to digital formats, placing a heavier burden on both teachers and students to maintain not only academic continuity but also psychological stability and civic responsibility. Language education, especially in the technical higher education sector, must now contribute to the formation of skills that go beyond grammar and vocabulary. In particular, it should empower students to act responsibly in digital spaces while developing self-awareness, resilience, and critical thinking. As Ukraine strives to maintain its educational sovereignty under external aggression, integrating these goals into foreign language instruction becomes a matter of national importance.

The ongoing hostilities have not only disrupted physical infrastructure but also deeply affected the cognitive and emotional well-being of learners, necessitating a rethinking of pedagogical priorities.

Foreign language classrooms have become spaces where students can regain a sense of agency through meaningful interaction and task-based learning. Moreover, the global nature of English positions it as a gateway to reliable information, international solidarity, and



access to humanitarian resources. By embedding principles of cyber hygiene and ethical online behavior into language learning, educators contribute to the formation of digitally literate and critically aware individuals. Thus, the foreign language curriculum during wartime must evolve into a hybrid platform for both linguistic advancement and the safeguarding of personal and national digital security.

Personal development through language learning

Foreign language learning offers fertile ground for fostering students' personal growth, particularly in extreme circumstances. It develops perseverance and adaptability through sustained effort, promotes empathy through exposure to diverse perspectives, and enhances self-reflection through communicative tasks. Moreover, in wartime, the classroom often becomes one of the few stable environments where students can regain a sense of normalcy, purpose, and control over their future.

Project-based learning, for example, not only encourages collaboration and creativity but also helps students find meaning in their education despite surrounding uncertainty. The opportunity to communicate with peers worldwide via English can create feelings of solidarity and global belonging, counteracting the psychological isolation many students experience during war.

A growing number of digital tools – such as Padlet, Kahoot, Mentimeter, and Google Workspace – can be used to simultaneously develop language skills and raise awareness of digital risks. By embedding cybersecurity-related topics into communicative tasks (e.g., discussing misinformation, analysing online behaviour, or participating in ethical debates), educators can implement a form of «integrated digital citizenship education» through the medium of English. Integrated digital citizenship education refers to the deliberate inclusion of digital ethics, online safety, and responsible behaviour into subject-specific instruction, rather than treating these topics as standalone lessons. In the context of English language teaching, this involves analysing online reviews for credibility, identifying manipulative language in phishing messages, or discussing the ethical implications of AI-generated content. For example, students can role-play a scenario in which they must respond to a suspicious email in English, thereby practicing both their language skills and safe online decision-making simultaneously.

Role-playing activities that simulate digital dilemmas (e.g., responding to a suspicious email, dealing with online bullying, or verifying sources)

promote both critical language use and responsible decision-making. These approaches align with contemporary trends in education that advocate for interdisciplinary learning, where language becomes a bridge between technical knowledge and soft skills.

Despite the potential of foreign language instruction to promote safe digital practices and personal resilience, several challenges persist. Limited access to stable internet connections, emotional fatigue, and the general unpredictability of wartime life can hinder consistent engagement. However, these same constraints reveal opportunities for innovation: asynchronous learning, micro-learning modules, and trauma-informed teaching strategies can be employed to adapt English instruction to the realities of war.

Moreover, by reframing language learning as a tool for empowerment and survival, educators can redefine the role of English in Ukraine's long-term reconstruction and modernization efforts. In this context, English becomes not merely a subject of study, but a strategic asset that equips students to participate in global dialogue, access technical knowledge, and advocate for their country on international platforms. Language proficiency opens pathways to academic mobility, remote employment, and collaboration with global humanitarian and reconstruction initiatives. Furthermore, incorporating real-world and socially relevant content into language instruction fosters a deeper sense of purpose and engagement among students, which is critical during periods of national hardship.

Through exposure to international discourses on resilience, recovery, and innovation, students begin to perceive themselves as active agents of change rather than passive recipients of crisis. Educators can guide learners in developing narratives about Ukraine's wartime experiences in English, helping to shape the global perception of the war conflict through authentic, youth-driven voices.

Such practices contribute to the cultivation of civic identity, media literacy, and personal agency, which are essential components of a democratic and secure post-war society. Ultimately, English language education can serve as a conduit through which Ukrainian students reconnect with the world, rebuild disrupted aspirations, and acquire the tools needed to contribute meaningfully to the country's future.

Conclusion

In the context of war, English language instruction in technical universities must be reimagined as a multifaceted educational

intervention – one that equips students with both linguistic competence and digital resilience, while supporting their emotional and personal development. By integrating digital safety awareness and opportunities for self-growth into English curricula, educators contribute not only to national educational continuity but also to the strengthening of Ukraine's future human capital in the face of adversity.

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