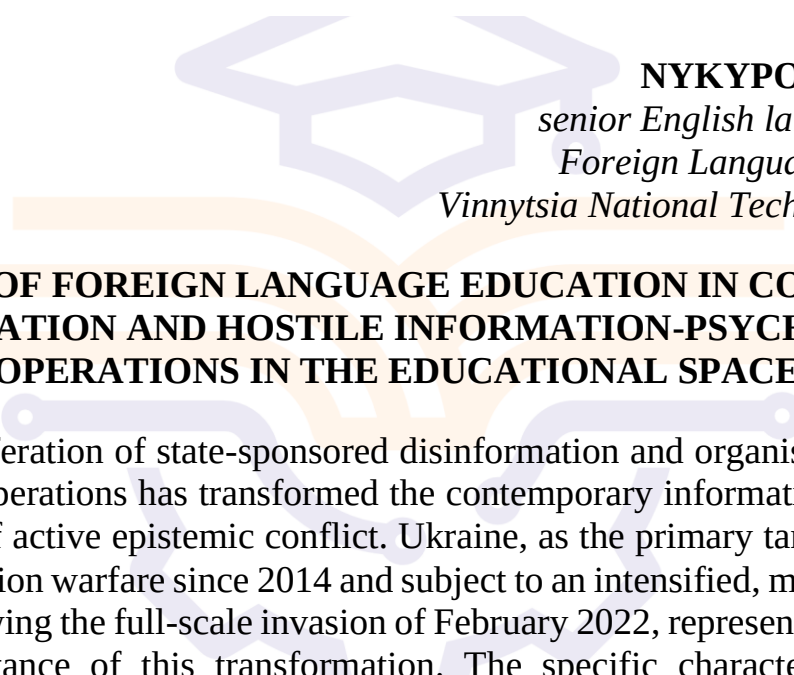




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THE ROLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN COUNTERING DISINFORMATION AND HOSTILE INFORMATION-PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS IN THE EDUCATIONAL SPACE

The proliferation of state-sponsored disinformation and organised information-psychological operations has transformed the contemporary information environment into a domain of active epistemic conflict. Ukraine, as the primary target of sustained russian information warfare since 2014 and subject to an intensified, multilingual IPSO campaign following the full-scale invasion of February 2022, represents the most acute present-day instance of this transformation. The specific characteristics of these operations – their exploitation of both Ukrainian-language and foreign-language, principally English-language, media channels; their deployment of syntactically complex, rhetorically sophisticated, and pragmatically manipulative content; and their strategic targeting of educated, digitally active young adults – render the university educational environment a frontline in the struggle for epistemic integrity.

Foreign language education, in this context, assumes a significance that extends well beyond conventional communicative competence. A student equipped with advanced reading and critical analytical skills in English or other foreign languages is able to engage directly with the primary sources, international fact-checking organisations, and cross-cultural epistemic frameworks that disinformation campaigns deliberately seek to undermine or circumvent. Conversely, a student whose foreign language skills are limited to linguistic form without critical interpretive capacity is precisely the audience that hostile IPSO operations are designed to exploit: capable of

accessing foreign-language disinformation content, but insufficiently equipped to evaluate, contextualise, or reject it.

This paper examines the mechanisms through which foreign language instruction – when purposefully oriented towards critical digital literacy and the analytical examination of authentic texts, including manipulative ones – develops in students the cognitive tools necessary to resist disinformation. It proceeds through a review of relevant scholarship, an analysis of the specific linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of IPSO content that foreign language competence uniquely enables students to interrogate, and a set of pedagogical recommendations for the Ukrainian technical university context.

The psychological and cognitive mechanisms through which individuals form, maintain, and revise beliefs on the basis of disinformation have been rigorously documented in recent scholarship. Ecker et al. (2022), in a landmark review article published in *Nature Reviews Psychology*, provided [1] a comprehensive account of the cognitive, social, and affective factors that drive sustained belief in misinformation and undermine its correction. Their analysis identified motivated reasoning, identity-congruent processing, and the continued influence effect – whereby corrected misinformation continues to shape inference even after retraction – as the principal psychological mechanisms exploited by disinformation operations. Critically for the present argument, Ecker et al. also evaluated the comparative effectiveness of prebunking and debunking strategies, finding that interventions which equip individuals with the analytical tools to identify the rhetorical and logical structure of manipulative content – rather than merely correcting specific false claims – generate more robust and durable resistance to disinformation. This finding provides a strong empirical basis for the pedagogical approach advocated in the present paper: foreign language instruction that explicitly teaches the metalinguistic anatomy of manipulation is precisely the kind of structural prebunking that the cognitive science literature identifies as most effective.

The specific application of critical digital literacy frameworks within foreign language education has been addressed by Brocca, Masia, and Garassino (2024), in a study published in *Language Teaching Research*. Their study proposed and empirically tested an Implicit Content Extraction (ICE) technique, which enables [2] students of English as a foreign language to identify presuppositions and pragmatic implicatures – the implicit, non-explicitly-stated content – in social media and political texts, thereby exposing the manipulative information that such texts embed without assertion. Their findings demonstrated that EFL teachers responded positively to materials built around this technique, recognising its capacity to address a genuine and urgent educational need. The relevance of this work to the Ukrainian context is direct: IPSO content characteristically exploits implicit communication strategies – presuppositions, rhetorical questions, selective framing, and false implication – that are difficult for readers without explicit metalinguistic training to identify and resist.

The effectiveness of media literacy education as an intervention against disinformation has been documented [3] empirically by Dame Adjinn-Tettey (2022), in an experimental study published in *Cogent Social Sciences*. Through a controlled comparison of trained and untrained groups, their research demonstrated that media

and information literacy (MIL) instruction significantly improved participants' ability to identify inauthentic information, with source credibility assessment, evidence evaluation, and headline analysis emerging as the key competencies developed. Whilst their study focused on general media literacy rather than specifically foreign language instruction, its findings are directly applicable to the argument advanced here: the analytical skills that foreign language curricula at an advanced level uniquely provide – close reading, discourse analysis, pragmatic interpretation, and cross-source verification – overlap substantially with the competencies that MIL training has been shown empirically to develop.

The specific contribution of foreign language education to disinformation resilience operates [4] through several interlocking mechanisms that are distinct from those offered by general media literacy instruction. The first, and most foundational, is the metalinguistic dimension. Advanced foreign language learners develop [5] an explicit, analytically articulated awareness of how language works – how syntactic structures create emphasis and obscure agency; how lexical choice frames events and participants; how discourse organisation guides inference; and how pragmatic devices convey meaning beyond the literal content of utterances. This metalinguistic awareness is precisely the cognitive toolkit required to identify the manipulation strategies that IPSO content systematically deploys. A student trained to notice, for example, the use of passive constructions to suppress the identification of responsible agents, or the exploitation of presuppositions to embed contested claims as background assumptions, is structurally better equipped to interrogate IPSO content than one whose engagement with language remains implicit and intuitive.

The second mechanism is cross-cultural epistemic triangulation. Foreign language competence enables students to access, compare, and evaluate information across linguistic communities, directly undermining the informational closure that hostile operations seek to impose. A student who can read English-language reporting, verify claims against international fact-checking databases such as Snopes, PolitiFact, and StopFake, and consult primary sources in their original language, possesses a verification infrastructure that is structurally inaccessible to the monolingual reader. In the Ukrainian context, where IPSO operations are frequently designed to maintain consistency within russian-language and Ukrainian-language information spaces while being directly contradicted by English-language international sources, cross-linguistic verification capacity is not a supplementary skill but a central element of epistemic self-defence.

The third mechanism is the development of pragmatic and rhetorical critical awareness through exposure to authentic, complex foreign-language texts. Foreign language instruction at the advanced university level, particularly in the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) – both prominent in Ukrainian technical university curricula – routinely involves the critical analysis of argumentative, journalistic, and persuasive texts. When this instruction is explicitly oriented towards the identification of logical fallacies, rhetorical manipulation strategies, and the pragmatic embedding of false presuppositions, it constitutes a form of applied critical discourse analysis that directly transfers to students' capacity to evaluate IPSO content. The integration of authentic examples of

disinformation – appropriately framed and contextualised – into foreign language curricula transforms language classes into spaces of active epistemic practice.

The wartime context of Ukrainian technical universities adds a further dimension of urgency and specificity to this argument. Under conditions of active information warfare, the gap between theoretical media literacy frameworks and lived informational experience collapses: students are daily confronted with disinformation in both Ukrainian and foreign languages, across multiple digital platforms, and in relation to issues – military operations, territorial control, civilian casualties, international support – where the stakes of misinformation are immediately and acutely consequential. Foreign language classes that engage with these realities directly, developing students' capacity to access, evaluate, and critically articulate the international informational context of the conflict in which they are living, serve a function that is simultaneously educational, civic, and strategic.

The analysis presented in this paper yields three interlocking conclusions. First, the cognitive science of disinformation – as documented in high-impact, Scopus-indexed scholarship – establishes that structural prebunking, which equips individuals with the analytical tools to identify manipulation, is more durable in its effects than reactive debunking of specific false claims. Foreign language instruction oriented towards metalinguistic and pragmatic critical analysis is, by its nature, precisely this kind of structural prebunking.

Second, the specific competencies developed through advanced foreign language education – metalinguistic awareness, pragmatic interpretive capacity, cross-linguistic source verification, and close analytical reading – map directly onto the skills that empirical research has identified as central to disinformation resistance. The foreign language classroom is not a peripheral or supplementary site of media literacy development; under appropriate pedagogical conditions, it is one of the most effective available institutional spaces for cultivating the cognitive defences that contemporary information warfare demands.

Third, Ukrainian technical universities face both an urgent responsibility and a significant pedagogical opportunity in this domain. By explicitly integrating critical digital literacy objectives – source evaluation, rhetorical analysis, pragmatic implicitness, and cross-cultural verification – into existing foreign language curricula, particularly in EAP and ESP contexts, these institutions can contribute directly to the epistemic resilience of the student population they serve. The foreign language classroom, reconceived as a space of active critical engagement with the multilingual information environment, is an essential component of Ukraine's broader educational response to the information warfare dimension of the ongoing conflict.

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