College of Arts and Cultural Studies   Exemplary Undergraduate Student Work

11-22-2021

Teaching English in Ukraine: An Educator's Guide to Teaching Russian-speaking Ukrainian students

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ENG 499

22 November 2021

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Introduction

Seeking to make an impact on the world through teaching English overseas, soon-to-graduate college student Annica feels drawn to Eastern Europe as she peruses a world map hanging on her dorm room wall. Her pointed finger drifting from country to country, she stumbles upon an unfamiliar, yet fairly large, eastern European country and reads "Ukraine." Joy fills her heart, as she believes she's found her destination. Seeking to gain information about teaching in Ukraine, she takes to the internet and her university's resources. Suddenly, however, she is bombarded with academic and non-academic search results alike that dive deep into Russian phonology, morphology, and other "ology"s that she has simply never heard of. As feelings of inadequacy overwhelm her, Annica simply does not know how to interpret and sift through all of this new-found information. All she wants to do is prepare herself the best she can for her potential future students. Considering Ukraine's history and current context, Russian-speaking Ukrainian students face both linguistic and non-linguistic challenges as they acquire English, which can be addressed through classroom strategies.

Background

Prior to the Ukraine's independence in 1991, Palaguta explains that the nation was under Soviet rule (USSR), whose approach to language learning laid a stumbling block for future language education in the nation (1). Soviet language education had a "low practical value," according to Palaguta, as "[t]he main activities were reading and translation" (1). Mastering European languages was discouraged (in part by propaganda) in order to limit the influence of European ideologies (1). Due to the strong legacy the Soviet authority left regarding language

education, even once Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, the "low practical value" of language learning remained, as the nation has struggled to move past those influences in today's post-Soviet society (1).

Victoria Fromkin et al. write that under Soviet rule, the lingua franca, or common language, was Russian (291). Resembling the tactics of Russia under the tsars' rule, the USSR established Russian and banned other languages, such as Ukrainian, to assert political control (279). However, two years prior to Ukraine's independence, the Council of Europe records that the state instituted Ukrainian as the official language to distinguish themselves as a people (26). Thus, in an attempt to put that era behind them, there was a push to speak Ukrainian (26). Today, according to a poll, 41.8% of Ukrainians declare Ukrainian to be the most important language in their everyday life, while 36.4% claim Russian (26). Some even see the two languages as rivals for position in society (25). In addition to Russian and Ukrainian, the Council of Europe reports, "19.63% of pupils study in schools with minority languages of instruction," such as Hungarian, Crimean-Tatar, Moldavian, and Polish (31).

In a personal interview, Ekaterina Atanova, a Russian speaker who had five years of secondary education in Ukraine at an English-focused Russian institution, emphasized the part the USSR played in shaping modern-day Ukraine, specifically regarding their attitudes regarding foreign languages. Under USSR control, the prevailing thought about the West and Western languages was that they were the enemy. Atanova warns against dismissing the USSR and its ideas as ancient history because now it's supposedly a "new generation." To her, it seems like the country has not moved beyond these anti-West ideals, as television plays a big role in influencing public opinion and still tends to portray the West as a kind of villain or, in Atanova's words, "bad guy." While the country institutes foreign language education, to Atanova, it seems

to serve only the purpose of looking good in the eyes of Europe as "They want to associate with Europe, ... but not be like Europe," emphasizing the focus "on *their* land, on *their* culture, on *their* nation."

Even though Atanova's school had a strong focus on English compared to other schools, low practical value, as previously discussed, was a dominant feature of her education in Ukraine. Atanova states that the focus of her English education was not only mere "memorization" but "blind memorization," as she called it – memorizing it for one class and forgetting it the next. For each class period, Atanova had to memorize around 20 vocabulary words and even memorize an English paragraph to recite perfectly, in addition to readings and completing pages in their workbook. As one might imagine, this approach made it difficult to truly learn and understand the language. The overall focus of the class, Atanova states, was grammatical correctness and correct spelling, as well as how fast and clearly one could read or recite a passage out loud. There was little to no focus on understanding the meaning of these texts. When asked if there was any element of conversation in her classes, Atanova responded no, citing time as the issue. Her class would learn a grammatical concept but not have sufficient time to practice. The history of language learning in Ukraine, along with the current linguistic diversity and low practical value of education, inform the need for good language instruction in the nation.

When researching a move to Ukraine, teachers should not only consider the impact of Ukraine's Soviet past but be aware of the current relationship between Ukraine and Russia, along with the events that have defined the conflict. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ukraine provides a valuable overview of the necessary facts regarding Ukrainian-Russian relations. On 20 February 2014, as previously planned, Russian armed forces seized part of Ukraine's territory – Crimea. This event is referred to as the annexation of Crimea by Western news sources, but as

the "return of Crimea" in Russia, as represented on the medals that the government issued to those involved. One might wonder why a nation as big as Russia is fixated on Ukraine as a nation. The Kremlin is convinced that Russia will not become a world leader without the control of Ukraine, as it is a "threat to the current authoritarian rule in Russia," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ukraine explains. Therefore, Russia was and is adamant in destabilizing eastern and western regions of Ukraine, which Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, announced April 2014. Ultimately, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia's attempt failed; Ukrainian forces stopped them. However, some of the Russian military succeeded in occupying the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which they still occupy to this day. While military aggression has certainly been one aspect of "Russian hybrid warfare," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ukraine presents the numerous other elements that are also involved, which include

> 1) propaganda based on lies and falsifications; 2) trade and economic pressure; 3) energy blockade; 4) terror and intimidation of Ukrainian citizens; 5) cyber attacks; 6) a strong denial of the very fact of war against Ukraine despite large scope of irrefutable evidence; 7) use of pro-Russian forces and satellite states in its own interests; 8) blaming the other side for its own crimes.

While the violence certainly plays a big part in Ukrainian-Russian relations, as there is a "constant inflow of Russian troops and weaponry," the conflict has triggered another crisis: 1,584,000 internally displaced persons in Crimea and along the occupied border. A 409.7 km section of the eastern border remains beyond Ukraine's control, which becomes concerning when one considers the mercenaries, classified by the UNSC as "foreign terrorist fighters," who arrive in Ukraine via the Russian occupied territory. Even today, the eastern Russian-occupied region along the border is central to the Ukrainian-Russian dispute (Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

The Council on Foreign Relations provides updated and expansive insight into the conflict itself, while also reporting on recent events that are significant to the conflict. The most recent developments in the conflict happened in March and April of 2021, when the fighting escalated, as Russia started amassing troops along Ukraine's border. NATO and the EU stepped in, voicing and demonstrating support for Ukraine, as the threat of invasion became more apparent. By the end of April 2021, Russia was to withdraw their troops. Since then, the United States military has been training the Ukrainian armed forces and those of surrounding nations, as violence continues to plague Ukraine's eastern border, to better ward off Russian invasion attempts (Council on Foreign Relations). None of this information is intended to scare or intimidate anyone seeking to teach in Ukraine but rather make them aware of the current situation so they would be empowered to teach their students in Ukraine effectively. In addition to being aware of the context of Ukraine, it is crucial to understand the challenges that Ukrainian students may face in developing English proficiency.

Challenges

Taking into account the significant influence of the Russian language on Ukraine and the limited availability of research on Ukrainian, Russian speakers will be the main focus for this discussion. In focusing on Russian-speaking Ukrainian students, one needs to consider that English and Russian linguistic concepts, as well as non-linguistic factors, can contribute to the challenges the students face as they learn English. The focus on Russian does not mean that the challenges and strategies apply only to Russian speakers. While Ukrainian and Russian are by no means the same language, they are actually related in that they are both descendants of the Slavic branch of Indo-European languages (Fromkin et al. 360). A main reason that certain aspects of English are harder to pick up than others for each language group is due to the impact that their

first language, in this case Russian, has on future language learning. In linguistics, the term for this concept is mother-tongue interference (Noviyenty & Putri 284).

In essence, mother-tongue interference draws on the understanding that, as David Sousa states in *How the ELL Brain Learns*, "we depend on our past learnings to associate with, make sense of, and treat new information" (32). In other words, one approaches new learning through the lens of past learning, seeking to make connections between the two. This concept of learning applies to all content areas, as well as language acquisition. Furthermore, Sousa asserts, "the grammatical networks of the learner's L1 [mother tongue/first language] will always influence— positively and negatively—the acquisition of the grammatical networks of L2 [second language]" (33). The terminology that Sousa uses is positive and negative transfer. A positive transfer occurs between L1 and L2 when "past learning helps" in the language acquisition process (32). For example, the concept of affixes to add meaning to a word might be subject to positive transfer if it exists in both L1 and L2. On the other hand, a negative transfer happens when "past learning interferes" (32). An example of this is capitalization, when L1 and L2 do not share the same rules, such as in English and German. In German, one capitalizes *every* noun, while in English only proper nouns are capitalized. A German-speaker learning English or English-speaker learning German will encounter a negative transfer when it comes to capitalization. Overall, Sousa explains that "the degree to which positive and negative transfer affect the acquisition of L2 depends largely on how closely the grammatical components of the two languages align" (33). Being aware of the components of a language that are subject to negative transfer is essential to providing the best possible language learning experience for one's students. Fernandez and Korneeva determine in their study that "Interlingual errors account for almost 50% of the errors identified in the spoken and written samples" they

collected, proving the significance of mother-tongue interference (9). However, not only do linguistic factors – of both English and Russian – contribute to the difficulties Russian speakers face acquiring English but non-linguistic factors, such as culture, do as well, which is why this section will explore both.

Linguistic Factors

English language concepts that can prove to be significant challenges for Russian-speaking Ukrainian students include SVO word order, affixes, and articles. The English language employs the grammatical word order of Subject-Verb-Object, which provides difficulties for Russian-speaking English Language Learners (ELLs), as Igolkina states: "SVO word order is not embedded into the inner program of the speech act for most Russian learners" (3). Russian does not have a very strict sentence structure; therefore, "fixed word order might be a completely new concept" to Russian learners of English, according to Igolkina (3). However, some Russian speakers tend to use the SVO structure when speaking Russian, while others do not (3). Those who tend to produce the SVO format in their Russian speech do not struggle with the English word order as much as those who structure their Russian sentences in a different manner, as it comes more naturally to them (3). In her interview, Atanova expresses significant difficulty with this concept, asserting that in English "you can't take words and mix them. Because, if you have a sentence 'why are you here?' and you change 'why' and put it after 'are' it becomes 'are why you here?', it doesn't make sense. But, in Russian and Ukrainian, you can take the words and mix them however you want." While there are ways to arrange sentences depending on the tone or message you want to get across, Atanova describes that a fixed sentence structure simply does not exist, further establishing the SVO structure of English as a substantial challenge for Russian speakers. One might wonder how Russian speakers establish meaning with the absence of a fixed

word order. Fromkin et al. explain that "[i]n languages with freer word order, such as Turkish

and Russian, ... grammatical relations are indicated by case markers" (400). While word order

does not play a large role in establishing meaning, as Fromkin et al. contend, context and noun

cases (nominative, genitive, dative, etc.) do.

In her article "English Word Order," Igolkina lists teaching tools that can help students

through this difficult concept. First, she suggests rearranging Russian sentences to fit the SVO

structure, so the students become familiar with it in a format that is easier to understand before

applying new concept to English (5). Additionally, Igolkina mentions employing substitution

tables, which she asserts help "internalise the different sentence patterns of the language through

processes of habit-formation" (5). Trzebiatowski provides different examples of substitution

tables in his article "The Power of Substitution Tables," demonstrating their versatility in English

language instruction, as they can fit into various kinds of content lessons.

Subject	Verb	Object
I	love	books.
You	like	soccer.
	hate	soda.
He	love**s**	books.
She	like**s**	soccer.
It	hate**s**	soda.
We	love	books.
You	like	soccer.
They	hate	soda.

Table 1 – Substitution Table Example

In the beginning stages of studying English language structures, students can look to these tables

as their internal speech program is being adapted to the SVO pattern. Inspired by

Trzebiatowski's tables, Table 1 offers a basic example of what one might look like to assist

students with the SVO structure specifically. Lastly, Igolkina recommends sentence building

activities with flashcards or another media to facilitate games that focus on sentence construction, naming domino, "see" battles, and snowball activity as specific examples.

A second feature of the English language that provides a challenge to Russian speakers is affixes. While Russian has affixes, Leontjev reasons that English affixes can prove to be especially difficult for foreign language speakers due to all of the different meanings an affix, such as "re-", can hold (241). However, one must realize that Russian has affixes in common with English, as do many other languages.

Level no.	Description
Level 1	A different form is a different word.
Level 2	Regularly inflected words are part of the same family, e.g., *-ed*, *-ing*, *-s*, etc.
Level 3	The most frequent and regular derivational affixes: *-able*, *-er*, *-ish*, *-less*, *-ly*, *-ness*, *-th* (*fourth*), *-y*, *non-* , *un-* (*unusual*)
Level 4	Frequent and regular affixes, e.g., *-al* (*coastal*), *-ation*, *-ful*, *-ism*, *-ist*, *-ity*, *-ise* (*-ize*), *-ment*, *-ous*, *in-**
Level 5	Infrequent but regular affixes, e.g., *-age*, *-al* (*arrival*), *-ance*, *-ant*, *-ship*, *en-*, *mis-*, *un-* (*untie*), etc.
Level 6	Frequent but irregular affixes, e.g., *-ee*, *-ic*, *-ify*, *-ion*, *-ition*, *pre-*, *re-*, etc.
Level 7	Classical roots and affixes, e.g., *-ate*, *-ure*, etc.

Table 2 – Difficulty order of L2 English affixes. Table from Bauer & Nation cited in Leontjev, Dmitri. "L2 English Derivational Knowledge: Which Affixes Are Learners More Likely to Recognise?" *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, vol. 6, no. 2, Jan. 2016, p. 227. *ERIC*.

Drawing on the students' Russian affix knowledge can prove to be especially useful when teaching the prefix "re-" to Russian-speaking students, for example. As Leontjev states, the Russian word репродукция [reproduktsiya] uses the prefix "re-" meaning *again,* just like in the English word – reproduction (241). On the other hand, Leontjev neglects to mention if all of the meanings that the English prefix "re-" carries apply to Russian as well. Leontjev's study "L2 Derivational Knowledge" *does*, however, prove the accuracy of Bauer and Nation's level system for English affixes (Table 2) for Russian-speaking learners of English. As suggested by

Leontjev, English educators should take these levels of difficulty into consideration when teaching affixes and be aware that one might need to dedicate more time to teaching upper-level affixes (242).

The third feature of English that Russian-speaking students struggle with is indefinite and definite articles due to their absence in Russian. In her study of Russian language interferences when learning English, Elena Baykalova et al. found that articles can provide a significant challenge for Russian speakers. "For example," Baykalova et al. state, "native speakers of the Japanese language, in which there is no indefinite article, or the Russian language, where there are no forms of a definite or indefinite article, admit the greatest number of mistakes, in contrast to the speakers of other languages where some or other forms of the article are present" (43).

English	Russian
Give me **a** book.	дайкнигу (любую)
Give me **the** book.	дайкнигу (определенную)

Table 3 – Absent article example from Baykalova, Elena, et al. "Morphological Interference in the Process of Mastering English Speech in Conditions of Interaction of Tuvan, Russian and English as a Foreign Language." *Opción: Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales*, vol. 34, no. 85-2, 2018, p. 42.

Compared to other native languages, Russian-speaking ELLs consider articles to be an especially difficult concept, since they are "missing" in Russian (42). "Semantically [for the sake of linguistic meaning (Fromkin et al. 134)], all nominals in Russian are indefinite, and the definiteness effects are of pragmatic [contextual (134)] nature" (Seres 69). In other words, all nouns are interpreted as indefinite until proven to be definite according to context or pragmatics (Fromkin et al. 134).

As represented in Table 3, in both indefinite (a) and definite (the) cases, the words are exactly the same: Дай книгу, which directly translates to "give book" (Baykalova et al. 42).

(The added comments in parentheses merely translate to "any" and "specific.") In Russian, these phrases would be rendered indefinite or definite depending on the context. The context of a sentence is key to unlocking the meaning in Russian, due to the loose word order and absence of articles. Though context plays an essential role, the Russian language does not solely rely on it to create meaning. One of the most important features of Russian nouns is their cases. Baykalova et al. explain, "The category of case is one of the morphological signs of the noun. In English this category is represented by two cases - the general and the genitive (possessive), in comparison with the Russian language, in which there are 6 cases" (43). The six noun cases in Russian include nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, and prepositional, according to "Russian Grammar," which manifest in the form of affixes. By comparison, English is simpler in terms of noun cases, but since the directness and indirectness of nouns is merely implied by context, it could be difficult for Russian-speaking students to take this implicit concept in Russian and express it explicitly in English using "a(n)" and "the," for example. Before teaching English articles, one might need to first deliver direct instruction on the concept of direct and indirectness of nouns, which provides a necessary foundation to understanding the practical use of articles. Additionally, employing think-alouds when using an article in a sentence can help students understand the thought process behind choosing an article and adapt it into their own thought pattern.

Lastly, situation-bound utterances (SBUs), as Istvan Kecskes et al. call them, or idioms, provide significant difficulty for native Russian speakers and other ELLs, since their meaning does not align with the direct translation of the phrase. In other words, as Kecskes et al. explain, situation-bound utterances (or idioms) "usually have a particular social function, and their functional meaning often differs from their compositional (literal meaning)," presenting

examples, such as "'you are all set' at the end of a transaction in a store, or 'be my guest,' when someone asks us for something, or 'tell me about it' when we mean the opposite" (220). When Atanova was learning English in Ukraine, she was taught to directly translate every word in an English sentence and was told that, once she does that, the sentence will make sense. However, she discovered through experience that this was an ineffective practice due to situation-bound utterances and idioms, which are dependent on context, mentioning "take off" (to start) as a confusing example. Validating Atanova's experience, Kecskes et al. state, if a Russian ELL does not know an expression, they process it in a literal sense, which often leads to miscommunication (221). Kecskes et al. describe in their article that one's understanding of SBUs depends on their prior experience and the current situation. Specifically in their study, Kecskes et al. find that situational context was of the most help to their participating Russian ELLs. In the conclusion of their study, the researchers mention effective classroom strategies, stating, "This study revealed that effective and successful activities such as student-led discourse analysis, matching, strategy analysis, as well as thinking aloud and discussion in class can help students reflect upon the reasons for different interpretations, and consider what strategies assist them best in comprehending SBUs" (232). In summary, any classroom practice that models, exposes, or leads students through the necessary thought process to interpreting SBUs and idioms are invaluable to teaching these non-literal phrases.

In addition to difficult English concepts, there are certain aspects of the Russian language that make it hard for Russian-speaking students to acquire English, such as the writing system, and orthographic transparency of Russian. First, the writing system that Russian employs is an alphabet called Cyrillic, which is quite different from the Latin alphabet of English.

IPA	Russian Letter	Letter Name
[a] [æ]	**Аа**	ah
[b] [p]	**Бб**	beh
[v] [f]	**Вв**	veh
[g][k]	**Гг**	geh
[d] [t]	**Дд**	deh
[je] [e]	**Ее**	yeh
[jo] [o]	**Ёё**	yoh
[ʐ] [ʃ]	**Жж**	zhe
[z] [s]	**Зз**	zeh
[i]	**Ии**	ee (long)
[i]	**Йй**	ee (short)
[k]	**Кк**	kah
[l]	**Лл**	el'
[m]	**Мм**	em
[n]	**Нн**	en
[o] [ɵ]	**Оо**	oh
[p]	**Пп**	peh
[r]	**Рр**	err
[s]	**Сс**	ess
[t]	**Тт**	teh
[u] [ʉ]	**Уу**	oo
[f]	**Фф**	eff
[x]	**Хх**	kha
[t͡s]	**Цц**	tseh
[t͡ɕ]	**Чч**	cheh
[ʂ]	**Шш**	shah
[ɕː]	**Щщ**	shchah
[ɨ]	**Ыы**	Jeryh
[ɛ][e]	**Ээ**	eh
[ju]	**Юю**	you
[ja] [ji] [a] [i]	**Яя**	yah

Table 4 – Russian alphabet and sounds, as synthesized from "Russian Grammar." BarCharts, 2006. and "Russian Alphabet." *Russland Journal*, 2021. https://www.russlandjournal.de/en/learn-russian/russian-alphabet/.

As "Cyrillic Alphabet" explains, it is an "alphabet developed in the 9th century for the use of

Eastern Orthodox Slavs. It was based on Greek characters, and with modifications it constitutes

the present Russian, Ukrainian, White Russian, Serbian, and Bulgarian alphabets." According

"Russian Grammar," Russian has 33 letters, as represented in Tables 4 and 5. In looking at the

Russian alphabet, English speakers might find some familiar letters, just as a Russian speaker

might with the English alphabet. While some represent similar sounds in both languages (M, O,

A, T, K), others do not (E, Y, B, H, P), acting as what some refer to as "false friends." Russian

has 21 consonants, 10 vowels, and two silent letters, whose purpose is to signal the hard or soft

pronunciation of the preceding letter (1). The degree to which the spelling of a word aligns with

its pronunciation is called orthographic transparency, which is the next topic of discussion.

Silent Letters			
hard sign:	**Ъъ**	tvjordyj znak	preceding consonant is **hard**, succeeding vowels are pronounced with an initial Y-sound
soft sign:	**Ьь**	mjakhkij znak	preceding consonant is **soft**, succeeding vowels are pronounced with an initial Y-sound

Table 5 – Silent Letters in Russian. Information from "Russian Grammar." BarCharts, 2006. and
"Russian Alphabet." *Russland Journal*, 2021. https://www.russlandjournal.de/en/learn-
russian/russian-alphabet/.

   In addition to their alphabet, another significant difference between Russian and English

is their orthographic transparency, which, in essence, denotes how much the spelling of a word

resembles how it sounds, involving an interplay between graphemes (symbols) and phonemes

(sounds) (Sousa 83, 13). Elisabeth Borleffs et al. explain it as follows: "Orthographic

transparency manifests itself in a feedforward fashion (grapheme-to-phoneme) and a feedback

fashion (phoneme-to-grapheme)," in other words, connecting a symbol to a sound (feedforward)

or a sound to a symbol (feedback) (3). In *How the ELL Brain Learns*, Sousa presents an

orthographic transparency spectrum, differentiating between shallow and deep orthographies –

orthography meaning "the rules of spelling that govern a language" (83). While shallow

orthographies have a "very close correspondence between letters and the sounds they represent,"

deep orthographies have a "poor correspondence between how a word is pronounced and how it

is spelled" (Sousa 83). English has a deep orthography, since the same letters and combinations

of such can be pronounced quite differently from word to word, as Sousa demonstrates with the

following examples: bough, cough, and dough (83). These words appear to only differ in one

sound as they each end in "-ough", which would make them minimal pairs (Fromkin et al. 224);

however, that is not the case as the ending "-ough" is actually pronounced differently in each.

On the other hand, Russian has a shallow orthography, meaning that the spelling of words

aligns with the pronunciation. Confirming that Russian words are spelled exactly as you

pronounce them, Atanova expresses significant challenge with English pronunciation based on

the confusing spelling, which native English speakers can also attest to. Based on this

information, it might seem that it is simple to decipher Russian pronunciation based on its

spelling. While it is certainly not as chaotic as English seems to be, Russian letters have more

than one sound, or way to pronounce them – soft and hard. Bashirnezhad and Ghapanchi explain

that "Russian consonants are pronounced either 'soft' or 'hard' depending on the type of a letter

that there is after them," thus there are two ways that every consonant can be pronounced (41).

As depicted in Table 5, if a letter is followed by "Ъ", it is pronounced "hard". But if a letter is

followed by "Ь", it is pronounced "soft." While this may appear confusing, only two

pronunciations per consonant is not unreasonable, considering English pronunciation is far more

difficult to decipher based on spelling, as demonstrated earlier. A Russian speaker is used to an

obvious connection between spelling and pronunciation, but English's "lack of sound-to-letter

correspondence makes it difficult for the brain to recognize patterns and affects the learner's ability to spell with accuracy and to read with meaning," according to Sousa (83). In looking at or attempting English spelling, Russian-speaking students draw on the patterns their brain knows from their native language to make the connection between what is written and how you say it and vice versa. Based on the spelling errors found in their study of native Danish, Italian, and Russian speakers, Nadya Dich and Bo Pederson "propos[e] that th[e] cross-linguistic differences result from spellers' transfer of their L1 spelling strategies," which makes sense when one considers that L1 spelling strategies are all that they initially have (60). To spell in English, ELLs need to learn a new set of strategies that, at times, may conflict with those of their mother tongue.

This hurdle of differing alphabets and orthographic transparency is significant for teachers to note, as Sousa asserts, "Preliterate students and literate ELLs who speak a language that does not use the Roman alphabet will need direct instruction in letter recognition and formation as well as beginning phonics [connecting sounds and letters]" (97). In other words, simply touching on the alphabet at the beginning of the year does not provide adequate support for Russian-speaking ELLs, who will need to start from scratch with connecting foreign phonemes, or sounds, to a foreign alphabet system. Since English sound-to-letter agreement in the context of words in complicated, "the ELL needs to recognize that how a letter is pronounced depends on the letters that surround it," as Sousa establishes: "[T]here are about 44 English phonemes [sounds] but only 26 letters in the English alphabet, each phoneme [sound] is not coded with a unique letter" (85). Subsequently, because Russian-speaking ELLs need direct instruction on the alphabet, the sounds, and spelling of English, it is imperative for English

language teachers to be aware of the four phases of word recognition as defined by Sousa,

represented in Table 6, so that they can guide their students through these phases.

Sousa's Four Phases of Word Recognition			
1	**2**	**3**	**4**
Prealphabetic phase	**Partial alphabetic phase**	**Full alphabetic phase**	**Consolidated alphabetic phase**
ELLs remember words by connecting visual cues in the word (such as the two *l*s in *bell* or the curve at the end of *dog*) with the word's meaning and pronunciation. **There is no systematic letter-sound connection.**	The ELL commits printed words to memory by connecting one or more printed letters with the corresponding sound(s) heard during pronunciation. This phase is sometimes called *sight-word reading* and the reading develop the ability to **recognize certain familiar and high-frequency words**.	The ELL remembers how to read a specific word by making accurate connections between the letters seen in the word and the phonemes that are used in the word's pronunciation. This complete **phoneme-grapheme connection** will facilitate committing this word to long-term memory, thus leading to more accurate reading.	The beginning ELL reader **notices multiletter sequences** that are common to words stored in memory (such as the ending -*ake* in *cake*, *make,* and *take*, or the -*ent* in *bent*, *cent*, and *tent*). The learner just processes the beginning consonant and the chunk (instead of processing each letter separately).

Table 6 – Sousa's Four Phases of Word Recognition. Information from Sousa, David. *How the ELL Brain Learns.* Corwin, 2011, pp. 86-87.

Though the alphabet, spelling, and reading are essential language skills for growing proficient in

English, Sousa argues based on his research that "learning to *speak* English becomes the ELL's

first priority, because it provides the foundation for hearing and reflecting on the structure of

spoken words and then to learning the alphabetic principle as it applies to the sounds of English"

(88). In other words, Sousa advocates for making the learner familiar with the sounds of the

language and how they group together to form words before connecting these sounds to letters.

Developing a mental lexicon of words before spelling them can actually help the students with

their English reading skills later on (89). To best help Russian-speaking Ukrainian students

overcome the hurdle of moving from speaking to spelling, one can employ the following

classroom strategies: think-alouds, modeling, and integration of spelling into various lessons during instruction. The main factor, however, in these strategies is practice.

Non-linguistic Factors

Russian-speaking Ukrainians face linguistic challenges when learning English; however, non-linguistic factors also affect their acquisition of English. Ukrainian ELs struggle with cultural, conversational, and environmental differences, which can produce language anxiety. One of the largest differences that can be difficult for Ukrainian students (and Western teachers) to overcome is that of culture. In regards to culture, the Western world, especially the United States, is typically individualistic, while Eastern countries tend to be more collectivistic (Badan 131). As defined by Harry Triandis, in individualistic cultures, "people are autonomous and independent from their in-groups; they give priority to their personal goals over the goals of their in-groups, they behave primarily on the basis of their attitudes," while, in collectivistic cultures, "people are interdependent within their in-groups (family, tribe, nation, etc.), give priority to the goals of their in-groups, shape their behavior primarily on the basis of in-group norms, and behave in a communal way" (909). However, Ukraine is a little more complicated than that. As Antonina Badan asserts, "Students with a Ukrainian (or Post-Soviet, to be more exact) background belong to a *mixture* of global cultures, namely, tribalistic (old-time Ukraine) and quasi-collectivistic (Ukraine under Soviet control)" (emphasis added, 131). As she explains how Ukrainian students enter the classroom with multiple cultural influences, Badan includes the Soviet Union into the discussion of culture, once again establishing its vast influence. Currently, Badan states, Ukraine is in the transition of moving away from traditional collectivist values and becoming more individualistic.

In addition to differing cultural focus, Ukraine's attitude concerning classroom behavior is different from that in the United States, as well. Badan explores this difference in her article, stating, "Unfortunately, the post-Soviet culture which still prevails in a Ukrainian classroom is based 'on silent majority' and does not encourage too many questions of people with higher status who may find it challenging" (131). Since posing questions of an authority figure is not typical for the culture, Badan recommends explicitly teaching specific phrases to students to facilitate an interactive classroom environment where the students feel comfortable posing questions and making comments throughout the lecture. Badan suggests two empowering phrases one could teach their students: "Excuse me, but I didn't quite understand" and "Could I interrupt for a quick second?" (131). However, one should not merely teach the phrases and expect the students to use them, as it might go against their previous experience. Overall, in this situation and in the classroom in general, voicing one's expectations and acting in accordance with them is absolutely critical.

The second main difference that can be difficult to navigate is one of conversational nature. For one, Badan points out that Americans communicate that they are actively listening both non-verbally (nodding) and verbally (mhm, okay, yeah), while in Ukraine silence, as well as a possible blank stare, are completely normal and in no way rude or "cold" (131). Secondly, Andrei Shatilov notes the lack of small talk in Russian as a significant language feature. Typically, Russian speakers are very direct when speaking, preferring heart-to-hearts (serious/important conversations) over small talk (30). The lack of small talk should be kept in mind as a teacher when teaching and practicing vocabulary, for example, as one may need to explicitly instruct them in how to engage in small talk and expect it of English speakers. Both

non-verbal/verbal listening responses and small talk need to be explicitly taught and practiced in the classroom.

The environment poses the third difference that Russian-speaking Ukrainian students struggle with, as their education is marked by the absence of an English environment outside of the school building. The internet provides a plethora of English language content for students to engage with outside of school; however, it is up to the students to enrich their own learning. As previously mentioned, Ukraine's language education has a low practical value, which the lack of instruction on English-speaking cultures has possibly contributed to. Nataliya Fedicheva found in her study "The Cultural Component in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Ukraine" that the "primary reason secondary students want to learn English is an interest in the culture, literature, and arts of English-speaking countries and a general interest in their way of life" (210). Even though this is the case, most Ukrainian English classrooms purely focus on the language itself (210). Fedicheva argues, "[T]he mere learning of the linguistic system itself is no guarantee of successful cross-cultural communication" (209). Since teachers are not catering to the students' interest in English-speaking cultures, they seemingly neglect the cultivation of student motivation, which is absolutely critical to true learning. Instead of teaching culture in isolation, Fedicheva contends that it is most useful for the students to learn about the target culture by comparing it to their own culture, thus, not only learning about but expecting difference (211). At the end of her article, Fedicheva lists activities revolving around classroom discussions about cultural greetings, celebrations, etc. with given scenarios.

Significant cultural, conversational, and environmental differences, in addition to the linguistic challenges explored previously, can produce language anxiety in Ukrainian ELLs. Exploring this struggle, Svitlana Tsymbal asserts that it is the teacher's role to create an

attractive classroom experience with a warm atmosphere, which increases student motivation

(105). When facing language anxiety, positive reinforcement and encouragement are key (105).

Based on the survey she conducted, Tsymbal identifies the following as significant anxiety

provoking contexts for Ukrainian ELLs:

> 1. Anxiety related to the English classroom (participating in class without being
> prepared; anxiety about failing the exams, completing assignments; passing the
> course; class assignments, etc.); 2. Self-perception (anxiety related to one's own
> English proficiency, etc.); 3. General anxiety exacerbated in English contexts
> (troubles in expressing ideas; interactions with more fluent classmates; fear of
> making a mistake, fear of evaluation, etc.); 4. Anxiety related to English
> communication (speaking English in front of the class; difficulty in following
> teachers' (and classmates') talk; difficulty in making one's point in English, etc.).
> (104)

It is critical for teachers to keep these triggers in mind, as they approach creating their classroom

community, so that they can help their students cope with anxiety-producing situations. Tsymbal

specifically brings up practices such as guiding students in "progressive relaxation, deep

breathing, meditation, and soothing music to put themselves in a positive mood" (105).

Practicing brain breaks and other such exercises can help the students decompress and release

anxiety that was built up before or after entering the classroom. Additionally, "[t]o encourage

relaxation," Tsymbal suggests, "teachers can also use funny videos, jokes, role-plays, games, and

other fun activities to stimulate laughter in their classrooms and make students feel more at ease"

(105). A fun learning environment can help students be more comfortable in the classroom.

Being sensitive to one's students' needs is one of the many responsibilities of a teacher. While

all of the challenges and strategies can seem overwhelming, they ultimately benefit the student, which makes the temporary learning curve worth it.

Conclusion

Those seeking to teach in Ukraine, like Annica, need to be aware that Ukraine's Soviet history and war-stricken present inform the background of Russian-speaking Ukrainian students, who face challenges related to linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Though daunting, teaching English in Ukraine is not without hope, as these difficulties can be addressed with evidence-based classroom practices. Now having an adequate overview of what impacts her students, Annica can remain hopeful that she can make a difference in her students' lives.

This research contributes to both linguistics and education, providing a much-needed practical approach to linguistics for educators. Further study of similar nature is necessary for other languages and countries, as teachers need a practical approach to language and culture to inform their classroom practices.

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