

ARTICLES

Creating Communities of Practice for Fostering Second Language Learning in People in Crisis

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Abstract. This paper describes two volunteer-based nonprofit initiatives, *COMMON* and *Speak Up For Peace*, which originated as a response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the invasion of the Russian Federation of Ukraine. The initiatives function as communities of practice that provide free online foreign language instruction to people in crisis (predominantly Ukrainian refugees). We conducted an online survey in a subset of language instructors (N = 75) and participating people in crisis (N = 102) with the goals 1) to assess the effectiveness of provided language instruction, 2) to gain a better understanding of the participating learners' and teachers' experiences and attitudes towards their learning and teaching, respectively, 3) to identify the main challenges and issues that learners and teachers face while participating in the projects, and 4) to gauge the viability of these and similar volunteer-based language projects for people in crisis and refugees in the future. The survey revealed a significant improvement in proficiency and motivation of participating people in crisis to learn a new language. Additionally, participating in the projects was associated with overall positive emotional and psychological benefits, for both learners and teachers. Among the most common issues related to learning and teaching in the context of the projects were student absenteeism and attrition, work balance, and teacher training. Overall, the study revealed interesting insights about perceived attitudes toward learning and teaching in students and instructors, respectively. It may be of interest to educators, language instructors and policymakers working with refugee groups and people in crisis.

Keywords: *people in crisis, refugees, trauma, second language acquisition, online language instruction, foreign language tutoring, volunteer instruction, community of practice.*

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Крабіс Анна, Анісімова Вера, Антропова Юлія, Бікіна Дар'я, Менухова Анна, Мірабо Сандра, Одношивкіна Вікторія, Щербакова Анна, Тихомирова Анна, Змієвська Тетяна. Створення діяльних спільнот для сприяння у вивченні іноземних мов людьми в кризових ситуаціях.

Анотація. У цій статті описано дві волонтерські некомерційні ініціативи, *COMMON* та *Speak Up for Peace*, які виникли як відповідь на гуманітарну кризу, спричинену вторгненням Російської Федерації в Україну. Ініціативи функціонують як спільноти практиків, які проводять безкоштовне онлайн-навчання іноземним мовам для людей у кризових ситуаціях (переважно українських біженців). Ми провели онлайн опитування серед підгрупи викладачів мови (N = 75) та учасників (N = 102), які перебувають у кризових ситуаціях, з метою 1) оцінити ефективність навчання мови в контексті ініціатив, 2) зрозуміти досвід учнів та викладачів та їхнє ставлення до навчання та викладання, 3) визначити основні складності та проблеми, з якими стикаються учасники проєктів, 4) оцінити життєздатність цих та подібних волонтерських проєктів для людей у кризовій ситуації на майбутнє. Результати опитування показали значне покращення рівня володіння та мотивації учнів до вивчення нової мови. Участь у проєктах також має позитивний ефект на психологічний та емоційний стан викладачів, і учнів. Серед найпоширеніших проблем, виявлених під час опитування, були пропуски та вибуття студентів з навчального процесу, робочий баланс та підготовка вчителів. Загалом, дослідження виявило деякі цікаві відомості про ставлення студентів і викладачів до навчання та викладання відповідно. Дослідження може зацікавити педагогів, викладачів-мовників та політиків, які працюють з групами біженців та людьми в кризовій ситуації.

Ключові слова: люди в кризовій ситуації, біженці, травма, оволодіння другої мови, онлайн-навчання мови, репетиторство з іноземної мови, викладання волонтерами, діяльна спільнота.

Introduction

This paper describes the organizational principles, operational choices, and interim outcomes (as assessed with a survey) of two nonprofit initiatives that originated as a response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the invasion of the Russian Federation of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The initiatives are exclusively volunteer-run and pursue one objective—to provide free foreign-language instruction to people in crisis that should help them to acclimate and adjust to life in their resettlement country. From the conceptual perspective, the initiatives can be viewed as Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Haneda, 1997; Tavakoli, 2015; Wenger, 2000), as they are run by groups of people who share a common goal and concern, who are actively engaged in knowledge and skill exchange in the context of their practice, and who, by virtue of their participation in the group's activity, develop its culture and agenda.

The CoPs described in this paper serve three different categories of people in crisis: 1) Ukrainian people displaced from their homeland due to an immediate or potential threat to their personal safety (refugees), 2) Ukrainian people preparing to immigrate to a different country, e.g., to reunite with their families (refugees-to-be), and 3) people from Russia and Belarus who fled their home countries for political reasons (political migrants) within the first months of the onset of the invasion. The

first category constitutes the most numerous group, whose needs for foreign language instruction are the most urgent. After resettlement, refugees face an acute need to integrate with a new host society within a very short period of time. Being able to use the language of the resettlement country secures better employment opportunities, provides access to schooling and the country's infrastructure, and, in general, leads to a better quality of life because acculturation and the process of becoming a full-fledged member of society is realized to a large extent through language and communication (e.g., Doucerain et al., 2015; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Conversely, lack of knowledge of the host country's language may take a toll on refugees' adaptation and acculturation to the host culture. Despite the importance of the knowledge of the host country's language, refugees face many barriers on their way to second-language learning, the most prominent of which are educational, institutional, financial, and social (Steele, 2017).

Psychological trauma is another key factor in second-language learning for refugee populations and, more broadly, for people in crisis. The trauma can be associated with migration stress, acculturation stress, or traumatic stress (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999). Immigration is an inherently stressful life event, especially if it is sudden, unplanned, involuntary, or forced. Acculturation stress is brought about by the disruption of familiar role systems and social identities. Traumatic stress refers to experienced traumatic events and intrusive memories about them, including experiencing or witnessing violence and death, destruction of home, separation from and loss of family members, prolonged exposure to danger, poverty, hunger, etc. (Amnesty International, 2002). Psychological sequelae of such traumatic events can have damaging effects on mental health and cognitive functions, including memory, attention, executive skills, motivation, abstract reasoning, and ability to learn and concentrate (Dunn et al., 2021; Finn, 2010; Iversen et al., 2014; Kaplan et al., 2016a, 2016b; Kleinmann, 1982; Marshall et al., 2016; Satinsky et al., 2019, among many). Specifically, the ability to learn a new language is also significantly hindered due to traumatic stress (Saigh, Mroueh, & Bremner, 1997; Söndergaard & Theorell, 2004).

To summarize, people in crisis, who have a history of trauma or who are subjected to ongoing immigration-related stress, may experience hidden obstacles to learning a new language. A significant amount of work has already been devoted to describing language learning and the associated challenges in different refugee groups, e.g., Syrian refugees (Abou-Khalil et al., 2019; Alefsha & Al-Jamal, 2019; Ameen & Cinkara, 2018; Boylu & Gungor, 2020), refugees from various countries of Asia (Gordon, 2011; Kleinmann, 1982) and Africa (Morrice et al., 2021). However, the ongoing (as of the time of writing this paper, August 2022) armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine has brought about a new refugee crisis, leading to the displacement of about 7.1 million Ukrainians within the country and 6.3 million Ukrainians outside of Ukraine (UNHCR, n.d.). This calls for a timely evaluation of the existing initiatives directed to providing foreign-language services to Ukrainian refugees and people in crisis.

This paper describes two such initiatives and summarizes the experience of running them. In traditional refugee classrooms, second language instruction is provided in person to, usually, a mixed group of refugees from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds as part of a formal resettlement program. In contrast, these two projects function as informal CoPs, where language instruction is provided exclusively online by volunteer instructors in the form of one-on-one tutoring or in small groups. The first objective of the study is to gain a better understanding of the participating learners' and teachers' experiences and attitudes towards their learning and teaching, respectively, in the context of the projects (Sections **Summarizing Experience of Participating Language Learners** and **Summarizing Experience of Participating Volunteer Instructors**). The second goal is to assess whether the instructional format provided through the projects is an effective and efficient way of developing the skills needed by people in crisis (Section **Assessment of Project effectiveness**). The third goal is to identify the main challenges and issues that the CoP members (both the learners and the instructors) face during their participation in the projects (Section **Encountered Challenges**) and to provide some recommendations on how these can be prevented or tackled in the future. Finally, we aim to obtain some insights from the participating learners and instructors on the viability of the projects in the future (Section **Future Perspectives**). Our study is descriptive in nature in that it summarizes the results of the survey administered among a subset of learners and instructors. Based on the results, we outline some recommendations on creating sustainable teaching practices tailored to the needs of the participating Ukrainian refugees and people in crisis, as well as refugee populations in general.

Description of the Reviewed CoPs

While many new volunteer initiatives came to life with the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict, this paper focuses on describing the work of two specific projects: *COMMON* (<https://cmoncmon.co/en/>) and *Speak Up For Peace* (<https://www.instagram.com/speak.up.for.peace/>). The initiatives are based on the principles of mutual respect and assistance, as well as political and national neutrality. Both initiatives started in March, 2022 as small communities of individuals, whose main goal was to connect volunteer teachers with the Ukrainian refugees in need of language instruction. Initially, group members shared information about the projects on their personal social media pages to reach out to potential teachers and learners. As the community of instructors and learners grew, project accounts were created on Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook as a means of promotion and a continuous search for participants. The initiatives have cumulatively received more than 1,000 teacher applications and about 3,700 learner applications from people in crisis (as of July, 2022). Out of these learners, approximately 85% have either completed a language course, are currently taking language lessons, or

have been transferred to other projects (e.g., for rarely-taught languages), while 15% are still awaiting instructor or group assignment.

Both teachers and students apply to participate by completing a role-specific questionnaire. Eligibility of potential students is determined based on their indication of whether they are in crisis or not, their detailed description of their situation, and their explanation of why they require foreign-language instruction. Once applications are processed, project coordinators either assemble learner groups and assign them to teachers (as in *COMMON*) or notify teachers through teacher Telegram chats about new students awaiting teacher assignment (as in *Speak Up For Peace*). In the latter case, the instructors contact students individually and can, therefore, decide how many students, and with what proficiency, they can take on. The instructors have complete freedom in deciding on the frequency and duration of lessons, as well as the choice of curriculum. As new instructors join the projects, they receive access to Telegram teacher chats—a vibrant and active teacher community, where teachers can share learning resources and instructional materials, discuss various teaching-related issues, and ask for help.

Besides students and teachers, another key role in the initiatives belongs to administrators and coordinators. Administrators oversee key operations of the projects, such as product-development, volunteer recruitment and coordination, conflict resolution and strategic vision. Project coordinators are responsible for sorting applications, helping teachers organize their work, collecting feedback from students and teachers, managing social media, communicating with mass media and similar projects, and attracting new teachers and students. Communication between teachers and students is not controlled by the administrators or coordinators, but in case of any problems both the teachers and the students are asked to notify the project's administration.

Method

Participants

Participating instructors were invited to complete a short online survey through the teachers' Telegram group chats or discussion forums, including about 490 members¹. Because the experimenters did not have access to the participating learners' contact information, the instructors were asked to distribute the links to the learner survey among their students. Additionally, project administrators were asked to circulate the call for participation among the enrolled students. As a result, 102 learners (mean age = 34.05 years old, range = 13-65) and 75 volunteer foreign-

¹ This number does not reflect the overall number of language instructors participating in the projects. It only represents the number of instructors who joined the projects' teacher forums and shared their contact information with the group. Instructors' as well as students' contact information is otherwise not disclosed.

language instructors (mean age = 27.49 years old, range = 12-45) filled out the survey. Out of all the students, 57.3% were studying in the *COMMON* project, 39.8% in the *Speak Up for Peace* project, and 2.9% were in both projects. With regard to the instructors, 63.7% were volunteering in the *COMMON* project, 33.3% in the *Speak Up for Peace* project, and 4% were volunteering in both projects at the time of the survey.

Ninety-seven learner respondents identified as female and 6 identified as male. Most of the learners were bilingual speakers of Ukrainian and Russian (53.4%), 32% identified Ukrainian as their native language, and 12.6% considered Russian as their native language. A small percentage of people were bilingual speakers of Russian and a language other than Ukrainian (2%). Most students were residing in European countries, primarily in France (13.13%), Poland (13.13%), and Germany (12.12%). Many learners returned to, or had not yet left, Ukraine (26.26%). Most participating students had higher education degrees (77.7%), and some were still in school or college (16.5%) or had other post-secondary education. A large subset of learners were not employed at the time of the survey (35.9%), but some continued to work either full- (16.5%) or part-time (16.5%). The remaining minority of student respondents were self-employed, interns, current school or college students, or retired people.

Out of all instructor respondents, 66 people identified as female, eight identified as male, and one did not identify as either male or female. Most of the teachers identified Russian as their native language (86.5%), though some were native speakers of Belarusian (6.8%) or bilingual speakers of Ukrainian and Russian (4.1%). One teacher was a native English speaker. Most of the instructors were residing in the Russian Federation at time of the survey (70.83%), while others were residing in Belarus (5.5%), USA (4.2%), Georgia (2.7%), Germany (2.7%), or other countries (a total of 15.2%). The majority of instructors had higher education degrees (82.67%). Most instructors had majors in language sciences, such as linguistics, philology, foreign-languages instruction, or translation. Out of all teacher respondents, 37.3% were working full-time at the time of survey, 29.3% were self-employed, 10.7% were working part-time, 8% were unemployed, and 13.4% of teachers were school or college students.

Materials and Procedure

Two web-based surveys for online administration were constructed in Google Forms: one for administration in the group of volunteer instructors and another one for administration in the group of language learners. Copies of the original forms in Russian, their Ukrainian and English translations can be accessed in Chrabaszc (2022). Instructors and learners were informed that their participation in the surveys was anonymous and confidential and that the results of the surveys would be used by the authors to summarize teacher and learner experiences, and to evaluate the

effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes in the context of the volunteer projects. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). Participation was completely voluntary; participants received no compensation for completing the survey.

Each survey included 40 questions of different types: open-ended questions, multiple choice questions, and Likert scales. Each questionnaire contained three subsections: demographic information, experience of participation in the project, and psychological and emotional factors in learning/teaching. Within these subsections, the questions aimed 1) to quantify the instructional process (e.g., most frequently-taught languages, duration and frequency of lessons, amount of classwork/homework, learning resources, etc.); 2) to assess learner and teacher attitudes towards their learning/teaching in the context of the projects (e.g., the primary goal of participation, importance of different language skills, attitudes to the online format of instruction, etc.); 3) to gauge the effectiveness of learning/instruction (e.g., change in perceived proficiency and motivation in the studied language, change in the emotional and psychological state, satisfaction with the instructional format, readiness to continue to participate in the project in the future); 4) to identify primary challenges that learners and instructors face in learning/teaching in the context of the projects; and, finally, 5) to gain some perspectives on the future of the projects.

Results

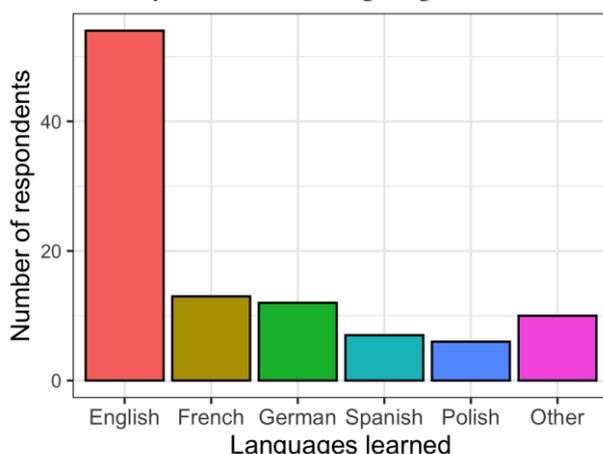
Survey responses yielded qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data were analyzed using the R program for statistical computing (R Core Team, 2021) and the following packages: lme4 (Bates, Mäeçler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015), lmerTest (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2017), ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016), and tidyverse (Wickham, 2019).

Summarizing Experience of Participating Language Learners

Most of the student respondents said that their main motivation for joining the project is, expectedly, to learn a foreign language, although some respondents mentioned that participation in the projects provides a means for self-growth, a way “to live a normal life”, and do something productive with their time. Among the identified goals for learning a foreign language, the most popular ones were 1) communication purposes (72.8%); 2) employment (65%); and 3) daily needs (63.1%) (multiple choice was possible). While we identified 25 foreign languages that are currently being studied by the respondents, most common ones are English (53.4%), followed by French (12.6%), German (11.7%), Spanish (7%), and Polish (6%) (Fig. 1).

Figure 1

Most Commonly Studied Languages in the Respondent Group of Language Learners

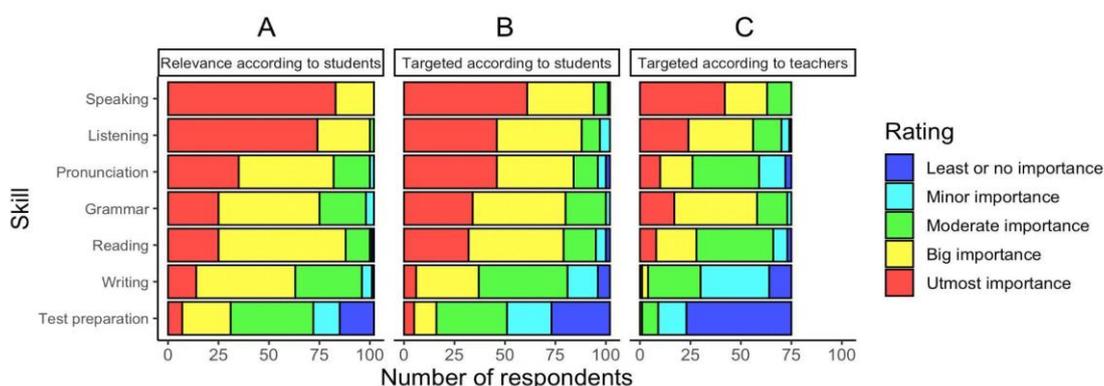


At the time of survey administration, most of the respondents had attended more than 10 lessons. An average lesson lasts between 60 and 90 minutes, and the results show that many students (61.2%) were satisfied with the frequency and length of lessons. Most of the respondents also indicated that they allocated a significant amount of time to self-studying, with the maximum amount of time amounting to 15 hours per week. However, 7.8% of the respondents admitted that they did not dedicate any extra time to language learning besides classwork and homework that they do as part of their participation in the project(s).

In response to the question about most relevant language skills in their current situation, most of the students rated speaking and listening skills as skills of greatest importance. Pronunciation, grammar, and reading skills were also rated as important, but writing and test preparation skills received lower importance ratings (Fig. 2A). This trend is reflected in the ratings of the skills in terms of how much their development is targeted by the instructor during the lesson. Thus, students perceive that the teacher attributes most importance to developing speaking, listening, and pronunciation skills. Slightly less importance is attributed to grammar and reading. Writing and test preparation are among the least targeted skills (Fig. 2B).

Figure 2

Rating of Importance of Different Language Skills: A) Relevance of Skills, As Perceived by Learners, B) Focus on Developing a Particular Skill During the Lesson, As Perceived by Learners, C) Targeted Skills, As Rated by Instructors



To gauge students' attitudes towards the instructors, we asked them what they value the most in their instructors. The majority of student respondents pointed out instructors' professionalism, flexibility, responsiveness, and friendliness, as well as the instructors' choice of methodology. Some students emphasized that they value education, sharing new interesting facts, empathy and understanding the needs of the group, and good knowledge of the language. Additionally, because the majority of the language instructors are from Russia, and Russia is currently invading Ukraine, we asked about student attitudes toward teachers of Russian nationality. Out of all respondents whose instructors are Russian citizens, 60% said that they have a neutral attitude towards their teacher's nationality, 25% think of this positively (i.e., they respect the instructors' willingness to help), and about 12% have negative feelings about this (i.e., they do not like the fact that their instructor is from the enemy state). This finding, however, may reflect a sample bias. The learner application form states explicitly that many teachers have Russian nationality, so somebody who does not feel comfortable with this fact, would not enroll in the project to begin with.

Summarizing Experience of Participating Volunteer Instructors

For most of the language instructors (57 out of 75 teachers) the main motivation to join the volunteer project was to provide timely linguistic help and support for the Ukrainian people in crisis. Eighteen participants joined the project for political reasons, i.e., to gain agency in a situation over which they had no control or as a manifestation of their political and civic position. Among secondary motivations, 18 instructors consider their participation in the project as an emotional outlet (e.g., "to feel better", "to feel human", "not to go insane", "to feel useful or needed", etc.), four people wanted to find like-minded people, and six people volunteered for professional growth (e.g., to obtain teaching experience, get better at the language they are teaching, try something new, or broaden their horizons).

Out of all respondents, 88% of people had taught foreign languages before, however 11% of them had never taught online. At the time of survey administration, 13% of instructors had been volunteering since March, 33% of the participants joined in April, 33% in May, and 20% in June, suggesting continued interest and recruitment of volunteer language instructors. For 89% of the volunteers, it was their first time working with people in crisis.

Most volunteer instructors were teaching either two times per week (48%) or once per week (28%), although there was a small portion of instructors who were teaching more than 3 times per week. Most frequent were groups of three (28%) or two students (22.7%) as well as individual lessons (28%). More rarely, instructors were teaching in groups consisting of four (8%), five (8%), or six or more (5.3%) students. Online lessons usually lasted about 60 (79%) or 90 minutes (16%); two instructors were teaching 40-minute lessons, and the remaining two - for more than 90 minutes. The majority of the instructors (69%) spent approximately one hour preparing for the lessons, about 13% spent less than one hour on preparation, 9%

spent about two hours, and around 9% spent more than 3 hours getting ready for the lessons.

The lessons were primarily administered through Zoom (63%) or Google Meet (23%) platforms, but some teachers also used Skype, Telegram, Jitsi Meet, Discord, or VooV meeting rooms (from 5% to 1%). About 46% of teachers used available textbooks during almost each lesson, 32% of instructors used them very often, and 22% of instructors stated that they rarely or never referred to textbooks. The textbook-eschewing teachers were relatively young: on average they were 24 years old, while those who used textbooks were on average four years older. The younger instructors also seemed to be more eager to use online resources and create their own exercises and activities. More than 70% of teachers did not use or almost never used pre-made lessons available on the internet; only 5% of people used them often. At the same time, up to 33% of instructors almost always created their own materials and activities for the lessons. When asked what language skills they target during the lessons, most of the instructors replied that speaking skills received the utmost attention, followed by listening skills and grammar. Reading skills and pronunciation received moderate attention, while writing skills and test preparation received the least or no importance during lessons (Fig. 2C).

Instructors listed a wide range of activities as “most effective,” including vocabulary exercises using Quizlet.com, speaking practice and role plays in pairs, discussions of everyday topics, peer correction, viewing and discussion of authentic videos and TV series, oral translation from L1 to L2, fill-in-the-gap tasks, games, and quizzes, among many others. Although 81% of instructors assigned homework on a regular basis, only in about 39% of cases was it completed by all students. In 13% of cases half of the group got the assignments done, and in 21% of cases it was completed by even fewer students. The remaining 7% of instructors did not assign any homework, 12% assigned homework from time to time.

Finally, when asked whether their expectations about volunteering in a language project had been met, 77% of instructors replied positively. The remaining instructors did not know how to answer this question, mostly because they had not had any specific expectations to begin with. One person did not expect to enjoy teaching people in crisis as much as they did.

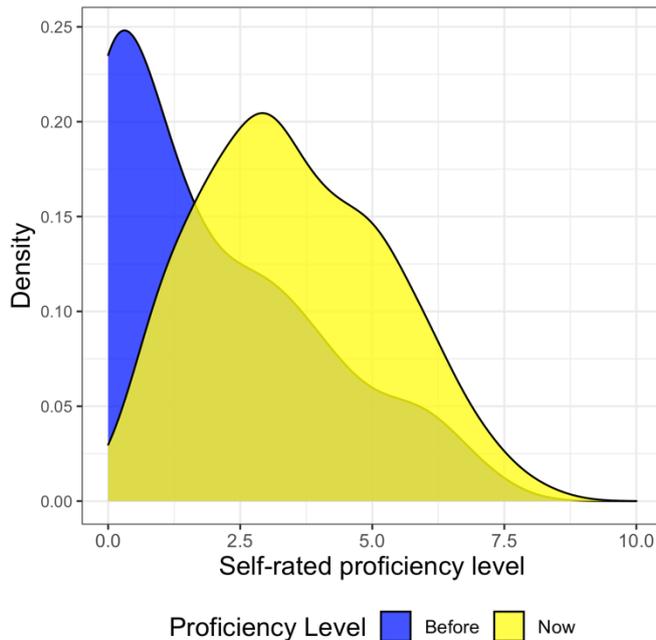
Assessment of Project Effectiveness

When conducting the survey, it was important for us to assess the effectiveness of foreign language instruction provided in the format of free online tutoring. We asked student respondents to rate their language proficiency (on a scale from 0 to 10) at the time of joining the project and at the time of survey completion. The results exceeded our expectations. While most people started with almost no knowledge of a foreign language, their language proficiency had increased significantly at the time of survey administration (Fig. 3). A linear mixed-effects model estimating the change in proficiency between the two time points and holding unique participants as random intercepts revealed a statistically significant outcome, $\beta = 1.61$, $SE = .1$, $t = 15.83$,

$p < .001$. This is an excellent indicator, given that the projects were launched in March and, therefore, had been running for only about four months by the time of survey administration.

Figure 3

The Change in Students' Language Proficiency Between the Time of Joining the Project (Before) and the Time of Survey Completion (Now). Proficiency is Self-rated on a Scale from 0 ("Zero Knowledge") to 10 ("Native Speaker Proficiency").



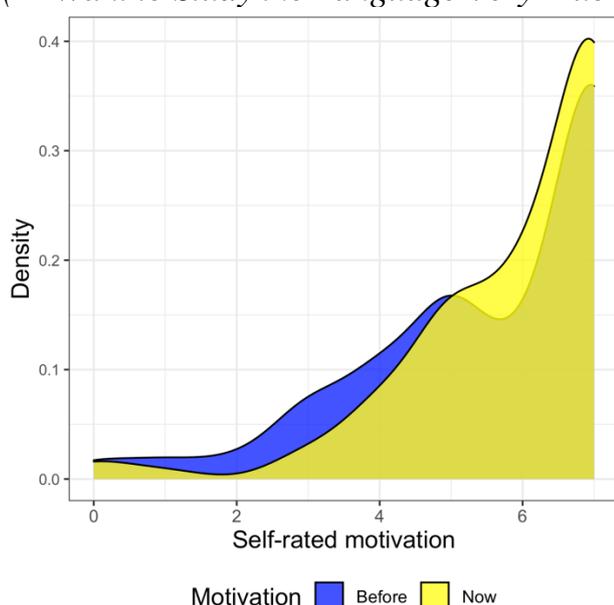
When student respondents were asked to choose the statement (out of five given options) that best describes their learning outcomes, about two-thirds of them (68%) said that their knowledge and skills in the target language had improved significantly and that they noticed the results of learning. However, about 15% of students indicated that they had improved their knowledge of the target language only slightly and that they believed that the methodology could be better. Some students (13%) said that they had not had enough time to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction on their learning. Another 4% indicated that their knowledge and skills in the target language had not yet improved and that they were not sure if it was worth continuing studying. Importantly, nobody chose the option that they were disappointed in the lessons and quit them for this reason.

Next, we compared how learners' motivation to learn a new language has changed during their participation in the project. A linear mixed effects model estimating the change in the self-rated motivation level (on a scale from 0 to 7) between the time when the participants joined the project and the time of survey completion revealed a significant change in the students' motivation in the course of their participation in the project (Figure 4): $\beta = .38$, $SE = .15$, $t = 2.54$, $p = .013$. We also asked the participants how strongly and in which way their motivation to learn a new language had been affected by the changes in their emotional and psychological

state due to the armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia. About 55% of respondents answered that the changes in their mental state had increased, rather than decreased motivation. About 23% of the participants responded that the change in their mental state affected their motivation negatively, making it more difficult to stay focused and concentrate on their studies. About 13% of people said that they cannot answer the question, and the remaining respondents stated that they did not notice any significant changes in their motivation.

Figure 4

The Change in Students' Motivation to Learn a New Foreign Language Between the Time of Joining the Project (Before) and the Time of Survey Completion (Now). Motivation is Self-rated on a Scale from 0 ("I Do Not Want to Study the Language, but I Have to") to 7 ("I Want to Study the Language Very Much and I Am Enjoying the Process")



Regarding the psychological-emotional state of the participating learners, 83% of respondents acknowledged a positive effect of language lessons on their mental well-being. Another 10.5% of respondents observed no effect and about 6% of respondents found it difficult to answer. Only one student answered that taking language lessons had a negative effect on them, adding more stress. When asked to elaborate, many people wrote that participating in the project provides distraction from negative news, connects them with interesting like-minded people, serves as a support group, instills them with hope that they are capable of learning a new skill, and brings great pleasure and purpose.

Finally, because all language lessons offered through the projects are taught online, we wanted to know what the students thought about this format of language learning. When asked whether the online format of lessons presents any additional challenges for learning, 53.4% of the students replied that they prefer the online format to the offline one, and 38.8% of the respondents said that they do not anticipate any differences in the effectiveness between online and offline lessons.

Encountered Challenges

There are several issues that the reviewed volunteer projects face on an ongoing basis. This is evidenced by the fact that out of all surveyed respondents only 28 students and 7 volunteer instructors did not have any immediate issues to report. The remaining respondents identified various problems of different natures, which we will summarize below.

The main problem is the attrition and the transience of students. More people in crisis express initial interest in learning a foreign language when they fill out the application compared to the actual number of people who ultimately attend the lessons. For example, out of all students who responded to the survey, 88.3% have continued taking language lessons through the volunteer projects while 11.7% have already stopped participating, either because they already finished the course, because they lack time, because they started work, or because they have moved to another place. Eleven volunteer instructors reported that they have persistent problems with attendance rate and that they have not been able to resolve this issue. Another two volunteers reported that their students were generally uncooperative: they did not answer emails or otherwise communicate with them.

Next, time-constraints and scheduling seem a common issue for both students and instructors. For volunteering instructors, it is often quite challenging to balance everyday life and often a full-time job with teaching and preparing for lessons. For participating students, the issue is even more aggravated, as many of them find themselves in a new country, jumping through hoops of bureaucracy, looking for jobs, housing, and, generally, adjusting to a new life. For example, 32.1% of surveyed students were concerned with their time availability. Nine students had to participate in lessons while commuting, usually late at night; another two students had to miss many lessons because they were not always available at the time when their group was meeting, etc. In some cases, it has been possible to figure out a solution to this problem, e.g., agreeing on a flexible schedule with the instructor, recording the lessons so that those who miss them can watch them later, transferring students to a different group, etc.

One more issue seems to have a psychological origin. Many volunteering instructors reported feeling uneasy about teaching people who may have experienced traumatic stress, often not knowing how to extract themselves emotionally and how to avoid unnecessary trigger topics and victimization. For example, many instructors avoid discussing many common language classroom topics like “my family”, “my home”, “vacations”, etc. Some of the instructors were also apprehensive that the stigmas and the perception of them as subjects of the enemy state would prevent them from establishing a rapport with their students.

Finally, technological challenges have also been noted by both students and instructors. These include issues with bad internet connection (26.2% of students mentioned this problem), functional limitations of some freely available video conference applications, and having to use VPN.

Future Perspectives

To gain a better understanding of how well the volunteer projects serve linguistic needs of people in crisis, we asked if the students were likely to continue their language studies in the context of the current projects after military actions in their home country end and when most of them will presumably be able to return home. Not a single respondent replied “no”. Encouragingly, 84.5% of people said “yes” and 15.5% were unsure. The decision to continue language studies will depend on many different factors. Thus, many people said that their own achievements and successes in the new language will motivate them to continue with the studies. Other people are willing to continue learning the target language if they can overcome their personal obstacles (finding more time to study, achieving balance between work and life, setting clear goals, etc.).

We also asked the students how they felt about the gratuitous basis of language lessons and whether their commitment to learning would change if they had to pay for the lessons. About 27% of people said that they were not sure how to answer this question. Many students (60%) said that their willingness, motivation, and commitment to learning would not change if the lessons were not free. Only a small fraction of people (4%) said that having to pay for the lessons would make them treat the lessons more seriously. The remaining 9% of respondents noted that it would not be possible for them to pay for the lessons at the moment due to the unstable financial situation.

With regard to the instructors and their attitudes towards continuing volunteering in the future, many of them did not have a clear understanding of how long they would be participating in the project(s), mostly because the timeline and the outcomes of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict remain uncertain. For example, 89% of instructors had not even thought yet about the end date of their tutoring. They were continuing to volunteer as long as their help would be useful and needed. A smaller portion of instructors had stipulated the duration of provided language instruction in each group to last for six (3.9%), five (1.3%), three (3.9%), or two months (1.3%). When asked whether they would continue to teach the language in the context of the volunteer projects in the existing format even after all military actions end, 57.3% were undecided, 40% said “yes” and only 2.6% answered “no”.

Discussion

The present study aimed to assess the effectiveness of two volunteer-based civic initiatives, *COMMON* and *Speak Up For Peace*, that provide online language tutoring to Ukrainian refugees and people who are in a crisis situation as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict. We surveyed both the participating learners and the instructors regarding their experience with the projects and their perceived attitudes to their learning and teaching, respectively. Valuable feedback was obtained revealing the main challenges that learners and teachers face in the context of

participating in the projects. Important insights were also elicited regarding the future of such projects.

Analysis of the survey data revealed an overall positive result. Both the learners and the instructors had overwhelmingly positive attitudes to their participation in the projects. Thus, most instructors reported that their expectations about volunteering in the projects had been met. With regard to the students, they reported satisfaction with the duration, frequency of classes, pedagogical approach, as well as their instructors (despite the fact that many of them are citizens of the enemy state). The development of the students' language skills also seems to have been adequately achieved, as evidenced by the correspondences between the desired and the targeted skills, especially speaking and listening skills (Fig. 2). The effectiveness of language instruction is also indicated by a significant increase in students' motivation to study the language of the host country and improvement in their language proficiency (Fig. 3 and 4). About 68% of students also reported that they had noticed improvement in knowledge and skills in the target language.

Because the projects only offer online language instruction, we wanted to find out how satisfied the students were with this instructional format. We found that most of the student respondents either preferred online language instruction or did not think that the in-person instruction would make any difference. Thus, in situations when enrolling in language classes through resettlement agencies in host countries is not feasible (due to bureaucratic constraints, long wait time, price, scheduling problems, etc.), harnessing digital technologies for online language learning through volunteer-based communities seems like a viable option.

While the ultimate goal of language instruction provided through the two projects is for the students to achieve a desired competency level in the host country's language, additional benefits—mostly psychological and social—of participating in the projects have been reported by both students and teachers. For students, language lessons provide a useful and pleasant distraction from the negative aspects of their current situations. Some students also mentioned that their language classes act as support groups, positively affecting their psychological and emotional states. Learning a new language provides new opportunities for socializing and creates a sense of belonging to a community of learners. Because the learners in the projects had had many common experiences (e.g., being mostly from Ukraine and fleeing their home country), they shared a lot of cultural context and could establish rapport more quickly (as opposed to more heterogeneous refugee classes). For teachers, the psychological benefits came from being able to manifest their civic position through teaching and applying their skills to the common good. Some teachers said that being part of the community of like-minded people made them feel less hopeless and even gained back some belief in humanity.

While many positive things were reported by the participants, there are inherent challenges that both students and teachers had to deal with on a regular basis. The biggest one is student attendance and attrition. It takes a lot of motivation and self-organization to engage in learning when there are no financial or institutionalized obligations, as is the case with free instruction. This problem is exacerbated when

students are people in crisis, whose availability may fluctuate as their life situations change (e.g., starting a job, moving to a new place, etc.). Some students also reported fragility of emotional state due to experienced trauma, which can also influence motivation to attend lessons and commitment to learning. As a result, instability in attendance and drop-outs can impact the learning dynamic (especially in a group) in a negative way.

Additionally, while very few instructors set an end date for completion of the language course, about 90% of instructors had not discussed the length of language instruction with their students. Such practice may create an environment when students do not know for how long they are committing and may lead to losing a sense of the end goal. A better approach would be perhaps setting clear expectations in terms of attendance from the beginning of instruction and agreeing on a concrete end date by which certain language goals should be achieved. Provided that many teachers reported struggling with the balance between volunteering and their main (often full-time) jobs, such an approach could also help prevent teacher attrition and burnout. Thus, instead of teaching the same student(s) for an indefinite amount of time, teachers should perhaps teach in shorter cycles (e.g., 3-4 months), which would allow them to take breaks in between new students or groups.

Finally, while most of the volunteer instructors have prior language teaching experience, only 10% of them previously worked with people in crisis. This creates different kinds of insecurities in teachers who do not have that experience, both psychological and methodological, e.g., not knowing what content may trigger undesirable reactions or how to handle highly emotional topics during class. Therefore, community-based initiatives like the ones we describe in this paper should implement a professional development component and mechanisms for sharing best practices. These may include periodic workshops organized by peer teachers who have experience with teaching refugees, teacher observations by newly recruited instructors, mentoring partnerships within the CoPs, development of low-cost instructional materials on how to work with people in crisis, etc. We acknowledge that addressing the above issues is not an easy task under the best of circumstances. It is even more challenging when work falls on the shoulders of untrained volunteers.

Conclusions

The results of our study have uncovered several important insights about volunteer-based foreign language instruction for people in crisis. However, we acknowledge that they may not necessarily be representative of the general refugee population due to 1) the small sample size and 2) the selection biases at the stage of enrollment in the projects. For example, people who do not support the idea of online language learning or who do not feel comfortable with online technologies may be less likely to enroll in the projects to begin with. Similarly, if they are opposed to the idea of working with instructors of the enemy state (most of the instructors hold or have held Russian citizenship), they are unlikely to join the projects. Given the

political circumstances, many people (both people in crisis and instructors) may feel uncomfortable, threatened, or scared to participate in the projects or fill out any surveys out of fear that their identity might be revealed.

Despite the above limitations, we believe that the results of this study have important implications for organizing foreign language aid for Ukrainian people in crisis, and other refugee groups as well. Describing our pitfalls and the common mistakes as well as successes can help educators to develop more effective methodologies and approaches to teaching foreign languages to refugee groups and provide policy makers with valuable insights for organizing and running volunteer-based initiatives in the future.

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