

Lessons in wartime

Ablenkung oder Überlebenstraining: Welche Bedeutung hat Englischlernen jetzt für Menschen aus der Ukraine? Von LORRAINE MALLINDER

MEDIUM

When the war started, Daria Psaruk lost all focus.

For two years, she'd been running a school of English in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, just 40 kilometres from the Russian border. During the pandemic, the Stellar Academy had grown fast, expanding to seven teachers so that it could meet the demand for remote teaching. But this new crisis was of a completely different magnitude, one that Psaruk found hard to process.

Stunned by the news of Russia's brutal attack, with armoured troops rolling in from Russia and Belarus, and missile strikes on several cities leaving countless innocents dead and wounded, nothing else mattered. "You watch the news, you see these awful pictures," says Psaruk. "I couldn't face my students and say: 'Hey guys, what's up?'"

Yet, a few months into the war, the 33-year-old was up and running again, having fled west to the relative safety of Kyiv, and recruited an eighth teacher to her team. She says the war has not diminished demand for English lessons. On the contrary, for Ukrainians at home and abroad, learning what Psaruk terms "global English" has become an essential tool for survival.

Most of Psaruk's students are IT workers. Some, mainly men aged 18 to 60, have remained in the country, while others have found safety in countries like Poland, Bulgaria and Spain. "People say they don't know where they're

going to be in three months' time. They need global English," she says. As they struggle to find their feet on shifting sands, it makes sense for students to carry on learning in Ukrainian.

It's all part of the "new normal", says Psaruk. Scenarios that once seemed impossible – air raid sirens going off in the middle of lessons, for one – are now part of everyday life. During the pandemic, a time of disruption that now pales in comparison to the war, Psaruk found herself continually trying to keep the students on topic, a skill that has been taken to new levels since the invasion.

"One of my students is doing military service. Some have relatives in cities under occupation. Some have lost their homes," she says. "I can see they want to talk about it, but we can't. It wouldn't be a lesson." So, she tries to stick to small talk. She knows that her students' employers in the IT sector provide therapy. And she needs to look after herself to avoid burnout. Heavily pregnant when we talk, Psaruk has a lot on her plate.

A long way from home

Millions have left the country since the war broke out. Among them is Maryna Yurieva, 37, now living with her two sons in a village in Tipperary, Ireland. Back in Kharkiv, she taught at the renowned Hotspot School of English, a major player in the language market. Around 60 per cent of her students are males, who – like her husband – are

air raid
• Luftangriff

diminish
• reduzieren

disruption
• Unterbrechung

magnitude
['mægnɪtjuːd]
• Größenordnung, Ausmaß

missile strike ['mɪsaɪl]
• Raketenangriff

pale
• verblasen

plate: have a lot on one's ~ UK ifml.
• viel zu tun haben, genug um die Ohren haben

pregnant
• schwanger

recruit [rɪ'kruːt]
• anwerben

remote
• von Ferne; hier: Online-

renowned [rɪ'naʊnd]
• renommiert

running: be up and ~
• wieder in Gang kommen, wieder aktiv werden

shifting sands
• Flugsand; hier: unsicherer Boden

stunned
• fassungslos

term sth.
• etw. bezeichnen

Foto: privat

under official orders to remain in the country.

When she's not teaching her remaining five groups, she watches the news constantly and keeps in close touch with her husband and parents in Ukraine. Living in Kharkiv had become very stressful, with regular attacks in the early hours of the morning, designed to break the population psychologically. She would run downstairs with the kids when the sirens sounded, returning to her online lessons with hands shaking.

War has brought Yurieva closer to her students, whom she sees as friends. As with many other teachers, she finds herself playing a supportive role. "A good teacher is like a kind of therapist as well," she says. But, when Kharkiv came under attack, the roles were reversed, and some of her students invited her to come and stay with them in western Ukraine.

Known for its high standards, Hot-spot delivers a rigorous and varied curriculum of grammar, speaking and listening. In the past, students might have been asked to leave if they fell behind with lessons or didn't complete homework, a strategy intended to keep them on their toes. In some cases, companies would ask students to refund the cost of lessons if they didn't achieve results. "The system works well and gives results," says Yurieva – although she admits that the regime is slightly more relaxed now.

In lessons, Yurieva aims to pass on her own enthusiasm for the English language, picked up by reading novels by George Orwell and Ray Bradbury. She has always been fascinated by the diversity of accents in the English language. But beyond the intellectual interest, she clearly sees teaching as her vocation, a calling that requires strong interpersonal skills. "More than the explaining, it's the connection and the interaction that enables students to learn," she says.

For both Yurieva and Psaruk, the future is uncertain. Each has found her own approach to teaching in these extreme circumstances, using a variety of

methods to motivate students dealing with the traumatic fallout of war. However, even as they face their own struggles, they share one defining characteristic, a remarkable ability to "Keep calm and carry on" – against all odds.

Friends – Ukraine's super-fans

With her transatlantic twang, snappy one-liners and pop-culture smarts, Daria Psaruk is the perfect ambassador for "global English". Given her mastery of the language, it comes as a surprise to learn that she has never spent any time in the US or UK. Her fluency, in large part, is thanks to the hit sitcom *Friends*.

The worldwide smash series from America was especially popular in Ukraine. Psaruk watched it undubbed, rewinding each episode of the ten seasons again and again to catch each word, each term, each idiom. As a student, she'd recite the lines over and over, imitating the pronunciation of the main characters: Monica, Phoebe, Rachel, Chandler, Ross and Joey.



ambassador [æm'bæsədə]
• Botschafter(in)

approach [ə'prəʊtʃ]
• Ansatz

fallout
• negative Auswirkungen

given
• angesichts

interpersonal
• zwischenmenschlich

odds: against all ~ ['ɒdʒ]
• allen Widrigkeiten zum Trotz

official order
• behördliche Anordnung

recite sth. [ri'saɪt]
• etw. auswendig aufsagen

refund [ri'fʌnd]
• zurückerstatten

reverse [ri'vɜːs]
• sich umkehren

rewind [ri:'waɪnd]
• zurückspulen

rigorous ['rɪɡərəs]
• gründlich

season N. Am.
• hier: Staffel

smarts N. Am. ifml.
• Intelligenz, Köpfchen

smash ifml.
• sehr erfolgreich

snappy ifml.
• schmissig

toes: keep sb. on their ~ ['təʊz] ifml.
• jmdn. auf Trab halten

twang
• näselnde Aussprache

undubbed
• ohne Untertitel

vocation
• Berufung



Yevheniia Ustyuhova: discovering how useful English can be

There were other influences, too: action films like *True Lies* and *Die Hard*; the music of Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears. But nothing came close to *Friends*. In Kharkiv, where Psaruk studied, students would hang out at the *Friends* cafe, its sign written in the same cheerful font as the opening sequence, and the sofa positioned to recreate the atmosphere, right in front of a TV set playing the seasons on loop. "They had delicious hot chocolate," says Psaruk, remembering those carefree times.

Beyond teaching – solidarity beyond borders

Before the war, Oleksandra Lanko had worked as an English teacher in Kharkiv. She had majored in journalism before becoming a teacher and would draw on her news savvy to give her teaching a real-world relevance.

As the Russian invasion loomed, the 26-year-old found herself lending an empathetic ear as her students voiced their anxieties for the future. Her students trusted her, she says.

When war broke out, she went to Poland, combining her journalism and language skills to interpret for *The New York Times*. Amid all the upheaval, she managed to get her mother and grandparents to safety, first in Holland, then in Poland.

Now in Germany, she is still in touch with some of her former students. Spotlight spoke to two of her top performers.

Diana Motalyhina, 22, fled Kharkiv a month after war broke out. The block of apartments where she had lived was hit, but, miraculously, nobody was killed in the attack and her apartment was left undamaged.

Now renting in Kyiv, she is taking English lessons with a local teacher. It's a distraction of sorts, a lifeline. "I need to keep my mind off of it all," she says. "The shelling could start again. Maybe it could be the last hour of my life."

Motalyhina remembers Lanko's lessons with fondness. "We watched a lot of films and read the news. There was lots of talking," she says.

Once, she had dreamed of teaching English to children in Ukraine. It's a



Diana Motalyhina: fled the destruction in Kharkiv



dream she still nurtures, but for now, the priority for her and her husband is to begin a new life elsewhere.

Yevheniia Ustyuhova, 28, spent the first months of the war moving between Kyiv and Lviv. Finally, she settled in her home town of Myrhorod, around 300 kilometres east of Kyiv.

The computer programmer describes Lanko as "dynamic", with high standards. "She probably won't give you the lesson if you don't do the homework," she laughs. Teaching fees are donated to the Ukrainian war effort.

Ustyuhova used her English skills to interpret for international students stuck at Lviv train station when the war started. "Lots of the students were scared, they couldn't communicate with people, didn't know what to do next," she says. "It was convenient that I had learned English, to be able to help in this way."

amid
• inmitten

carefree ['keəfriː]
• sorglos

distraction
• Ablenkung

donate [dəʊ'neɪt]
• spenden

ear: lend an ~
• zuhören

empathetic
• einfühlsam

fee
• Gebühr

fondness: remember sth. with ~
• sich sehr gerne an etw. erinnern

font
• Schriftart

hang out ifml.
• abhängen

interpret [ɪn'tɜːprɪt]
• dolmetschen

loom
• drohend naherrücken

loop: on ~
• in Dauerschleife

major in sth. ['meɪdʒə] N. Am.
• etw. im Hauptfach studieren

miraculously [mə'rækjʊləsli]
• wie durch ein Wunder

nurture ['nɜːtʃə]
• etw. hegen, fördern

of sorts
• irgendwie

savvy ['sævi] ifml.
• Verstand, Durchblick

shelling
• Beschuss

upheaval [ʌp'hiːvəl]
• Unruhe, Aufruhr

war effort
• Kriegsanstrengungen