

DOI: 10.20535/2410-8286.143742

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION IN UKRAINE: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES

Oksana Zabolotna

Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, Uman, Ukraine
oxana.zabolotna@gmail.com

Natalia Gut

Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, Uman, Ukraine
natalia_gut@ukr.net

Involvement of international students plays an important role in the process of every university development. This article presents the research conducted at Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, one of the leading pedagogical universities in the central part of Ukraine. It considers language education of international students and their attitudes to learning the Ukrainian language as the language of instruction. The main tasks of this work were to study the organisation of educational process within the academic subject "Ukrainian language (as a second language)"; to examine international students' attitudes towards learning the Ukrainian language; to monitor students' satisfaction with the result of learning the Ukrainian language; to find out the difficulties that can affect the quality of language acquisition. 75 international students studying at non-linguistic faculties of the University who come from Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, The Republic of Serbia, Uzbekistan were involved in the study. The purpose of the research was accomplished with the help of the questionnaire consisting of 9 closed-ended questions with an introductory section for indicating a participant's age, speciality and year of study etc. The preliminary results of the research show that students of different years of study initially have different ideas about the Ukrainian language as an academic discipline, but those with more developed language skills are more confident and motivated. Consequently, students are optimistic about their future development within the study and learning the Ukrainian language in higher education. The article also addresses the issues of mastering basic language skills in a relatively short period of time, the gap between the level of language proficiency and the volume of information students must learn in other disciplines, the language barrier. Finally, based on the results obtained and the reflection on their experience the authors suggested some recommendations to overcome possible difficulties in language acquisition.

Keywords: international students; attitudes; language of instruction; the Ukrainian language.

Introduction

Currently, Ukrainian educational system is undergoing considerable change in different areas. One of them is international students' training which is a significant factor in the formation of every nation as an equal partner in the world educational space. Ukrainian universities have been taking an effort to create an international learning environment since 1991. Involvement of international students is one of the main components in the process of every university development. It enhances its credibility both in the home country and abroad. At the beginning of 2016, 63 906 international students from 143 countries were registered by the Ukrainian State Centre for International Education (Ukrainian State Centre, 2016). The trend of rapid increase in the number of international students who come to Ukraine to study (compare: 18 000 in 2000, 63 000 in 2015) requires new approaches to education and regulation of migration processes to ensure competitiveness in the international education market.

The aspect that is in the focus of primary attention is international students' learning the language of instruction as a major factor for their effective training and adaptation. The results of recent surveys engaging international students in other foreign countries emphasise that language learning in a naturalistic setting is driven by meaningful interaction and a sense of belonging (Deygers, 2018; Mitchell, Del Fabbro, & Shaw, 2017) and that cultural and linguistic construction are influenced by local linguistic contexts (Lin, 2018). The findings of the research made by Edele, Kempert, & Schotte (2018) indicate that the advantages of immigrant bilinguals in third language learning mainly depend on their competence in the language of instruction.

Ukrainian universities are supposed to meet international students' communication needs in different areas: research, social, political and cultural spheres, everyday life etc. Thus, the language education of international students aims at studying the communicative needs, forming skills for communicative situations relevant to their needs, developing respect for Ukrainian people, language and culture as well as critical thinking skills, awareness of social values, skills of independent learning, etc. (Ushakova, 2011). Considering these aims, the universities are developing educational standards and curriculum with training aids for international students.

According to Ukrainian Centre for International Education top ten countries of international students' origin in Ukraine are Azerbaijan, India, Turkmenistan, Morocco, Georgia, Nigeria, Jordan, Uzbekistan,

China, Egypt (Ukrainian State Centre, 2016). As it can be seen, students predominantly come from countries where spoken languages are not related to the Ukrainian either in language group or even in language family (e.g. the Azerbaijan language is included into Turkic group of Altai family while the Ukrainian language is in Slavic group of Indo-European family). On the other hand, Article 20 of Law of Ukraine “On fundamentals of state language policies” defines Ukrainian as an official language used on the whole territory of the country, especially in educational establishments, and free choice of languages for instruction can be realised “provided that learning of the official language is compulsory and is done in the scope that is sufficient for integration into Ukrainian society” (Law of Ukraine, 2012). As a result, the Ukrainian language for international students is now academic subject at all Ukrainian universities. Considering the mentioned facts, it must be said that educational process is one of the most complicated activities in international students’ adaptation as they must master Ukrainian phonetics, grammar, syntax and study other professional subjects where they should speak Ukrainian. So, language education for international students is a combination of three components: verbal (communicative competence), general (research / professional competence), adaptation (intercultural competence) (Ushakova, 2011).

Although the current works of foreign authors are of great importance for understanding the main concepts concerning adaptation and education of international students in other countries (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014; Roga, Lapiņa, & Mürsepp, 2015; Tyabaev, Sedelnikova, & Voytovich, 2015), this paper is predominantly based on the works by Ukrainian researchers as they provide the issues and results of studies connected with learning the Ukrainian language in the country. The review of some recent works showed that the acquisition and mastering the language in the host country are well-discussed in the Ukrainian scientific literature. The articles of the researchers examine adaptation of international students to the educational environment in Ukraine (Dovgodko, 2013), analyse State Standard of Ukrainian as a Foreign Language (Yastremska, Romashova, 2013), define factors and conditions influencing learning the Ukrainian language by international students (Korotyn, 2014). The main theoretical premise included in all the analysed studies is that the Ukrainian language as the language of the country of studying plays an important role in the process of international students’ integration and adaptation. However, little was investigated in terms of the main attitudes of such students towards studying the Ukrainian language.

So, the objectives of the research were as follows:

1. To study the organisation of educational process within the academic subject “Ukrainian language (as a second language)” for international students at the university;
2. To examine international students’ attitudes towards learning the Ukrainian language;
3. To monitor students’ satisfaction with the result of learning the Ukrainian language;
4. To find out the difficulties that can affect the quality of language acquisition.

Method

General Background of Research

The presented research was conducted during 2015-2016 academic year at Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, one of the main pedagogical universities in the central part of Ukraine, as of the total number of students enrolled to full-time studies during the defined period 5 % (228 persons) were citizens of other countries (See Table 1).

Table 1

International students according to the country of origin and qualification level

Qualification Level	Country				
	Turkmenistan	Azerbaijan	The Republic of Serbia	Uzbekistan	People's Republic of China
Bachelor	218	31	8	3	2
Master	10		3		1
Total	228	31	11	3	3

The authors used quantitative analysis to meet the objectives of the survey. A questionnaire and informal interviews were used to collect the data of the research. The questionnaire consists of 9 closed-ended questions with an introductory section for indicating a participant’s age, speciality and year of study. No other personal data was included to ensure the anonymity of the survey. As fixed answer set was

provided, it allows the author to calculate the percentage for every option. Additional space was left for participants' own answers if they considered the proposed responses like those that do not express their thoughts. The questions were designed to get the information about students' level of linguistic awareness, their attitudes toward, expectations for, assumptions about and motivation for learning the Ukrainian language.

Participants

The participants of the study comprised international students whose native language belongs to the Turkic group of languages as students from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan form the biggest group of international students in this university (See Table 1). The research examines 73 international students (32% of all international students in the University) aged 18-24 (42 males and 31 females) who were studying at non-linguistic faculties of the University (See Table 2). All the students are obtaining the qualification of a secondary school teacher; hence the table indicates only their field of study.

First-year students were also partially included in the survey. The research was conducted during the second term of the academic year, and consequently, these participants had already been living in the country for about seven months that allowed them to overcome "culture shock" and be acquainted with Ukrainian style of life, culture, and language.

Table 2

Sample distribution according to speciality and year of study

Speciality	Year of study	Participants
Biology and Geography	I	15
Biology and Geography	II	14
Biology and Geography	III	13
Computer sciences	I	9
Physics and Mathematics	IV	9
Fine Arts	II	3
Fine Arts	IV	3
Primary Education	III	7
Total		73

Instrument and Procedures

We conducted the research in several steps in the period between February 2016 and May 2016. The information concerning the first task was gathered with the help of class visits, documents analysis, and interviews with Ukrainian language lecturers of the university. The data about attitudes of international students were collected through observations of their activity at the Ukrainian language lessons, informal interviews, and by proving questionnaire for students. The observation of the participants' work directly in the class with Ukrainian language teachers was also included in the process of the research as the authors see the level of activity at the lesson as an important factor indicating students' motivation to learning the Ukrainian language.

The aim and structure of the questionnaire were explained to students before they started to work with its questions. The questionnaire was presented for the respondents in paper form and written in the Ukrainian language. If there was a need, the students received the explanation of some questions in Russian which could create a comfortable atmosphere for them to express their points of view. As to the interview, all the participants were spoken to in Ukrainian but could answer in Russian.

Results

The results of the study are presented in accordance with the objectives indicated at the beginning of the paper.

The survey showed that Ukrainian language as an academic subject was included in Bachelor educational process of international students at Pavlo Tycyna Uman State Pedagogical University according to the order of Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine №260 from 04 April 2006 (Ministry of Education, 2006) and has the distribution of academic hours presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Academic hours of the discipline “Ukrainian language (as the language of instruction)”

Year	Term	Academic hours		Form of evaluation
		lectures	seminars	
1	I	2	106	credit
	II	2	106	
2	II	2	88	credit
	IV	2	68	
3	V	2	70	credit
	VI	2	54	
4	VII	2	54	examination

Beginning with 2015-2016 academic year, the number of hours for the 1st year was increased (in comparison with 2014-2015 academic year) by reducing the time for individual learning. Consequently, the academic subject “Ukrainian language (as foreign)” taught for international students has such stages:

1. Elementary (intensive foreign language learning during year 1);
2. Intermediate (years 2-3);
3. Advanced (year 4).

The requirements of Ukrainian language learning in the existing programmes at University are correlated with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: levels A1 and A2 – basic user, levels B1 and B2 – independent user, levels C1 and C2 – proficient user (Ushakova, 2011). In addition, the content of educational programmes for this subject includes elements of vocabulary connected with students’ field of study, which in its turn contributes to mastering the terminology of their profession.

The students’ attitudes towards learning the Ukrainian language, their satisfaction with its results and the difficulties that can affect the quality of language acquisition were studied with the help of the questionnaire.

The students’ motivation to learning the Ukrainian language can be seen from their responses to Questions 1, 2 and 5. Reflecting on **the need for inclusion of the Ukrainian language in the curriculum** for international students at the university, 72.8% of respondents agreed that it is a necessary subject for studying while 13.6% of students had never thought about it. The same amount (13.6%) stated it as not so useful for non-linguistic specialities.

Analysis of responses concerning **personal reasons for learning the language** at the university found that 51% of participants considered the Ukrainian language in the context of receiving future profession and about 22% as a means to continue their study at the university. The rest of the students (26%) saw the connection between the study of the language and the need to communicate in the social environment of a new country. However, 8.2% of students had never tried **to use language** for communication outside the university, more than half of respondents spoke it from time to time (50.7%), and 41.1% of students indicated that they always tried to use this language outside the university.

The level of international students’ satisfaction with the result of learning the Ukrainian language and their attitudes to this language were presented through their answers to previously analysed Questions 2 and 5 as well as to 3, 4, 7 and 8. Most respondents **study content material in Ukrainian** with pleasure (46.6%) or because of academic necessity (41.1%) and only 12.3% dislike to do it. The opposite results were obtained from the responses to Question 3 asking about the amount of time students spend working independently with language material. Only 28% of participants spent more than 2 hours for doing their home tasks, more than half of students (53.4%) spent less than 2 hours to accomplish their work, and 18.6% did not think the homework was important.

The majority of the respondents expressed their **willingness to continue** mastering the Ukrainian language independently (68.5%), 16.5% had not thought about the importance of its further learning before, and other 15% of students did not see any reason to improve their knowledge of this language. The participants connected the **further development of their language skills** with their prospects in education (45.8%) and social interaction (42.1%), and 12.1% of students expressed doubts that they would manage to use this language after finishing their studies.

Questions 6 and 9 were included in the questionnaire to display the difficulties that can affect the quality of language acquisition. Among **the factors that prevent the students from improving** their level of Ukrainian language competence, they indicated such as “difficulties in learning any foreign language”

(56.1%) and “lack of time” (10.5%), while 54.4% of respondents stated they had no difficulties in mastering the Ukrainian language.

The authors realise that **the challenges in Ukrainian language acquisition** can also be explained by the grammatical and lexical features of the language. However, 54.8% of students believed the Ukrainian language to be not too difficult to learn, 30%, on the contrary, supposed it to be challenging, whereas other 15.2% indicated it as rather easy for learning.

Discussion

Four main topics are discussed from the quantitative survey findings: organisation of educational process, attitudes towards learning the Ukrainian language, students’ satisfaction with the result of learning the Ukrainian language, and the difficulties that can affect the quality of language acquisition. Other authors were more interested in class participation and identity construction in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms (Lin, 2018), acculturation, language and learning experiences of international students (Mitchell, Del Fabbro, & Shaw, 2017), intercultural competence (Yarosh, Lukic, & Santibáñez-Gruber, 2018), etc.

The authors of this article have studied the organisation of educational process within the academic subject “Ukrainian language (as a language of instruction)” for international students at the university and found out that there was a relatively short period of time for mastering basic skills of the language of instruction with no special period for adaptation and preliminary language immersion. That leads to the students’ disability to master other courses efficiently as they were delivered in Ukrainian. Thus from the start, the international students under research appeared in the unfavourable situation compared to their Ukrainian counterparts which goes in line with some previous research on this kind of academic inequality (Glass, Westmont, 2014).

To overcome the challenge the international students might devote the first year of their studies in Ukraine to active immersion in the language of instruction. The gap year between the secondary school and University might be the optimal period for that. This issue was somewhat differently addressed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in their draft order to introduce the external testing system for international students that will check their Ukrainian language proficiency. On the other hand, most of Ukrainian Universities check the international students’ ability to communicate in Russian though they will join the Ukrainian-speaking native students.

Another issue considered was examining international students’ attitudes towards learning the Ukrainian language. The questionnaire results showed that the majority of international students realised the importance of leaning Ukrainian as the language of instruction. Approximately half of the surveyed considered the Ukrainian language the key for their future career, and about 22 % saw it as the thing contributing to their education. At the same time, only a quarter of the surveyed spoke Ukrainian out of the University.

That leads to the conclusion that international students see Ukrainian as a means to receive their future profession. However, they do not consider Ukrainian as a foreign language necessary for their further international communication. The solution here might be delivering the courses in Russian. In this case, they should be separated from Ukrainian students and study in the groups specially designed for foreign students. In its turn, it might lead to the students’ exclusion from the University environment, and in the long run – less efficient adaptation to Ukrainian society. To some extent, it contradicts the findings of Yarosh, Lukic, & Santibáñez-Gruber who stated that international students demonstrate higher academic performance in nationally homogenous groups (2018).

The survey questionnaire investigated students’ satisfaction with the result of learning the Ukrainian language. Most respondents admitted that they learned Ukrainian with pleasure though motivated by their academic needs. There was some percentage of students who did not devote their time to learning Ukrainian, and there were some students (12.1 %) who questioned the necessity of speaking Ukrainian in the future. This drew the authors to the conclusion that, in the long run, learning Ukrainian was considered only by those respondents who viewed Ukraine as an option for their future career. To raise the international students’ interest in learning the Ukrainian Language, the programmes encouraging its use in everyday life should be realised.

And finally, the questionnaire helped to find out the difficulties that can affect the quality of language acquisition. Among them were traditional difficulties in learning any foreign language admitted by the majority of the respondents (56.1 %), 10.5 % pointed out the lack of time and lexical and grammatical differences from their native language. To meet the challenges it would be desirable that there should be a shift in the programme with more time devoted to classroom activities than to individual work.

Conclusion

The preliminary results of the research show that students of different years of study initially have different ideas about the Ukrainian language as an academic discipline, but those with more developed language skills are more confident and motivated. Consequently, students are optimistic about their future development within the study and learning the Ukrainian language in higher education.

The conclusion can also be drawn that students' level of motivation for learning the Ukrainian language correlates with their opinion about themselves as students. Following an in-depth analysis of preliminary research results and despite the obvious advantages of linguistic environment, characterised by communicating with native speakers, there are some issues to be addressed:

- mastering basic language skills in a relatively short period of time (elementary level must be acquired at the preparatory courses but not during the first year of studying);
- existence of the gap between the level of language proficiency and the volume of information students must learn in other disciplines at the beginning of their training;
- the language barrier, which does not disappear before the professional courses are learnt, as a short period of learning a foreign language can lead only to passive understanding (a person requires 1-2 years of intensive learning to use a foreign language in professional communication).

Among the ways to overcome the difficulties in language acquisition the authors indicate the following:

- 1) differentiation of international students into categories depending on knowledge of other languages (for example, Russian which is related to Ukrainian in many linguistic phenomena);
- 2) development of special programmes, textbooks and educational means taking into account the language needs and capabilities of such students, the characteristics of their native languages;
- 4) adding the amount of time for learning the Ukrainian language in classroom with teachers and native speakers.

If applied into practice, the abovementioned recommendations can contribute to the provision of training services of a higher standard to international students. Further research may deal with methodology issues in teaching international students, with the language of instruction as a means of equality in access to higher education, and designing special Ukrainian language curriculum for international students etc.

References:

- Beine, M., Noël, R., & Ragot, L. (2014). Determinants of the international mobility of students. *Economics of Education Review*, 41, 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2014.03.003>
- Deygers, B. (2018). How institutional and interpersonal variables impact international L2 students' language gains at university. *System*, 76, 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.05.012>
- Dovgodko, T. (2013). Adaptatsiya inozemnykh studentiv do osvithnogo seredovyscha Ukrayiny. [Adaptation of international students to educational environment in Ukraine]. *Pedagogika i psykholohiya profesiynoyi osvity*, 2, 114–120. Retrieved 15 September 2018 from <http://ena.lp.edu.ua:8080/handle/ntb/24215>
- Edele, A., Kempert, S., & Schotte, K. (2018). Does competent bilingualism entail advantages for the third language learning of immigrant students? *Learning and Instruction*, 58, 232–244. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2018.07.002>
- Glass, Ch. R., & Westmont, Ch. M. (2014). Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic success and cross-cultural interactions of domestic and international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 38, 106–119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.04.004>
- Korotyn, O. (2014). Lihvodydaktychne seredovyshe yak faktor efektyvnogo zasvoyennia ukrayinskoyi movy inozemnymy studentamy [Linguistic environment as a factor of the Ukrainian language effective acquisition by international students]. *Problemy pidhotovky suchasnoho vchytelya*, 9 (2), 306–313. Retrieved 15 September 2018 from http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/ppsv_2014_9%282%29_44
- Law of Ukraine “Pro zasady derzhavnoyi movnoyi polityky” [On fundamentals of state language policies] (2012). Retrieved 26 April 2017 from <http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/en/5029-17>
- Lin, S. (2018). To speak or not to speak in the new Taiwanese university: class participation and identity construction in linguistically and culturally diverse graduate classrooms. *Language and intercultural communication*, 18 (2), 184–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2017.1337778>
- Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Order №260 from 04 April 2006 “Pro vyvchennia ukrayinskoyi (rosiyskoyi) movy inozemnymy studentamy i aspirantamy” [On the Ukrainian (Russian) language learnt by international students and post-graduate students] (2006). Retrieved 20 April 2017 from <http://document.ua/pro-vivchennja-ukrayinskoyi-rosiiskoyi-movi-inozemnimi-stude-doc119238.html>
- Mitchell, C., Del Fabbro, L., & Shaw, J. (2017). The acculturation, language and learning experiences of international nursing students: Implications for nursing education. *Nurse Education Today*, 56, 16–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.05.019>
- Roga, R., Lapiņa, I., & Mürsepp, P. (2015). Internationalization of Higher Education: Analysis of Factors Influencing Foreign Students' Choice of Higher Education Institution. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 213, 925–930. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.506>
- Tyabaev, A. E., Sedelnikova, S. F., & Voytovich, A. V. (2015). Student-Centered Learning: The Experience of Teaching International Students in Russian Universities. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 215, 84–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.578>

- Ukrainian State Centre for International Education (2016). Retrieved 28 April 2017 from <http://intered.com.ua/actual-statistical-and-analytical-data>
- Ushakova, N., Dubichynskyi, V., & Trostianytska, O. (2011). Kontsepsiya movnoyi pidhotovky inozemtsiv u VNZ Ukrainy [Conception of foreigners' language education in higher educational establishments of Ukraine]. *Vykladannia mov u vyshchyykh navchalnykh zakladakh osvity na suchasnomu etapi*, 19, 136–146. Retrieved 10 May 2018 from <http://www-center.univer.kharkov.ua/vestnik/full/261.pdf>
- Yarosh, M., Lukic, D., & Santibáñez-Gruber, R. (2018). Intercultural competence for students in international joint master programmes. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 66, 52–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2018.06.003>
- Yastremska, O., & Romashova, Ya. (2013). Metodychnyy pidkhdid do orhanizatsiyi protsesu navchannya inozemnykh studentiv [The methodic approach to the organization of the educational process for international students' training]. *Problemy ekonomiky*, 4, 55–61. Retrieved 15 September 2018 from http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/Pekon_2013_4_8

Received: September 04, 2018

Accepted: November 04, 2018