



## **The Current State of English in Ukraine: Some Outsider Perspectives**

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In November each year, EF (Education First) releases its English Proficiency Index. This is a survey based on tests taken online by adult learners of English, and in 2015 it covered 26 countries in Europe, and 72 worldwide. Ukraine was ranked 24<sup>th</sup> in Europe (only Turkey and Azerbaijan were lower), and 41<sup>st</sup> in the world (behind countries such as Indonesia, China and Costa Rica). This is disappointing given the status of English as an increasingly indispensable global language, Ukraine's highly developed education system and the country's aspirations to be more open to Europe and the wider world. In this short article I suggest some reasons for these poor standings, based on insights from my work as a consultant to two major projects concerned with the reform of English language teaching and teacher education nationally.

### **Reason 1: Teacher Preparation**

The pre-service education and training offered to language teachers remains largely locked in a traditional approach, in which methodology is taught as a theoretical subject, usually in the mother tongue rather than in the target language, and through lectures. Student teachers are then pitched into the harsh realities of school practice without adequate preparation. The British Council's PRESETT reform project is addressing this issue through an innovative methodology curriculum which is designed to promote an interactive and highly practice-oriented approach, and to be taught exclusively through the medium of English. This curriculum is currently being piloted and will ultimately be made available to all universities involved in the pre-service education of English teachers. When the first graduates from this new curriculum become fully qualified teachers, there will certainly be an impact on the standard of English teaching in primary and secondary schools across Ukraine. Side by side with the methodology curriculum, there is a need for language proficiency levels among future teachers to be raised and for minimum standards at graduation to be set and maintained.

### **Reason 2: Old Ways (Methodology)**

My observations of English classes in Ukrainian universities have revealed that teaching methods remain, to a very significant extent, locked in a kind of time-warp of long-established practices, which in some cases date back to the Soviet era. Reading aloud, on-the-spot translation of texts, strict focus on grammatical rules, long lists of vocabulary to learn, low-yield comprehension questions and instant correction of mistakes all seem to be prioritised. In many classes, the teacher's voice dominated, and learners had only limited opportunities to interact or to contribute anything more than a short answer. The age-old, three-stage paradigm was much in evidence: teacher asks, student answers, teacher evaluates the answer. Basically, this is testing, not teaching. Despite the few hours of class contact time available for English, I saw little or no sign of teachers helping students to develop the autonomous learning strategies that they could so clearly benefit from. There were relatively few (but very welcome) instances of systematic work on the four language skills for the purpose of communication, of the use of group and pair work, of fluency oriented activities or the development of critical and higher order thinking skills which are needed for effective study at university level.

### **Reason 3: Isolation**

Responses from university English teachers show that they feel pretty isolated. Low salaries and lack of access to European funding mean that very few of them have been able to visit the UK or other English-speaking countries, and the British Council has only recently resumed targeted

support for English in Higher Education. Added to this, the academic traditions that exist in Ukraine often restrict co-operation between teachers both within and between universities. The sense of isolation is probably even more pronounced among teachers at school level, especially in rural areas. This state of affairs is largely beyond the control of individual teachers, and it results in a tendency for them to be inward-looking rather than outward-looking, which is a shame given the opportunities that English classes offer to open a window on a wider world. Further consequences of this isolation are a lack of awareness about new trends in methodology, and in some cases, worryingly, poor proficiency levels among teachers of English. Opportunities for networking do exist, notably through national and regional events organised by IATEFL Ukraine, but these are mainly attended by those teachers who already take an interest in their own development rather than by the silent majority.

#### **Reason 4: Resources**

Locally produced language textbooks vary in quality and British or American textbooks are prohibitively expensive. Thus, many teachers are thrown back on their own inventiveness when it comes to providing learning materials for their students. Fortunately, the Internet offers rich resources for language learning, whether for ESP or General English classes, but many teachers lack the training in the basics of materials writing that they would need in order to exploit these resources to best advantage. Efforts are being made to address this need in the new PRESETT curriculum, in the INSETT Project and in the English for Universities project.

Human resources are also an area of concern. The drive to introduce English at primary level is being slowed down by the shortage of suitably qualified teachers, and there are shortages in some other educational sectors too. There is no quick solution to this, and it will take policy shifts at Ministry level to prioritise the training of adequate numbers of English teachers. There are very few, if any, English native-speaker teachers anywhere in the system.

#### **Reason 5: Attitudes to English**

Ukraine is a largely bilingual country, with many people able to function satisfactorily in both Ukrainian and Russian. In addition, there are several minority groups, mostly close to the borders with Europe, who speak other languages, notably Polish, Romanian, Slovakian and Hungarian. Despite these language-rich traditions, there seems to be only a limited dawning of awareness of the value of plurilingualism to future citizens. University administrators and senior academics pay lip service to the need for their students and teachers to improve their English, but are unwilling or unable to find the extra hours in their programmes that would be needed to make this improvement possible. English classes at universities are often tucked away at unfavourable times of day, and students pick up the message that English is of much lesser importance than classes in their main subject areas.

However, the English for Universities project has revealed a gradual shift in attitudes in most of the 15 universities that were surveyed. Students are becoming increasingly conscious of the added value that good English might bring to their career opportunities, an increasingly confident in stating the need for more classes and resources. Small numbers of lecturers in a very wide range of specialisms are beginning to take up the challenge of teaching their subject through the medium of English, a move which is likely to have a strong impact on students' proficiency levels if pursued consistently over time. In many of these universities, lecturers are offered financial incentives to prepare and teach their classes in English.

#### **Reason 6: Standards**

The Ministry of Education and Science has set exit standards of English proficiency for secondary and higher education using the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. However, these standards will remain purely aspirational rather than realistically attainable until and unless there is widespread and in-depth understanding among teachers and administrators of what they mean in practical terms. Many of the teachers we surveyed are unaware of the provenance of the standards used to assess students' English proficiency in their own institutions, and evidence shows that in most cases there is little or no correlation between the assessment

and testing instruments used at institutional level and the level descriptors found in the CEFR. In addition, there is often a mismatch between teaching and learning objectives and testing procedures. There is an urgent need for training in this area throughout Ukrainian ELT.

### **Reason 7: Attitudes to Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

All the evidence we have gathered in our survey of university level English points to a need for a practical approach to the in-service training of English teachers, and many teachers also recognise this need. However, a great majority, especially those who have come through to graduation in Philological Faculties, see their career development in more traditional academic terms, and they aim at acquiring a PhD. While the status that this confers is no doubt extremely attractive, the topics that are often chosen, under the guidance of supervisors with an academic rather than a pedagogical perspective, usually have little or nothing to do with teaching and learning. There is very little sign of engagement with classroom-based research, either at doctoral level or simply as a means of understanding issues relating to pedagogy. I also found some signs of complacency and satisfaction with the status quo among teachers who have already acquired a PhD.

There is an urgent need for a national policy which focuses on enhancing the quality of language teaching at all levels of the system, and it needs to be backed up by incentives to pursue further training which focuses on issues in teaching and learning.

### **Conclusions**

This is a watershed moment for Ukrainian ELT. Interest in English is at least as high as it has ever been, and it will take joined-up thinking at policy level to ensure that real progress is made at institutional level. The British Council's current project initiatives are definitely providing a launchpad for the changes that are needed, both systemically and in classrooms. The next few years will be crucial.

### **Reference**

The English Proficiency Index can be found at: <http://www.ef.co.uk/epi/> (accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2016)