

Technologically Enhanced Language Learning and Instruction: *Подорожі.UA: Beginners' Ukrainian*

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Abstract: This article reports on the development of a new blended-learning model for beginners' Ukrainian language learning and instruction, an innovative approach in foreign language education. This model is a combination of face-to-face and online learning and is a response to new realities in education, and language learning in particular, in our fast-paced, technologically enhanced everyday life. The authors focus on the design of their new blended-learning textbook *Подорожі.UA (Travels.UA)*, which contains a considerable online component, closely interconnected with in-class, or face-to-face, learning and teaching materials. They discuss their approach to the pedagogical design of this new model, used in the textbook, and also address piloting challenges. The study concludes with a report on the overall success of this project and invites others who teach Ukrainian at postsecondary levels to pilot the project in their institutions.

Keywords: Blended learning, Ukrainian, Ukrainian as a foreign language, teaching and learning Ukrainian, technology and Ukrainian language learning.

The twenty-first century is noted for the significant role that digital technologies play in many aspects of our human life worldwide. On a daily basis, we use computers, smart phones, tablets, and Internet services for various purposes. The young generation cannot even imagine their day-to-day existence without some type of digital technology. Having grown up with a plenitude of digital gadgets, young people, often referred to as “digital natives” or the “net generation,” are reported to use Internet for e-communication (90-100%), watching videos (80-89%), and listening to music (60-69%) (Zickuhr, qtd. in Ducate and Arnold 2). Young people also use digital technologies for networking, shopping, playing games, information searches, and other daily-life tasks and activities. Many university students indicate that computer and Internet technologies form an essential part of their academic success (CDW-G 10 21-Century Classroom Report, qtd. in Ducate and Arnold 3). Therefore, when modern students enroll in our classes, they expect learning to include some “digital” component. Specifically, the results of a recent motivational survey of learners of Ukrainian at a postsecondary level demonstrate that students desire and expect a technologically enhanced learning environment that is relevant to modern students, allowing them to apply knowledge gained in

real-life situations (Nedashkivska and Sivachenko). In this motivational study, participants voiced their concerns about the relevance of existing learning and teaching resources to their daily lives. Some students noted that current textbooks often do not contribute to the development of skills necessary for their effective communication, i.e., communicative competence in the language. In participants' view, the integration of more technologically enhanced tools and activities into the learning process may promote additional language and communication practice, potentially contributing to overall learning success.

As a professional response to challenges we face with learning and teaching materials for Ukrainian, and also responding to students' desires and wishes based on our empirical data (Nedashkivska and Sivachenko), our research group, consisting of Dr. A. Nedashkivska, PhD candidate O. Sivachenko, and O. Perets, set out to develop learning and teaching materials for our modern and technologically savvy students. Specifically, we designed a new blended-learning model for the Ukrainian language classroom (also known as a flipped-classroom or hybrid learning model). By integrating the blended-learning model into Ukrainian language learning, we strive to meet the needs of modern learners and make our Ukrainian language courses more appealing, accessible, and motivating to university students, thus building a strong core for the Ukrainian language course offerings, starting with Ukrainian for beginners.

We understand blended learning as

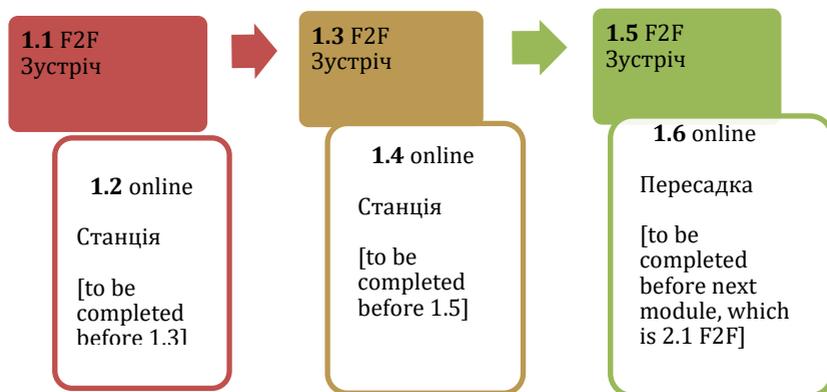
the continued use of face-to-face (F2F) teaching as a basic learning block of the learning experience, enriched and enhanced by the integration of the Internet and other teaching and learning technologies into studies undertaken both in and out of the classroom. (Marsh 3)

Empirical studies show that the blended-learning model, when properly designed and applied, offers "affective and linguistic advantages over both e-learning and FTF modes" (Bueno-Alastuey et al., "Evaluating" 510). A number of advantages of the model have been noted, such as greater flexibility (Macedo-Rouet et al.); reduced costs (Sanders); positive effect on students' performance (Scida and Saury); reinforcement of student autonomy, control of learning, more individualized feedback (Gimeno Sanz); higher time on task (Stepp-Greany); high ratings in enjoyment (Peters et al.); and support of different learning styles and increased motivation (Bueno-Alastuey et al., "Evaluating"). There are disadvantages associated with the model also: lesser amount of guidance and monitoring; decrease of control over learning, especially for students lacking self-discipline (Carrio); overwhelmingly fast pace of learning (Stepp-Greany); intensified workload (Bueno-Alastuey, "WebCT Design"); students' inadequate computer skills

(Bueno-Alastuey, "Using WebCT"); and in some cases, a lack of connection between the online and in-class components (Carrio). Therefore, while developing the materials for the beginners' Ukrainian level, our primary task was to control for the aforementioned disadvantages and ensure that the listed advantages become our model's strengths.

The work on this project began in late January 2014. Since its inception, the model has gone through several iterations. Currently it is being piloted at the University of Alberta. The textbook (which is a set of F2F and online materials) is entitled *Подорожі.UA (Travels.UA)*, and consists of 26 modules, each to be covered over the period of one week. The materials are designed to resemble train travel, which is common in Ukraine. In-class activities are classified as *Зустрічі (Zustrichi, or Meetings)*, and online assignments are labelled *Станції (Stantsii, or Stations)* and *Пересадки (Peresadky, or Transfers)*. The materials are organized such that a week-long course module consists of three fifty-minute in-class F2F learning sessions, or *Зустрічі* (see Figure 1 for an illustration of Module 1). In our case, the F2F classes take place on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays (in Figure 1, illustrated as 1.1, 1.3, and 1.5). In Figure 1, the two online hours or *Станції* are illustrated as 1.2 and 1.4. In our case, students are asked to complete these on Tuesdays and Thursdays, or before the next F2F class. During the in-class *Зустрічі*, the focus is on speaking and interactional activities. In the online *Станції*, the emphasis is on grammar and vocabulary introduction, review, and practice. At the end of each module, students are asked to complete an online station, *Пересадка*, marked 1.6 (see Figure 1). This online *Пересадка* is designed to summarize what students learned during the week, or in a particular module, while also preparing them for the first class of the next module (some type of written homework is included). In our pilot, students are asked to complete the *Пересадка* station over the weekend or before the next module, as indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. One-Week Course Organization: General Structure (An Example for Module 1)



Overall, as shown in Figure 1, with the blended-learning model students complete approximately three hours of independent online study and online home assignments (this amount varies from student to student), in addition to three in-class contact hours per week (please note that before introducing this model, Ukrainian for beginners was taught over five physical contact hours per week).

As previously mentioned, the discussed textbook is thematically organized into 26 modules, and focuses on a number of topics normally found in a beginners' language textbook: personal information, family, place of living, travelling, appearance, shopping, sports, seasons and weather, holidays and celebrations, food and diet, health and medicine, and work and leisure, to name a few. The topics are chosen in order to accommodate learners' functional and practical needs for everyday communication at a beginner level. These topics are chosen to provide a natural context for introducing grammar, functional language, and vocabulary items, aiming to demonstrate language and linguistic elements in meaningful settings and contexts that could be encountered in a target-like environment.¹

¹ In our pedagogical design, we were also guided by learning objectives, that is, what the students will be able to do after completing two semesters (26 weeks) of instruction. As stated in this excerpt from our course syllabus:

Upon completion of this course, the student should be able to:

- (a) Communicate with others: introduce themselves and meet others; talk about where they are from, where they live, what courses they are taking, and what they like to do; discuss daily routines, weekend plans, holidays,

Please note that the pedagogical design of activities and tasks associated with the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar differs between the F2F and online learning spaces. In the online format, vocabulary and grammar are introduced generally through viewing, listening, and reading texts. Following these instructional activities, students are offered opportunities for practice through a series of training exercises. During the F2F time, students also work with vocabulary and grammar, but in an interactional rather than instructional manner. In class, for vocabulary and grammar presentations, we use the five-step technique (Tschirner et al.). According to this technique, new material is consistently presented in five stages: (i) presentation of the new material in context; (ii) receptive recall or reception; (iii) choral repetition; (iv) productive recall or production; and (v) personalization. This technique allows for interaction initiated by the instructor, which gradually transfers to students, during which students individually or collaboratively personalize and thus practice the newly introduced vocabulary or grammar elements.

For our design of the online components of the *Подорожі.UA* textbook, we used a number of technological tools: the Moodle learning management system, Blendspace, Quizlet, Screencast-O-Matic, and Audacity.

With the help of Moodle, we brought together in-class and online materials and arranged them into an organized course structure. This tool allows learners to access our course materials 24/7 through various technological devices (computers, phones, and tablets). With respect to the in-class materials, which resemble a traditional paper-based textbook, students can either print the units (in colour, if they wish) or access the textbook via computers and tablets.²

Blendspace is a free online tool that we used as a main platform for our online component. This tool is for structuring the developed online sessions. It also embeds various resources, including videos, audio files, and exercises

appearance, and food; talk about interests and professions, discuss leisure activities, shopping, eating out, and discuss films, sports, and travels;

- (b) Be able to ask simple questions and engage in everyday conversations;
- (c) Be able to produce simple greetings, ask for and give directions, describe appearance; order food in a restaurant, buy groceries, make arrangements with friends over the phone; write a greeting card; inquire about the interests and preferences of others, discuss trips and vacations, give advice, compare things (groceries, movies, and other items), and write movie reviews;
- (d) Be able to write simple texts in Ukrainian;
- (e) Be able to understand simple audio and video texts (such as TV ads).

² Please note that if students access the in-class printable materials via “smart” devices, such as tablets and the like, they use various ‘stylus’ pens to take notes and complete the traditional ‘paper’ exercises on those devices.

externally created by other digital tools. Blendspace enables us to create a number of learning tasks for the online components of the textbook: multiple-choice tests and student forums. Specifically, we developed the multiple-choice tests as assessment activities at the end of each online session. These assessment tests constitute an important element of the online stations, for both students and instructors. For learners, at the end of each online station, these tests allow for immediate feedback and assist students in identifying gaps in their knowledge and skills. Students can complete these tests as many times as they deem necessary or as their will permits. The possibility of multiple attempts to complete the tests encourages students to spend more time “on task” in order to correct an error and achieve the highest score. Additionally, these multiple-choice tests constitute an important instrument for the instructor. Namely, the tests have a “track” option, which enables instructors to monitor learners’ online performance. Instructors see when learners attempt to do certain tasks, and whether these attempts are successful. The “forum” feature of Blendspace enables asynchronous communication between students, and/or between students and instructors, thus constituting a communicational tool in the online components of the textbook.

Quizlet is another valuable tool that we used to design several learning tasks for the online components of the *Подорожі.UA* textbook. This program offers an array of functions to design activities around: presenting and practising new vocabulary and grammar constructions; practising and improving pronunciation; as well as developing listening, reading, and writing skills in the online component of the textbook.

In the online component, we also use Screencast-O-Matic and Audacity applications to create learning resources. Screencast-O-Matic is a valuable tool for preparing animated videos and video podcasts. We utilized Audacity for creating the audio recordings. Various functions of these two applications allowed us to make video and audio resources that resemble the situations of real life communication. For instance, we were able to mix our own audio recordings of conversations with recordings of various background sounds and noises, thus producing target-like audio recordings (which are very much enjoyed and appreciated by the students).

Piloting of the discussed resources first took place in the 2015-16 academic year and provided us with valuable insights into learners’ perception of the effectiveness of the blended-learning model in the Ukrainian language classroom. The most important finding of our empirical testing was the fact that students acknowledged the consistency between and interconnectedness of the in-class and online components. According to recent studies in the field of blended-learning models in educational settings (discussed briefly above), this consistency is the most important requirement for successful blended-learning delivery. In addition, the

majority of students expressed their desire to continue learning the language via the model, and this was an extremely satisfying result after the pilot.

The first pilot also revealed a few issues that required our immediate attention. As mentioned above, our textbook is structured in such a way that the in-class and online components are closely interconnected. Therefore, it is paramount that students complete all the online assignments before in-class meetings, because they constitute not only review sessions but also presentations of new material that is crucial for the next F2F class (as shown in Figure 1 above). During the initial pilot, at the beginning of the course, instructors noticed that some students did not feel entirely confident with the online components for self-study, and most likely needed some additional assistance with the course organization and its requirements. These students lagged behind in the course, and some eventually dropped out (4 out of 24). At that time, the online component was not equipped with the assessment tools, and instructors were not able to monitor students' online presence and performance. As a response to this challenge, we designed assessment tests, which provided us with a "track" option for each online session.³ Moreover, with the addition of assessment tests, students were able to see their own progress. Because completing an online component is counted towards students' daily participation grade, students also place more emphasis on completing the online stations before coming to class. We also learned that students need to be constantly reminded about the importance of completing the online stations and how these assignments prepare them for their next class. These reminders were both direct and indirect. While direct reminders need no explanation, an example of an indirect reminder is the following: during class, instructors would bring up some of the most interesting topics and the most challenging tasks that students had worked with in the online sessions (for instance, based on students' forum postings). These 'reminders' additionally increased students' participation in, and engagement with, the online component.

In addition to the online assessment tests, it was decided to conduct short (4-6 minute) in-class written quizzes, during the last F2F class of each module. These in-class assessments also prompted students to complete the online stations more regularly and consistently, as students needed to be prepared for the in-class quiz, based on the entire module. Following these additions and revisions, both students and instructors reported that such an approach helped students to become more organized and self-disciplined, and thus more successful language learners.

³ Please note that when using Blendspace, an instructor creates a class and invites students to join this class. Therefore, each student may be monitored as a part of this class.

At the time of this writing, after implementing our initial student-participants' feedback, as well as instructors' observations, the course is being piloted for the second time. At the moment, the results of the second pilot are encouraging, and we are highly enthusiastic about continuing to improve our blended-learning textbook. Our next step is to pilot our textbook in other post-secondary institutions in which Ukrainian is taught as a foreign language. We would be most happy to share our experience with everyone who might be interested in teaching/learning Ukrainian via the blended-learning model.

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