MUSIC ACTION

INTERNATIONAL

Working with Ukrainian Children, Young People and Families

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Background information

While compiling this document in September 2023, there were over 5 million displaced Ukrainians. Most Ukrainians have gone to neighbouring countries:

Russia - 1,275,315 Ukrainian refugees recorded*
Poland - 959,875
Moldova - 116,950
Romania - 85,255
Slovakia - 108,500
United Kingdom - 210,800

*this figure is contentious, as it includes forced deportations and other human rights abuses

The UN says there are more than 1,094,155 Ukrainians in Germany, 368,300 in the Czech Republic and 167,525 in Italy. Source from UNHCR report from 21 September 2023 - data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine.

As of 21 September 2023, the government had issued 240,600 Ukrainian visas out of 312,800 applications received, and 187,300 visa holders had arrived in the UK.

Language

Duolingo has a very good overview of the Ukrainian language in this blog. We strongly recommend reading the whole blog but I have highlighted particularly important points here:

"Ukrainian is the official language of Ukraine. It's a Slavic language, which means it's related to languages such as Russian, Czech, and Polish. Like its neighbours, Ukraine uses a version of the Cyrillic alphabet. It shares a lot of letters with the Russian writing system but it also has a few unique letters to represent sounds specific to Ukrainian.

Ukrainians often know Russian, but Russians don't often know Ukrainian

So while Ukrainian and Russian are distinct linguistically, there is an important asymmetry to be aware of: even though most Russians don't know or understand Ukrainian because it's a different language, most Ukrainians know and understand Russian. This isn't because of linguistics but because of politics and history. The Russian-speaking Soviet Union occupied Ukraine for almost 70 years, and Russian was the only official language of Ukraine. Government, schools, and businesses were all required to only use Russian, so even though most families continued using Ukrainian at home, much of their public lives required Russian. As a result, older Ukrainians grew up around Russian, and even younger generations still see Russian in their daily life.
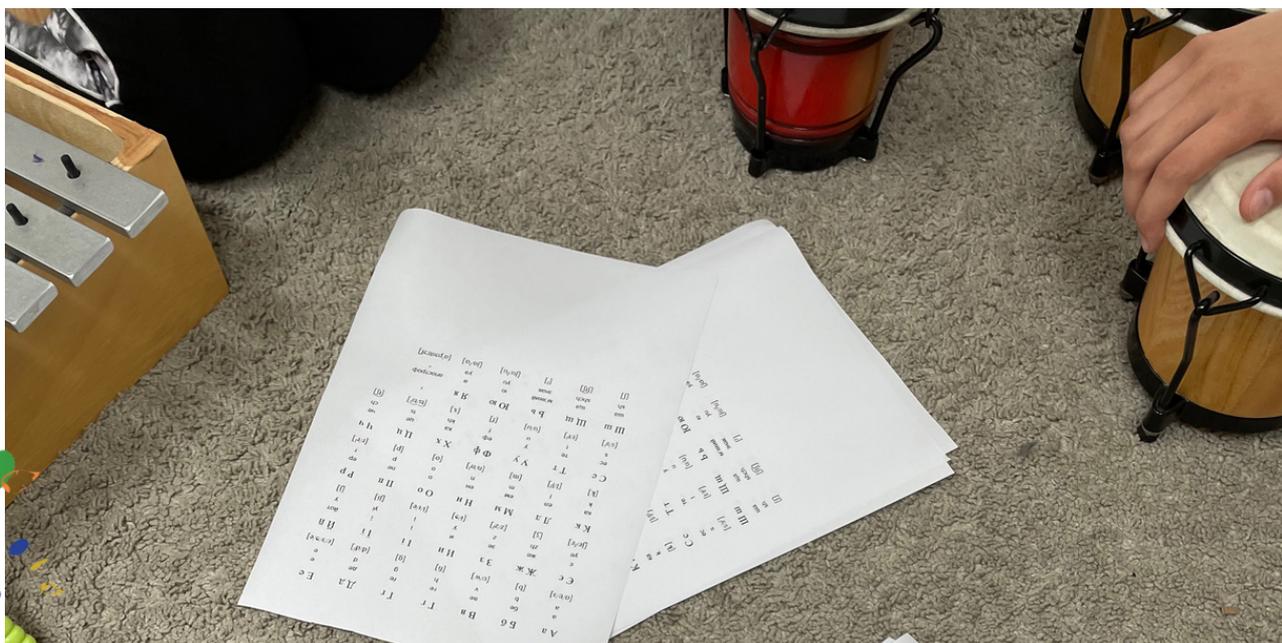
How different are Ukrainian and Russian?

Before diving into the facts of these languages, we should take a moment to consider what people mean when they ask this question and what people are actually saying when they answer it. Because sometimes, this question is a very political one. In the course of world history, groups could often justify their right to have an independent nation by proving that they had their own unique language — and so sometimes, people who try to minimize the differences between two languages might be attempting to diminish another country's nationhood. So be aware that political ideology, rather than linguistic fact, can sometimes shape someone's opinion about how similar or different the languages are.

Ukrainian and Russian are distinct languages that are, effectively, cousins to one another. Over a thousand years ago, there was a language spoken in central Europe that we now call proto-Slavic, an ancestor to all the Slavic languages spoken today. Speakers of proto-Slavic migrated across Europe, spread out, settled down, and taught their children to speak their language. However, because they were so spread out into multiple communities, each community started doing things a little differently — and then, as time went on, things got more and more different, until eventually, members of these communities that once spoke the same tongue became unable to understand one another. (This divergence of dialects over time and distance is how many languages evolve.)"

Source: blog.duolingo.com/ukraine-language

Adela Donoval is a musician based in Slovakia has been working with displaced Ukrainian children and young people. Roshi Nasehi from Music Action International in the UK has been giving her long-distance mentoring support through a series of Zoom calls and other online interactions.

Observations & recommendations

As expected Ukrainian young people are affected in every way by the political unrest and conflict they have been exposed to. Facilitators working with these young people must have an understanding of their situation as outlined in the background information above.

It is important that young people aren't reliving any trauma and facilitators need to have a mature and dogma-free understanding of these young people's testimonies and honour them. One young person said to Adela: "I hate Putin but it is easier for me to speak [and sing and write] in Russian."

On the other hand, other young people relished the chance to share material heavily based on the Ukrainian language. Facilitators need to be able to support this range of situations.

- Music and creative arts are culturally important to Ukrainian people. There are big cultures of poetry, cinema, visual arts and crafts, folk and pop music among others in Ukraine. Consequently, music and creative arts opportunities are a great support for displaced Ukrainians.

- Ukrainian people are especially driven to share music and creative arts from their home that are either rooted in folk traditions or poetry that was learnt in school.

In post Soviet countries, the school systems require students at an early age to learn by heart and recite famous poetry from their home countries. In Ukraine, it is no different and something that many of them collectively share. These activities bring some familiarity and a sense of home. The poems usually carry themes of Ukraine, of home, war, family, nature or spring. On the surface, they seem simple, but they hold a lot of depth and emotion to Ukrainian people.

While these poems hold great significance for the Ukrainian people, they are very willing to share and teach others regardless of whether those others have any previous experience with the Ukrainian language and culture.

Adela discovered this after taking a traditional poem shared by young Ukrainians as a starting point for creating a bigger collective piece (more outline below).

- These activities offer an outlet for release and are a great transition activity back into education for children and young people. However, facilitators must be mindful of how music can evoke emotions and memories, which may need to be managed and supported.

- Facilitators themselves should be offered wellbeing support/ therapeutic supervision and have training in working with refugees.

- Non-polarising and genre-non-specific warm-up/ice-breaking activities were a helpful and effective way of bringing this group together and into the present. Activities like…

    1. **Non-verbal warm-ups and listening games**
    2. **Sound recording/collecting from walking in local surroundings**
    3. **Sound-scape making**
    4. **Improvisation**

These all have a built-in sense of promoting mindfulness and being in the present.

Genre is also important to young people and like any group of youngsters, some of the older participants were into drill, hip hop, and metal and were accessing new music through TikTok. There was concern about dark content in some of these videos. We found that a safe way of exploring this kind of genre-based music-making without any baggage was through setting tasks like re-scoring scenes from popular genre-based but age-appropriate films (for instance re-scoring extracts from horror, Marvel, superhero films with the original score muted and subtitles displayed).

At the end of the project, Adela found that soft-sharing in the form of

- Making and playing recordings and
- Show-and-tell style relaxed presentations were a much more appropriate way to bring a project to a close than any more formal performance.

Case study

In a classroom of around 15 children, there were two new Ukrainian students. During our music lessons, we explored different community music activities focusing on engagement. It was important for these activities to be as inclusive and engaging as possible and unifying for the class.

I chose warm-up activities from John Steven's seminal work Search & Reflect, E.G "beat space beat"

We also played various field recording sounds and guessed what they were (Jana Winderen, Chris Watson, Jonáš Gruska) and played simple listening games like Count To Ten.

In this game, we have our eyes closed. Only one person should say a number at a time and the whole group should try not to say the next number at the same time as anyone else (otherwise we start over).

Towards the end of the school year, students paired up to explore songwriting and composition in smaller groups. Together as a class, we brainstormed some themes we wanted to write about, focusing on things that were meaningful to us. We came up with friendship, family, animals, nature, bravery and home.

The last two themes were suggested by the Ukrainian students.

Students were encouraged to explore different ways of songwriting, including using a language other than the English language. Their task was to come up with at least four lines of lyrics and a melody, then use the tools and instruments we used during our community music activities to facilitate an improvisation over their songs; either teaching some other students to sing along or using percussion instruments/anything found in the classroom to enhance the written song into a collective experience.

The Ukrainian students paired up and were very eager and enthusiastic about using a poem they had learned in school as a prompt. This poem is by Ukrainian poet Taras Hryhorovych Shevchenko (born 1814), called Садок вишневий коло хати (Sadok vyshnevyy kolo khaty, translation: A cherry orchard by the house).

Садок вишневий коло хати,
Хрущі над вишнями гудуть.
Плугатарі з плугами йдуть,
Співають, ідучи, дівчата,
А матері вечерять ждуть.

A cherry orchard by the house.
Above the cherries beetles hum.
The plowmen plow the fertile ground
And girls sing songs as they pass by.
It's evening—mother calls them home.

Сем'я вечеря коло хати,
Вечірня зіронька встає.
Дочка вечерять подає,
А мати хоче научати,
Так соловейко не дає.

A family sups by the house.
A star shines in the evening chill.
A daughter serves the evening meal.
Time to give lessons—mother tries,
But can't. She blames the nightingale.

Поклала мати коло хати
Маленьких діточок своїх,
Сама заснула коло їх.
Затихло все, тільки дівчата
Та соловейко не затих.

It's getting dark, and by the house,
A mother lays her young to sleep;
Beside them she too fell asleep.
All now went still, and just the girls
And nightingale their vigil keep.

This poem was a prompt for making something of their own. The final piece ended up being a song inspired by many Ukrainian poems and folk songs combined, and of course, written in Ukrainian.

The final piece was presented with a real spirit of generosity. The pair printed out lyrics for everyone in Ukrainian (Cyrillic), the English translation and a copy of the Cyrillic alphabet for everyone to figure out the phonetic way of singing the song. The whole class took part in writing the first line down phonetically and then joined in singing the first line with the Ukrainian students.

It was important to foster a sense of joy in the classroom - one that made the students curious and eager to learn. This also encouraged the Ukrainian students to really find joy in sharing their culture with their fellow students, whom they'd only known for a few months. They were open to hearing their language being spoken by people who might be having their first interactions at school.

Additional links

ukrainianlessons.com/ukrainian-and-russian-languages
ukrainianlessons.com/language-situation
britannica.com/art/Ukrainian-literature

Contact us

We love to talk about all things community, music and wellbeing.