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An interview-based investigation of cross-lingual communication in Transcarpathian secondary education

1. Introduction

Even though multilingual education dates back to earlier times, the study of one of its core components, cross-lingual communication, is a current trend. Over the past fifty years, a considerable body of literature has emerged about its key elements, such as the common underlying proficiency (CUP) (Cummins, 1981), the cross-linguistic influence (CLI) (Odlin, 1989), cross-lingual pedagogy (AlJuhani, 2024) or translanguaging (Williams, 1994). Research on each of these concepts has examined the teachers' role in promoting cross-lingual communication in the classrooms of western countries renowned for their multilingual communities. However, Ukraine, and within it one of its most linguistically diverse western regions, Transcarpathia, is falling behind in terms of research that studies teachers' practices in this context.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how English and Ukrainian language teachers working in Transcarpathian secondary schools with Hungarian language of instruction build on their pupils' multilingualism. Is cross-lingual communication actually implemented in everyday language teaching, and what advantages or disadvantages does this practice entail for teachers?

The present study was undertaken in an attempt to find answers to the above-mentioned questions. In its first section, the theoretical background of cross-lingual communication is established, next the methodology of the research is described, and finally, the findings are presented. Hopefully, the significance of

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educators' work will be brought even more into focus as a result, particularly in the current challenging situation complicated by air raid alerts.

2. The benefits and drawbacks of cross-lingual communication in educational settings

As part of modern education, cross-lingual communication has evolved into a valuable tool that helps shape both the learning process and how multilingual pupils perceive the value of their linguistic resources. They are shown that their mother tongue is an important asset that facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge.

However, cross-lingual communication is built upon the cognitive framework of Jim Cummins' CUP and Terence Odlin's CLI. Cummins defines CUP as: 'To the extent that instruction in Lx is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx, transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly and adequate motivation to learn Ly' (Cummins, 1981). The notion of CLI is closely linked to this concept. It allows pupils to transfer skills, literacy and conceptual knowledge acquired in one language to another (Odlin, 1989).

However, the definition of CUP highlights two important factors: motivation and adequate exposure. The latter gave cause for concern: the parties involved (parents, teachers and policymakers) feared that using valuable classroom time for L1 would weaken results in the target language. It made stakeholders reluctant to support programs with reduced target language instruction when the pupils faced important exams in the target language.

Currently, Ukrainian statutory frameworks and regulations issued by the Ministry of Education and Science do not establish explicit quantitative thresholds regarding target language usage during English language instruction. Rather than imposing percentages, the regulatory landscape relies on methodological recommendations and competency standards to govern pedagogical practices (URL1). These are intended to align with European trends in pedagogy, so instruction is grounded in the communicative approach: classroom management and instruction should be conducted primarily in English to cultivate an immersive environment. The only exception is education in elementary grades, where the usage of L1 is allowed for complex grammatical explanations and administrative directives. However, starting from Grade 5, guidelines mandate a gradual shift towards maximizing target language exposure. The ultimate aim is not only to improve practical language skills, but also to prepare pupils for the English external independent test at the end of secondary school.

A teaching strategy that helps pupils around the world but is not mentioned in the above-mentioned recommendation is cross-lingual pedagogy. It draws upon a

learner's entire linguistic background to enhance target-language acquisition and academic understanding. Instead of viewing a pupil's mother tongue as a barrier or a distraction, it recognizes multilingualism as an asset (AlJuhani, 2024). Teachers, by using this asset and linking familiar cultural elements or linguistic structures to the new material, help pupils build metalinguistic awareness and master complex concepts. Most importantly, it may help lower classroom anxiety.

A similar concept linked to cross-lingual communication and skill development in the classroom is the phenomenon of translanguaging. Translanguaging is the pedagogical approach that actively uses pupils' full linguistic repertoire for teaching and learning (García–Wei, 2014). In the course of its practice, individuals do not switch between separate linguistic systems, but instead draw from a unitary linguistic repertoire (Otheguy et al., 2015); thus, translanguaging serves as a creative practice that reflects both cultural and linguistic creativity.

Finally, it is worth noting that the aforementioned Ukrainian educational recommendations apply only to pupils currently in secondary school, while the reforms of the New Ukrainian School are gradually being implemented at lower levels of education. These reforms allow more time during language lessons for developing communicative language competence and provide teachers with additional resources. As a result, current primary school pupils are able to learn both English and Ukrainian through creativity-enhancing methods that also incorporate their mother tongue. In addition to paper-based learning materials, an online platform has also been launched for younger pupils, encouraging them to practise outside school by offering various rewards. Unfortunately, the platform is currently available only in Ukrainian.

However, bearing in mind the current ministerial and institutional recommendations regarding secondary school education, as well as the concepts learnt during teacher training, it is ultimately the teacher who makes a conscious decision regarding its practical implementation.

3. Background to the study

Ukraine's westernmost region, Transcarpathia, is renowned for its linguistic diversity and for an educational environment in which pupils' multilingual abilities can be utilised in mastering the curriculum. However, this would not be possible without the teachers' expertise and dedication. They represent the group with a clear understanding of the situation from both a professional and a practical, everyday perspective. Consequently, as part of an interview-based case study, teachers were asked to answer questions regarding the extent to which cross-lingual communication takes place in day-to-day teaching of two key school-leaving examination subjects: English and Ukrainian.

The interviews for collecting the data that form the basis of this article were conducted in the spring of 2025 in Transcarpathian secondary schools with Hungarian language of instruction. The interviewees were English and Ukrainian language teachers working with Grades 10 and 11. The pupils taught by these teachers know at least three languages: Hungarian, Ukrainian, and English. In addition, many of them are familiar with German or Spanish.

The five English teachers involved in the study are native Hungarian speakers and have between 12 and 23 years of teaching experience. The five participants who teach the Ukrainian language have been in this field for between 8 and 29 years. They are all multilingual individuals, some of whom learnt Hungarian as adults. These teachers have continuously developed their expertise in managing diverse classrooms. They have either learnt independently through observation or studied at university level how to successfully engage with multilingual children.

The research instrument was a set of interview questions. Any potential influence on the responses had to be avoided during the compilation of the questions, as it was essential that the forthcoming answers to them be objective. To achieve this, the set of questions was piloted with four teachers. The result was a set of 16 main questions, which were available in Hungarian and Ukrainian, although it was ultimately used only in Hungarian. This was possible because all of the teachers spoke Hungarian. The questions were organised around various topics: teaching experience, best practices, and the regulations governing their work. Throughout the interviews, the teachers answered numerous additional questions and provided valuable information from an educational perspective.

A systematic process of thematic analysis was employed to transform the verbal accounts into a structured framework of conceptual findings. The first step involved the verbatim transcription of all audio recordings, followed by close reading and the clustering of individual codes into themes based on recurring patterns. The dataset was analysed inductively, allowing codes and themes to emerge organically rather than forcing the data into a pre-existing framework. Once the thematic structure had been finalised, each theme was assigned a name.

The following section outlines some of the practical themes regarding cross-lingual communication in the Transcarpathian secondary school classrooms.

4. Cross-lingual communication in practice

With regard to the present study, the most relevant themes that emerged during the interviews were the teachers' positive and negative real-life experiences connected to cross-lingual communication. Additionally, two main sub-themes were identified: classroom practices and instructional materials favoured or discarded by the interviewees.

In relation to the first sub-theme, a recurring pattern, mentioned by seven teachers, was that at first, the pupils interpreted the use of multiple languages as a form of assistance with translation and wanted to rely on it constantly. In response to this, teachers indicated two solutions. The first, mentioned by two teachers, was that rules were put in place, and after about a month the pupils were no longer taking advantage of the situation. The second solution was that teachers only included tasks enhancing the usage of two or more languages when they were covering topics related to culture or literature. There was one thing in common in all the teachers' solutions: they encouraged help from their classmates. They try to place pupils who share the same primary language in one group. In this way, advanced pupils can help others stay engaged and at the same time learn the material.

Furthermore, they aim to incorporate creative activities into the lesson that rely on group work. Pair work or group work always involves some kind of real-life situation for which pupils often contribute ideas. It is important that first they demonstrate and then constantly supervise the use of multiple languages. Nonetheless, pupils collaborate more effectively and are more highly motivated during tasks when they have been given the opportunity to use their home language. Moreover, when they have to report on the results of their group work, they can do it in a low-stress environment, which, in turn, improves the result.

On the other hand, it is not only the teacher's feedback that can make pupils feel uncomfortable, but also their classmates. This is why the interviewees pay attention to validation. According to one interviewee, it must come from the teacher in the first place, because it sends a clear message. Unfortunately, it takes a lot of time for pupils to accept that using their primary language during the lesson is not necessarily a failure, but a valuable asset. There is bound to be some teasing and taunting, even outside of lessons.

Teachers also observed shortcomings on the pupils' part when it came to using their whole linguistic background. Cross-lingual communication requires the pupils to intentionally shift between languages, which is a difficult task involving cognitive control, problem-solving skills and heightened mental flexibility. Although their linguistic background would not be a problem in many cases, the pupils' age and maturity level often present an obstacle. In this context, the teachers who mentioned it did not distinguish between advanced and weak pupils but rather considered the more mature pupils to be better suited.

As for an educational approach suitable for both advanced and weak pupils, an interviewee connected content and language integrated learning (CLIL) to the incorporation of cross-lingual communication into the lessons. According to her, CLIL provides teachers with the opportunity to offer their pupils a sense of achievement, regardless of their mother tongue. She applies this approach in her

everyday practice, because she prefers focusing on improving lexis rather than grammar, mainly due to the structure of the school-leaving examination. The most common type of task assigned in her lessons is reading, especially when covering topics related to the target culture.

While talking about new vocabulary acquisition, teachers mentioned the recurring problem of false friends. The biggest problem for them is that pupils often just assume the meaning of the word and do not ask for its proper translation. Teachers therefore have to take particular care during group work to discuss more difficult or tricky words in advance. But when it comes to grammar, no mixing of prior knowledge is observed, especially not in the structures of affirmative or negative sentences. According to the teachers' observations, most pupils take the structure of the target-language sentence as a basis and incorporate words from their mother tongue into it.

In addition to improvements in knowledge, teachers who utilize the pupils' multilingual backgrounds in every lesson topic have also observed a positive change in the pupils' motivation when it comes to studying grammar. In this way, pupils can compare how their three languages structure sentences or convey tense. However, pupils differentiate between languages. According to one of the teachers, it is easier for the pupils to compare the English target language example with a Hungarian counterpart than with a Ukrainian one.

However, alongside the beneficial effects on pupils, teachers reported a number of practical drawbacks that are mainly related to teaching aids or the lack thereof. The main drawback mentioned by all the English teachers was the extra preparation required for their lessons. In order to manage the needs of a cross-lingual classroom, they need diversified lesson plans and additional teaching materials. Even those teachers who, thanks to their many years of teaching experience, already possess the resources mentioned above, have to make a special effort to prepare for their lessons. The main reason is that the educational materials available to teachers and pupils, such as textbooks or worksheets, are inadequate. Even at best, they only contain bilingual exercises in English and Ukrainian. Thus, in the absence of suitable teaching resources, they have to prepare worksheets themselves.

The English teachers emphasised that although multilingual picture- or graph-based activities help pupils to understand the target culture, in most cases this can only be achieved by purchasing teaching aids or by printing pictures or worksheets from their own resources. These are then also used while assessing the pupils. It has been a great help that several classrooms have recently been equipped with laptops or even printers. This is also useful because, due to power cuts, teachers tend to prepare for their lessons at school in the afternoon with reliable electricity, rather than at home.

As for the Ukrainian teachers, they highlighted two difficulties. The first one is the lack of training in multilingual classroom teaching during their university years. In their opinion, teachers who do not have the necessary skill set in this field struggle to meet the pupils' needs effectively. Being able to provide explanations in three languages improves the outcome. Therefore, they are trying to update their skills through the various training courses now available.

The second difficulty for them is that the practice of cross-lingual communication during their lessons is not rated highly during an assessment conducted by the headteacher or the school district inspector. Although they also mentioned that there are no regulations regarding how frequently the target language should be used, they never employ this practice during inspected lessons.

However, the most important setback that was noted by all the teachers and which I also experienced while observing their lessons was a lack of time. Under the regulations currently in force, in the event of an air-raid alert, pupils must leave the classroom immediately and proceed to a safe place. This takes even more time away from the 45-minute lesson, which is not particularly long in the first place. However, using cross-lingual communication during the lessons and accommodating pupils with varying levels of language proficiency takes extra time. The teachers understand that applying this technique is both necessary and advantageous for the pupils, but they must also balance the speed of learning. In addition, ensuring comprehension for both Hungarian and Ukrainian pupils in some classes means additional time lost.

5. Summary

It can therefore be concluded from the interviews that in linguistically rich regions like Transcarpathia, it is not a choice, but a functional imperative for the teachers to utilize the pupils' multilingual skills to help them master the curriculum. The implementation of cross-lingual communication in the lesson is a vital tool for academic success, but its success depends on three factors: the teachers' determination, their up-to-date training, and adequate teaching resources.

The most important factor is the teachers' resolve to persist with building on the pupils' linguistic background, which promotes a deeper understanding, even when there is a lack of time or teaching materials. The teaching materials are often prepared and funded by the teachers themselves: they create and print flashcards, worksheets or visual aids. In order to acquire the appropriate knowledge to do so, they seek suitable training and develop their language skills. Despite all the preparation involved, it remains a positive experience for the teachers, as they can see their pupils changing and making progress. In addition to improvements in knowledge, teachers observed a positive change in the

pupils' motivation when it comes to studying the culture of the target language, grammar or vocabulary. Teachers aim to incorporate all the languages the pupils know into their lessons, whether through individual or group work, speaking or reading, thereby preparing them for real-life situations. Nevertheless, they must take into account the requirements of the school-leaving examination.

In the light of all these practical insights, it can be concluded that cross-lingual communication, which genuinely helps and motivates pupils, is already present in the classroom. However, this involves a great deal of invisible preparatory work on the teachers' part and perseverance combined with maturity on the part of the pupils.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

Participant Name: .....
Participant Code: .....
Date: .....
Venue: .....
Interview questions:

1. Could you tell me a little about yourself and your journey as a language teacher? What languages do you teach and how long have you been teaching them?
2. The educational institution and, more specifically, the classes in which you teach include pupils who speak multiple languages. What kind of training or professional development have you received on dealing with multilingual children?

3. If you did not undergo any training of this sort during your studies, where can you find inspiration and acquire new knowledge?
4. Are there any training courses available, whether state- or self-funded?
5. During your teaching experience, has it always been standard practice for you to incorporate other languages alongside the target language in your lessons?
6. Is there a difference between the attitude towards the implementation of cross-lingual communication in the classroom at the start of your career and the current attitude? If so, in what ways does it differ?
7. Have you encountered any language-related difficulties during your teaching career due to your pupils' different home languages?
8. What methods or tasks are best suited to support cross-lingual communication in the classroom?
9. Did the pupils take advantage of the linguistic benefits inherent in this situation? If so, what rules did you put in place?
10. Are the necessary teaching aids available for the realization of the aforementioned tasks?
11. If yes, how accessible are they to you? If not, do you create the activities yourself?
12. Are there any specific topics that you often teach using similar types of exercises?
13. In your experience, which skills are best developed by drawing on the full linguistic repertoire?
14. How does the school administration support or hinder your work with multilingual pupils? Do any problems arise from the pupils' use of home languages during inspections?
15. In your opinion, what additional professional support or material resources would be helpful?
16. What advice would you give to novice teachers for teaching in classes with multilingual children?

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The present study deals with the rapidly spreading practice of cross-lingual communication in educational settings. Over the past fifty years an increasing number of international research projects have been conducted on its key elements, such as the common underlying proficiency (CUP) (Cummins, 1981), the cross-linguistic influence (CLI) (Odlin, 1989), cross-lingual pedagogy (AlJuhani, 2024) or translanguaging (Williams, 1994). However, Ukraine, and within it one of its most linguistically diverse western regions, Transcarpathia, is falling behind in terms of research that studies teachers' practices in this context. To address this gap, the present study investigates how English and Ukrainian language teachers working in Transcarpathian secondary schools with Hungarian language of instruction build on their pupils' multilingualism.

The research on which this article is based consisted of a series of interviews conducted in the spring of 2025 in Transcarpathian secondary schools with Hungarian language of instruction. The interviewees were English and Ukrainian language teachers working with Grades 10 and 11. The research instrument was a set of 16 interview questions, which were available in Hungarian and Ukrainian, although it was ultimately used only in Hungarian. The questions were organised around various topics: teaching experience, best practices, and the regulations governing their work. Following the data collection process, a systematic process of thematic analysis was employed to transform the verbal accounts into a structured framework of conceptual findings.

The findings of the research indicate that cross-lingual communication is already present in the classroom, and it is used by the teachers to motivate their pupils and provide them with a safe linguistic space in which to acquire new material. However, this involves a great deal of invisible preparatory work on the teachers' part. In order to manage the needs of a cross-lingual classroom, teachers need diversified lesson plans and additional teaching materials. To acquire the knowledge required to produce these, the teachers must attend courses on their own initiative. However, this is offset by the fact that pupils are much more active, whether working individually or in groups, when they can draw on their mother tongue and their own culture whilst completing tasks. Although they currently have little time to carry out all the tasks they have planned due to the constant air raid alerts, they are hopeful that this will change soon.

Keywords: *Transcarpathia, secondary education, multilingualism, cross-lingual communication, classroom language*.

Особливості міжмовної комунікації в закладах загальної середньої освіти Закарпатської області (за результатами інтерв'ю)

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У статті розглянуто практику міжмовної комунікації в освітньому середовищі, яка стрімко поширюється. Упродовж останніх п'ятдесяти років дедалі більше міжнародних досліджень присвячено її ключовим складникам, таким як спільна базова мовна компетентність (Cummins, 1981), міжмовний вплив (Odlin, 1989), міжмовна педагогіка (AlJuhani, 2024) та трансмовлення (Williams, 1994). Однак Україна, а в її межах і один із найбільш різноманітних з погляду мов західних регіонів — Закарпаття, відстає за кількістю досліджень, присвячених педагогічним практикам у цьому контексті. З метою заповнення цієї прогалини проаналізовано, як учителі англійської та української мов, які працюють у закладах загальної середньої освіти Закарпаття з угорською мовою навчання, спираються на багатомовність своїх учнів у навчальному процесі.

У статті проаналізовано серію інтерв'ю, проведених навесні 2025 року в закладах загальної середньої освіти Закарпаття з угорською мовою навчання. Респондентами були вчителі англійської та української мов, які працюють у 10–11 класах. Інструментарій дослідження становив набір із 16 запитань для інтерв'ю,

підготовлених угорською та українською мовами, хоча зрештою було використано лише угорськомовний варіант. Запитання згруповано за кількома тематичними блоками: педагогічний досвід, ефективні практики та нормативні положення, що регулюють роботу вчителів. Після завершення збору даних застосовано систематичний тематичний аналіз, що дало змогу перетворити усні відповіді респондентів на структуровану систему концептуальних висновків.

Результати дослідження свідчать, що міжмовна комунікація є складником освітнього процесу, вчителі використовують її для мотивації учнів і створення безпечного мовного простору під час засвоєння нового матеріалу. Водночас це передбачає значний обсяг невидимої підготовчої роботи з боку педагогів. Наголошено, що для ефективної організації міжмовної комунікації в класі вчителям необхідні різноманітні плани уроків і додаткові навчальні матеріали. З метою набуття нових знань педагоги із власної ініціативи проходять відповідні курси. Водночас прикладені зусилля компенсуються тим, що учні активніше працюють як індивідуально, так і в групах, якщо під час виконання завдань можуть спиратися на рідну мову та власну культуру. Хоча нині через постійні повітряні тривоги вчителям часто бракує часу для виконання всіх запланованих завдань, вони сподіваються, що найближчим часом ситуація зміниться.

Ключові слова: *Закарпаття, середня освіта, багатомовність, міжмовна комунікація, мововживання в класі.*

A nyelvközi kommunikáció interjúalapú vizsgálata a kárpátaljai középfokú oktatásban

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Jelen tanulmány az oktatási környezetben egyre szélesebb körben alkalmazott nyelvközi kommunikáció gyakorlatát vizsgálja. Az elmúlt ötven év során egyre több nemzetközi kutatás foglalkozott annak kulcsfontosságú elemeivel, így például a közös mögöttes nyelvi kompetenciával (*common underlying proficiency, CUP*) (Cummins, 1981), a nyelvek közötti hatással (*cross-linguistic influence, CLI*) (Odlin, 1989), a nyelvközi pedagógiával (*cross-lingual pedagogy*) (AlJuhani, 2024), valamint a transzlingválással (*translanguaging*) (Williams, 1994). Ukrajnában, azon belül pedig az ország egyik nyelvileg legsokszínűbb nyugati régiójában, Kárpátalján ugyanakkor viszonylag kevés kutatás vizsgálja a tanárok ezzel kapcsolatos gyakorlatát. E hiány pótlására a jelen tanulmány azt vizsgálja, hogy a magyar tannyelvű kárpátaljai középiskolákban dolgozó angol- és ukránnyelv-tanárok miként építenek tanulóik többnyelvűségére.

A tanulmány alapjául szolgáló kutatás 2025 tavaszán, magyar tannyelvű kárpátaljai középiskolákban végzett interjúvizsgálaton alapult. Az interjúalanyok 10. és 11. évfolyamon tanító angol- és ukránnyelv-tanárok voltak. A kutatási eszköz egy 16 kérdésből álló interjú volt, amely magyar és ukrán nyelven egyaránt rendelkezésre állt, bár végül kizárólag a magyar nyelvű változatot használták. A kérdések több témakör köré szerveződtek: a tanítási tapasztalatok, a bevált gyakorlatok, valamint a pedagógusok

munkáját szabályozó előírások köré. Az adatgyűjtést követően a szerző szisztematikus tematikus elemzést alkalmazott annak érdekében, hogy a szóbeli beszámolókból strukturált fogalmi keret és rendszerezett következtetések rajzolódjanak ki.

A kutatás eredményei azt mutatják, hogy a nyelvközi kommunikáció már jelen van az osztálytermi gyakorlatban, és a tanárok arra használják, hogy motiválják tanulóikat, valamint biztonságos nyelvi teret teremtsenek számukra az új tananyag elsajátítása során. Ez ugyanakkor jelentős, kívülről gyakran láthatatlan előkészítő munkát igényel a pedagógusoktól. A nyelvközi osztálytermi kommunikáció hatékony megvalósításához változatos óratervekre és kiegészítő tananyagokra van szükségük. Az ezek elkészítéséhez szükséges ismeretek megszerzése érdekében a tanároknak gyakran saját kezdeményezésükre kell továbbképzéseken részt venniük. E többletmunka ugyanakkor azzal jár, hogy a tanulók mind az egyéni, mind a csoportos feladatvégzés során lényegesen aktívabbak, ha támaszkodhatnak anyanyelvükre és saját kulturális tapasztalataikra. Bár a gyakori légiriadók miatt jelenleg sokszor nincs elegendő idő valamennyi tervezett feladat megvalósítására, a pedagógusok bíznak abban, hogy ez a helyzet hamarosan megváltozik.

Kulcsszavak: *Kárpátalja, középfokú oktatás, többnyelvűség, nyelvközi kommunikáció, osztálytermi nyelvhasználat*.

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