

Ukrainian language teaching in higher education in the United Kingdom

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In this brief overview I would like to describe the current state of Ukrainian language teaching in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK), mention the historical context in which Ukrainian has been taught to adults in the UK, discuss the problems relating to Ukrainian as a “less commonly taught language” and suggest possible future steps which could be taken to support the teaching of Ukrainian.

Whilst interest in learning foreign languages in the UK grew after the Second World War, the last two decades have seen a fall in the take-up of mainstream foreign languages (French, German, Spanish etc.) by school pupils and, consequently, at universities. This is partly a result of globalisation and the predominance of English in the international sphere, partly of economic constraints and government policies, and, last but not least, of the perception, among school pupils and the general public in the UK, that studying a foreign language is difficult.

It is in this context that the teaching of less commonly taught languages, including Ukrainian, takes place.

The origins of Slavonic studies in UK universities can be traced back to 1870, when the first lectures on this topic took place in Oxford, and, subsequently, to 1915, when the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) was founded as a part of London University. Since that time, various Slavonic and East European languages have gradually been introduced for study at university level, with Russian being the most widespread.

The teaching of Ukrainian in HE began much later than that of most other languages. After several unsuccessful attempts, in the first half of the 20th century, to introduce Ukrainian studies at UK universities, the first realistic opportunities for this arose only in the 1950s, with the appointment of Victor Swoboda as lecturer in Ukrainian and Russian at SSEES, and the introduction of evening courses in Ukrainian. Opportunities to study Ukrainian as part of a degree arose in the early 1970s, when courses in Ukrainian language, literature and history of the language were introduced at SSEES, and taught by Swoboda.

Today, students at SSEES (which in 1999 became a part of UCL) can study Ukrainian language and culture, and also Ukrainian history, as part of their undergraduate and masters’ degrees. Undergraduates doing degrees in language and culture can take Ukrainian at three levels (one in each year of their degree), or they can follow a series of half-module courses to supplement their degrees in other disciplines (such as political science or history). Masters students can take Ukrainian as a new language and at intermediate level. A number of

students research Ukrainian topics for PhD degrees. SSEES also organises evening courses in Ukrainian, both for students and the general public.

In 2006, Ukrainian language classes (initially open or non-degree courses) were introduced for the first time at the University of Cambridge Slavonic Department, and in 2009 the Ukrainian Studies Programme was established. Since then, as part of their degrees, Cambridge undergraduates can study Ukrainian language, literature, culture, cinema, as well as the early history of Rus'. There is also a thriving programme of postgraduate and post-doctoral research. Non-degree language courses, open to all members of the University, continue to be offered at elementary, intermediate and advanced levels, and the Cambridge University Language Centre now also provides Ukrainian speaking skills sessions.

A few other universities, such as Oxford, offer or have offered Ukrainian language tuition tailored specifically to the needs of PhD students.

Outside the HE sphere, British diplomats, translators, the military, police, businessmen and others learn Ukrainian (with teaching usually provided by visiting instructors) for their specific needs. Language classes for adults also take place at the Ukrainian Institute in London (affiliated to the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv). School-age children can learn Ukrainian in a range of Saturday and Sunday schools (for more information on this see the links below).

Such, therefore, are the opportunities for learning Ukrainian. There are, however, challenges: the falling interest in learning foreign languages, financial constraints at government and university level, and others. The raising of university tuition fees (and the consequent perception of students as “consumers” of education) mean that provision for less commonly taught languages has been cut at some universities. Currently, most of these languages are taught only at UCL SSEES. The overall situation is compounded by the fact that many teachers of less commonly taught languages work on part-time contracts and, therefore, need to supplement their incomes by other means (teaching outside the university sector, translating, training translators for international organisations, examining etc.).

In addition to the above, language teachers are also expected to embrace new trends and technologies, including the use of various media, the creation of new, interactive online materials for use in class and for independent study (including massive online open courses or MOOCs, as a means of reaching out to a wider public, beyond the HE sphere), blended learning, the teaching of language through culture and culture through language, teaching through Skype or other online conferencing services, etc.

Judicious use of the opportunities created by the Internet is essential, both for language learners and teachers. This is particularly the case for “less commonly taught languages” such as Ukrainian, where opportunities for more traditional

courses are limited. One should, though, be aware that this cannot entirely replace face-to-face contact with a teacher and, to quote Jocelyn Wyburd, Director of the Cambridge University Language Centre, “most students prefer to be taught by a teacher”.

Now, a few thoughts about measures and resources which could assist in supporting the acquisition of Ukrainian outside Ukraine.

New comprehensive courses for Ukrainian learners, such as *Yabluko*, *Krok* and *Beginners Ukrainian*, have recently been published and are very welcome new and attractive additions to the resources available. Learners, though, also need courses, both online and in paper format, which target specific issues and difficulties in learning the language. These do not need to be very large in scope but, rather, individual small textbooks or websites dealing with, for example, verbal aspects, consolidation of verb, noun and adjectival forms, vocabulary acquisition, stress, supporting learners’ progress beyond beginners’ level, Ukrainian for research in the social and political sciences and history, and others (examples can be seen on the ukrainianlanguage.org.uk website, see below). A selection of materials of this type for less commonly taught languages can be found in the CEELBAS Language Repository (see link). Some of the materials in other languages could serve as models for similar resources for Ukrainian.

Closer collaboration between Ukrainian academics (those carrying out research into linguistics, language and culture) and language teachers would bring the benefits of knowledge sharing and exchange to the creation of new resources for learners.

Whilst the opportunities for teaching Ukrainian in the UK are limited, as outlined above, dedicated professionals are still needed to deliver high-quality teaching of Ukrainian as and when needed. It is essential, therefore, that those wishing to engage in teaching should not only be native or near-native speakers of Ukrainian, but understand the specifics of teaching Ukrainian outside Ukraine. Teachers of Ukrainian will be called upon to support both learners who may have experience of another Slavonic language, and those who are complete beginners, and for whom different teaching approaches need to be implemented.

Even though fewer students learn Ukrainian than, say, Russian or Polish, those who opt to do so often become fascinated by, and deeply involved in, all things Ukrainian. It is important, therefore, that teachers of Ukrainian not only know the language, but also provide their students with enthusiasm and a level of cultural awareness which will allow them to do whatever they set their hearts on doing after completing their studies. For this, as for all issues, collaboration between Ukraine and “the abroad” is essential.

Finally, I would like to mention a crucial aspect of language learning – assessment and certification. There has long been discussion about the need to

introduce a unified system of assessment for Ukrainian, along the lines of ToEFL or Cambridge English (within the Common European Framework of Reference), and I believe the education authorities in Ukraine are moving closer to producing such a system. This will motivate learners by giving them something to aim for, as well as an officially certified qualification in the language. This cannot be implemented soon enough, so anything which can be done to expedite this should be supported by all those concerned.

References and links

A presentation, in Ukrainian, on Ukrainian language learning and teaching in the UK (4th MiOK International Conference, Lviv, November 2016), starting at 1'57":
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JI2JCUjoAI>

An overview of the current state of language teaching in the United Kingdom:
<http://www.britac.ac.uk/publications/languages-state-nation>

Examples of open resources for language teaching:
<https://www.futurelearn.com>
<https://extend.ucl.ac.uk>
<http://languagebox.ac.uk>
<http://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk/lc/opencourseware>

Resources for less commonly taught languages:
<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ceelbas/repository>

Support for teachers of less commonly taught languages:
<http://slavonic.group.shef.ac.uk>

Web portal of Ukrainian language resources:
<http://www.ukrainianlanguage.org.uk>

Education institutions offering Ukrainian language courses to university students and/or adults:
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/languages-ssees/ukrainian>
<http://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/slavonic>
<http://ukrainianinstitute.org.uk/learningukrainian/>

University Ukrainian Societies:
http://131.111.43.39/cuus/index_old.html
<http://ukrainianoxford.org/>

Ukrainian community schools
<https://www.augb.co.uk/association-of-ukrainian-teachers-and-educators.php>
<https://www.augb.co.uk/ukrainian-community-schools.php>
<http://www.ukrainianschool.co.uk/>

Information on Ukrainians in the United Kingdom (for general interest):
<http://www.ukrainiansintheuk.info/>
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/language-trails/ukrainian>
<http://www.britishukrainiansociety.org/>