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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE DURING THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Abstract: The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in a sudden influx of refugee learners into Polish schools, placing teachers under significant pedagogical and emotional pressure. This study examines how Polish teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) sought support and articulated professional challenges within a virtual community of practice, using a Facebook group as their platform, during this crisis. The analysis is based on 67 Facebook posts and 838 comments published between February 2022 and September 2023 in the largest Polish EFL teachers' Facebook group. Using thematic analysis, the study identifies key challenges related to the emotional burden, language barriers, assessment, and curriculum adaptation. The findings show that this virtual community fulfilled core functions of a community of practice, including problem solving, experience sharing, and emotional reassurance, compensating for limited institutional guidance.

Keywords: refugee crisis, EFL teachers, (online) community of practice

Introduction

Poland has remained linguistically homogenous for an extensive period. According to the census conducted in 2001, an overwhelming 99.7% of Poland's population embraced Polish national identity and used Polish as their primary language (Komorowska | Krajka 2016). As noted by J. Rokita-Jaśkow et al. (2023, 395), it is only in the past two decades that the Polish linguistic landscape has begun to evolve gradually. This shift can be primarily attributed to Poland's accession to the European Union, ensuing the opening of borders, with consequent heightened migration to and from the country. Despite these transformations, the presence of multilingual students in Polish schools was, until recently, uncommon. Consequently, the prevalent didactic approaches were far from the diversity-focused teaching methods already popularised in the West (Gębal 2014, 11ff.).

As a result of the conflict in Ukraine, which begun in late February 2022, Poland has experienced a notable and sudden influx of refugees, leading to persistent challenges across various aspects of social life, particularly affecting the primarily monolingually biased education system. Due to Poland's long-standing linguistic homogeneity, teachers had limited access to practical guidelines for working with pupils with a migration background. Although publications on migrant education existed before 2022, targeted, policy-oriented guidance on refugee learners and crisis-driven schooling emerged only gradually after the outbreak of war (e.g., Klisowska et al. 2023; Tędziagolska et al. 2023). Consequently, teachers entered the post-2022 educational context without clear, context-specific reference points for responding to this sudden large-scale disruption.

By the end of the 2021/2022 school year, approximately 140,000 Ukrainian refugee students had been enrolled in Polish schools, only a few months after the outbreak of war (Chrostowska 2023). As schools across Poland admitted increasing numbers of Ukrainian pupils, teachers faced unprecedented didactic and psychological challenges. While integrating newcomers into school communities, they often relied on intuition and peer support rather than formal guidance, a tendency particularly visible in online spaces bringing together Polish teachers, including the largest social media group for teachers of English as a foreign language.

The main assumption behind our research project is that in this new and dynamic transmodern reality, teachers more and more often seek help and support in the virtual reality, where they can ask questions and articulate their needs freely. Moreover, it appears that various social media groups for educators are currently assuming the role traditionally held by the communities of practice.

A thematic analysis of social media posts published in a Facebook group for English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) teachers would allow for a closer examination of the most urgent and real challenges that the teachers have had to face working with refugee students. This sudden shift has increased the potential of social media platforms for the teachers to look for support and possible temporary solutions. The main aim of this study was to investigate the Polish EFL teachers' community of practice in the digital reality. We hope that the results of the analysis will help in better tailoring policies and regulations for working with refugee EFL learners in Poland, and other school communities facing similar struggles.

1. Social Media Groups as Communities of Practice in Teaching

The concept of a community of practice (CoP), introduced by an anthropologist J. Lave and a social learning theorist E. Wenger in the early 1990s, refers to a gathering of individuals who share a genuine interest in similar real-world issues or trending

topics, and who consequently engage in regular interactions to collectively learn and exchange knowledge (Wenger et al. 2002, 4).

Wenger (1998, 5 ff.) identifies three key elements that condition the existence of CoPs: (1) domain, which refers to a shared area of interest, representing a common ground on which a given CoP is built; (2) community, representing social connections and interactions of CoP members, who engage in discussions, support each other and share information; and (3) practice, which involves the development of the shared repertoire of resources, tools and experiences. Pyrko et al. (2016, 389) comment on this definition by explaining that "mutual engagement is an essential element of these social structures".

As emphasised by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), while all CoPs share these three essential components, they exhibit notable variations across several dimensions. These differences encompass aspects such as size, scope (ranging from global to local), modes of interaction (including both face-to-face and online platforms), membership dynamics (from open to all to restricted within specific organisations), levels of formality and funding (whether they receive financial support and recognition or operate informally). Irrespective of their specific characteristics, CoPs cultivate their expertise through a range of different activities. These may comprise, for example, problem solving, information seeking, sharing experience, reusing assets, identifying gaps in competence, discussing new developments and boosting confidence (Wenger-Trayner | Wenger-Trayner 2015).

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are prevalent across various contexts and domains, spanning business enterprises, governmental organisations, professional associations, social sectors, international arenas, and the realm of education (Wenger, 2000). In the educational field, CoPs are occasionally referred to as 'learning networks', 'knowledge communities', 'occupational communities', or 'learning communities/communities of learning' (cf. Penfold 2010, 2). As hinted by P. Penfold (2010, 2), academics and educators have generally excelled in participating within such communities, benefiting from their environment's conducive nature for sharing knowledge and collaborating on various projects.

As pointed out by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), educational institutions function as independent entities and encounter growing challenges related to knowledge management. Initially, in this particular field, CoPs were primarily employed in teacher training initiatives and in facilitating communication among isolated administrators. However, there is currently a surge of interest in peer-to-peer professional development endeavours. This enthusiasm may arise from the recognition that, unlike business organisations, schools are not isolated environments where students merely gather knowledge; instead, they are integral components of a larger learning ecosystem, typically subject to official regulation (cf. Wenger-Trayner | Wenger-Trayner 2015). This context leads to to examine more

closely universality of challenges experienced by teachers within a given educational reality and opens doors for mutual support and exchange of experiences.

Before the widespread adoption of online platforms, CoPs for teachers primarily existed in non-digital forms, relying mostly on face-to-face interactions and traditional communication methods. These CoPs typically consisted of teachers from a specific circle, such as those gathered from a particular geographic area. Traditionally, educators have convened through various means, including participation in professional associations and organisations, attendance at workshops and professional development sessions, engagement in faculty meetings and departmental gatherings, formation of more or less formal teacher support and study groups, involvement in various teacher networks and mentoring programs, and participation in collaborative projects. Still, recent technological developments have greatly influenced their functioning, including, for instance, the possibility of forming CoPs within social media groups (Penfold 2010, 4).

Such virtual teachers' associations also fall within the definition of 'virtual communities', which are described by H. Rheingold (1993, 6) as "social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". An online or virtual community closely resembles a physical community, despite different development processes. For instance, as explained by Penfold (2010, 4), to address the absence of a physical environment, a member of the community, known as the 'technology steward', establishes a digital platform where other community members can engage. The specific virtual space and modes of interaction that need to be developed are determined by the nature and goals of the community. According to Wenger et al. (2009, 27ff.), technology stewards are individuals with sufficient familiarity with a community's operations to identify its technological requirements, along with sufficient technological experience required to take charge of those needs.

Based on the definitions provided above, social media groups gathering teachers can be considered examples of virtual communities of practice. An exploration of educational platforms and online resources reveals various types of these communities. Firstly, subject-specific groups offer resources and strategies tailored to specific fields and disciplines, while regional or national groups foster local networking and collaboration. Grade or level-specific communities provide support and insights aligned with educators' specific teaching contexts. Professional development groups facilitate continuous learning and growth, while special interest gatherings focus on specific areas of expertise. Additionally, support and mentorship networks offer guidance and encouragement to educators at all career stages.

Such groups also function in the specific field of foreign language education. These communities typically unite educators proficient in a shared language, facilitating smoother communication within these specialised CoPs. Moreover, there

are groups specifically gathering teachers of a particular language who work within the same educational context, enabling a deeper understanding of the challenges and issues typically encountered in this specific setting, fostering more targeted discussions and support among peers. On top of that, due to their constant and common availability, such groups appear to have the potential to serve as platforms in times of crisis. This role may become particularly visible in educational settings marked by rapid systemic change and constrained formal support structures.

Evidence from multiple national contexts shows that in response to large-scale migration or crisis situations, educational systems have often relied on school- and teacher-level responses developed under conditions of limited systematic coordination. Studies from Sweden, Switzerland, Canada, Italy, and Turkey consistently point to increased emotional burden on teachers, unclear institutional roles, insufficient training, and a frequent reliance on informal peer support when working with migrant or refugee learners (e.g., Biasutti et al. 2019; McDiarmid et al. 2021; Sanchez-Mazas et al. 2018; Tweedie et al. 2017; Ünsal | Başkan 2021). In Poland, post-2022 analyses similarly indicate that teachers supporting refugee students have had to respond to rapid systemic change under conditions of limited preparedness, evolving legal frameworks, and insufficient institutional guidance. These circumstances have been associated with heightened emotional and organisational strain, language-related challenges, and increased reliance on informal, peer-based professional collaboration (e.g., Duszczyk | Kaczmarczyk 2022; Jacewicz 2023; Tędziagolska et al. 2023).

Research from the COVID-19 pandemic further suggests that in crisis situations teachers often turn to informal online groups functioning as professional communities, which provide peer support and rapid, experience-based guidance (Al-Jarf 2021; Shriki 2021). However, research explicitly addressing refugee-related educational crises at the school level remains limited, underscoring the need for context-sensitive analyses of teacher-led, digitally mediated support structures in emergency settings.

2. Research design

After years of struggling with online education and its repercussions during the pandemic, Polish teachers were once again confronted with an emergency. Many teachers in Poland were left unsupported in the face of the Russian invasion on Ukraine, which resulted in a massive influx of refugee students entering the Polish school system. Having to navigate this complex and sensitive issue on their own, the teachers often resorted to looking for support and assistance within their communities of practice, including social media groups gathering language teachers in Poland. This is why the main aim of the study was to examine more closely

their communication and interactions within one of the largest language teachers groups on Facebook since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. We were interested in exploring the perspective of the teachers seeking help in working with refugee primary school pupils in interaction with their peers, who were members of this group. As a result we decided to find answers to the following research questions:

- RQ1: What kind of issues and didactic challenges concerning the Ukrainian refugee crisis were raised within the biggest social media group for EFL teachers in Poland?
- RQ2: In the face of the refugee crisis, what specific functions did this virtual community of practice fulfil?

The source material has been collected through an analysis of content posted in the biggest social media group on Facebook, gathering over 36,000 teachers of English as a foreign language in Poland. All of the posts published in the group between February 24, 2022 and September 30, 2023 have been examined with the aim to find posts that included references to the war in Ukraine, the Ukrainian refugee crisis and/or Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools. This data span allowed the study to capture the evolving challenges and responses rather than only short-term reactions to the crisis.

The first step in data collection was to look for posts with hashtags "Ukraine", "Ukrainian", "refugees". Next, the posts were examined for the second time, manually, searching for posts that also referred to the context of working with Ukrainian students, but did not include any hashtags. Since the data represents social media posts and interactions between members of a large Facebook group, it provides an insight into authentic concerns, practices and shared experiences of active teachers of English.

The total number of posts selected for analysis was 67. Each post was labelled with the letter P and a consecutive number, e.g. P01, P02, etc. All personal data of the group members were carefully removed prior to the analysis. The group administrator was informed about the research aims and agenda. Together with the posts, we registered a total number of 1201 reactions and 838 comments, which were also subject to analysis. The posts, the reactions and the comments were transcribed from the social media platform to an editable file, which was later transferred to the NVivo software for a qualitative analysis. The linguistic corpus of the analysed social media posts comprised 36,697 words. The length of each analysed post differed significantly, with the shortest post having only 7 words, and the longest thread, i.e. a post together with the comments below, being 4,941 words long.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the most suitable method for data analysis, with a set of themes that emerged in the process of coding the data. There were three stages of qualitative data analysis. First, posts were categorised by purpose (i.e. advertising, information sharing, awareness raising, help seeking, or initiating discussion). Second, posts and their comments were analysed in terms of the didactic

challenges and needs the teachers communicated in those threads. There emerged 13 codes in the didactic challenges category and 5 codes in the needs category. The third stage involved the analysis of the teachers' comments to each post. At this stage, the teachers' responses were analysed using 5 codes representing different categories of responses to a given issue in each post. Due to the qualitative, interpretive nature of the study, validation was approached in terms of trustworthiness rather than traditional validity.

A qualitative research design based on thematic analysis of naturally occurring online discourse was adopted due to the exploratory, authentic, context-sensitive, and socially situated nature of social media interactions. First, the study aims to capture teachers' perspectives as they are spontaneously articulated in response to an unfolding crisis. Second, the research problem is embedded in a community of practice framework, which emphasizes learning, meaning-making, and support as emerging through interaction. Third, the complexity and sensitivity of the refugee crisis require a method capable of accommodating heterogeneity, ambiguity, and emotionality in the data. Thematic analysis enables the identification of recurring patterns across diverse contributions while remaining flexible enough to capture unexpected themes.

Still, the research design is has its limitations. The study findings are limited to those teachers who are active members of the Facebook group, and are not representative of the whole population of English teachers in Poland. However, the study does not aim for representativeness in a statistical sense, but it achieves strong contextual and analytical representativeness for understanding teachers' professional knowledge construction during a crisis. As only 67 posts met the inclusion criteria, this further limits statistical representativeness and supports an interpretive rather than generalizable reading of the results.

3. Ukrainian refugee crisis in Polish schools – findings

Among the analysed posts, those addressing specific problems that arose in the new school reality and the resulting needs of teachers were at the forefront of our attention. The data examination revealed that Polish teachers of English who worked with Ukrainian refugee students faced a multitude of challenges, each highlighting the complex nature of accommodating the newcomers in the educational system. The thematic analysis of the posts revealed eight common threads that reoccurred in many posts and appeared to have drawn the most attention from the group members, namely:

- emotional issues;
- students' poor L2 proficiency;
- language barrier;

- double-tracking;
- formal issues and regulations;
- assessment and exams;
- unexpected arrivals;
- attendance issues.

First and foremost, the theme that appeared most often was connected with the emotional load of working with refugee students, particularly emphasising the difficulty of talking to young pupils about such sensitive topics as war and seeking refuge. The teachers discussed the importance of the emotional support they are expected to provide to both the newcomers and the rest of the class, as well as the emotional toll it had on them. The teachers reported lacking knowledge of how to address such an emotional and sensitive issue with their students, especially when a refugee student is in the group. Some teachers also admitted that they were scared and worried, which affected their professionalism in the classroom. The emotional factor also often appeared in questions about how to welcome a refugee student in a new school environment. Many teachers offered support by advising their colleagues to be more empathetic, patient and less demanding, making sure that the emotional comfort of the students was secured.

The second most popular theme in the didactic challenges that appeared in the analysis concerned the refugee students' poor academic proficiency in English hindered by their poor proficiency in the language of the host country. Additionally, as Ukrainian students mostly rely on the Cyrillic alphabet, the foreign language instruction at primary school level was even more demanding for the Polish teachers. The students' lower level of English proficiency was not the only concern – many of the teachers reported having faced communication issues with their students caused by the language barrier. There were eleven references in the analysis which pointed to refugee students who spoke neither English nor Polish.

The language barrier was additionally compounded by curriculum differences between Ukraine and Poland, leading to notable disparities in academic levels among students. Consequently, the teachers were concerned about the possibility of Polish students being affected by the need to adjust their teaching pace and level of the classes to accommodate the newcomers, posing a challenge for educators in maintaining a cohesive classroom environment, which they often referred to as 'double-tracking'. Some of these concerns were aptly expressed by the teachers as the necessity to prepare and conduct two lessons in one: one for the newcomers, addressing their needs, and another one for the rest of the group – following the planned curriculum.

Furthermore, the absence of standardised procedures hindered the accurate diagnosis of language levels, complicating the development of tailored learning plans. This challenge was exacerbated by the lack of official regulations on how to handle the influx of refugee students, making the navigation of educational requirements

and student classification a daunting task. This issue was also highly emphasised by the teachers who struggled with summative assessment and examination. The assessment component was particularly challenging for the teachers not only due to the students' limited language competence or poor linguistic performance – the teachers very often struggled with the unpredictable and dynamic situations of the refugee students and their families. It was difficult for the teachers to properly assess a student who joined a class in the middle of the semester or who departed early with little probability of coming back. The examination pressure was also a frustrating factor for the teachers, who pointed to the futility of grading a student who is in shock of entering a new school environment. The teachers' educational efforts were also impeded by a lack of information on the learning history and experiences of refugee students, making it challenging to provide adequate support for their academic and socio-emotional needs.

4. Inside the community of practice – teachers' comments and reactions

Group engagement, measured by the sum of reactions and comments to each post, is illustrated in Figure 1 below. As can be seen on the timeline, the group engagement concerning the issues of Ukraine and Ukrainian refugee learners was the most intense at the very beginning of the invasion. The teachers were active in posting, reacting and commenting on the content published in the group. The second 'wave' of engagement appeared in September 2022, which can be explained by the beginning of the school year – welcoming new students and preparing for the winter semester, focusing on matters such as the syllabi, didactic aids and assessment criteria. The two most popular posts, published on March 2, 2022, six days after the invasion, both referred to the war and possible ways of handling the emotional aspect in a classroom: P39 with 14 comments and 454 reactions, and P40 with 101 comments and 58 reactions.

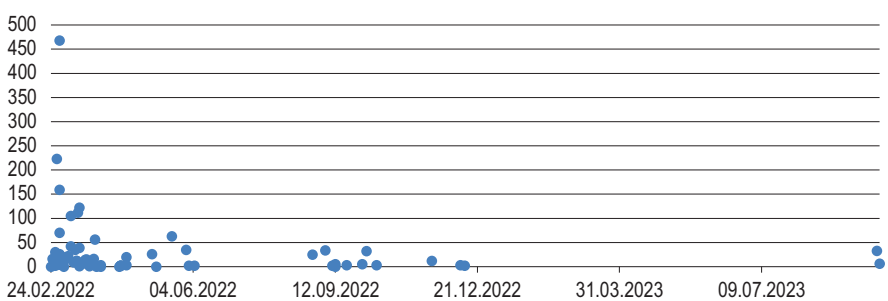


Fig. 1. The group engagement timeline

Our research interest also revolved around the interaction within the social media group. We were curious to explore the extent to which this group could serve as a networking space for the teachers to help one another solve didactic problems and offer advice. Out of the total of 838 comments published under the 67 posts, 156 comments were considered valuable for further analysis, as they served other purposes than just expressing politeness or engaging in conversational discourse. In the process of coding, 5 categories of codes emerged in the data analysis.

Within the selected comments for analysis, the most common (94 occurrences) belonged to the pragmatic category. These comments focused on offering practical solutions and tips, often providing useful links to resources and materials. The teachers also expressed support and sympathy in the comments section (21 occurrences), usually reacting to posts that illustrated their colleagues' didactic problems or fear of not being able to cope with the emergency situation well enough. These comments often offered emotional support for the teachers in need.

However, there were also comments (18 occurrences) expressing frustration with the ongoing situation. The vast majority of those comments reflected the teachers' frustration with the political decisions of the Ministry of Education at that time, compounded by the feelings of abandonment coupled with high societal expectations and low salaries. The teachers felt unsupported and left on their own in dealing with bigger groups of students. Many of those teachers also pointed to the educational system in Poland, specifically the core curriculum and teaching objectives, which are not adjusted to working with immigrant/refugee students without the knowledge of Polish or English.

Another recurring theme in the comments section, though not as frequently (8 occurrences), were comments triggering escalation and trolling. Usually, once such a comment was published under a post, the initial discussion addressing the issue raised in the post drifted towards other, often political, topics, unrelated to the issue at hand. Whether intentional or not, those comments almost always had the effect of triggering an intense exchange in the comments section.

Finally, the fifth category of comments represents responses which adopted a more critical approach towards a discussed issue, with teachers critically reflecting on the situation they found themselves in. This critical reflection often concerned the hierarchy of values when confronted with a refugee learner in a classroom – instead of prioritising language learning, those teachers pointed to other, in their opinion, more important matters, such as emotional comfort and well-being.

5. Discussion

As regards the first research question, several major issues verbalised by the teachers as urgent reoccurred in many of the analysed posts. The first and foremost challenge concerned having to deal with the emotional load of working with refugee students. Many of the teachers expressed experiencing difficult time coming to terms with how to talk to their students about war and its repercussions. Similar emotional and ethical dilemmas have been reported in international research on refugee education, where teachers are often required to address traumatic experiences without adequate psychological preparation or institutional support (e.g., Sanchez-Mazas et al. 2018; Tweedie et al. 2017).

The second most frequently communicated challenge was the language barrier and the need to communicate effectively with the newcomers (see also Chiofalo et al. 2019, Shamim et al. 2020). This problem was compounded by the organizational issues: the teachers reported they had little knowledge of their refugee students, which made it difficult to plan learning objectives and attend to their needs as language learners. Students' low proficiency of their target language was also stemming from the curricular differences between their home and host countries (see also Free et al. 2014), which contributed to what the teachers called 'double-tracking', i.e. having to navigate between the needs of the refugee student and the rest of the class. Comparable tensions between curricular demands and learner diversity have been observed in other migration-affected educational systems, where teachers report role overload and uncertainty regarding instructional priorities (Biasutti et al. 2019; Ünsal | Başkan 2021).

This issue was very much connected with the lack of effective systemic solutions; the teachers seemed to be in dire need of official guidelines and regulations which would help, not hinder, the socialization and academic success of refugee students. Polish teachers appear not to be alone in this respect, as this problem was observed in other cultural contexts as well (see Biasutti et al. 2019). Notably, similar patterns were observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when teachers relied on online professional communities to address new pedagogical challenges through resource sharing, peer advice, and mutual support (Al-Jarf 2021; Shriki 2021).

Addressing the second research question that concerns the specific functions the Facebook group fulfilled, it should be first stated that the analysed social media group indeed met all the criteria defining a community of practice (see Wenger 1998). In this group, the teachers engaged predominantly in three types of activities (Wenger-Trayner | Wenger-Trayner 2015):

1) problem solving – the group was oriented towards practical solutions that would, at least temporarily, help the teachers mediate their didactic challenges in working with refugee students;

2) sharing experience – the group also served as a platform for sharing resources, materials and tips from other practitioners, who were willing to share their expertise based on their own experience;
3) boosting confidence – many of the teachers in the comments section were ready to offer support, sympathy, and words of encouragement; the teachers created a support network where they could freely express their worries and frustrations and were met with understanding.

These functions closely resemble those identified in studies of online teacher communities during pandemic-related disruptions, where social media groups operated as ad hoc communities of practice providing emotional reassurance, pedagogical advice, and professional validation (Al-Jarf 2021; Shriki 2021).

The group engagement with the topic of working with refugee learners of English as a foreign language was highly dependent on the two major 'events' marked on the presented timeline: the first one being the outbreak of war and the second one – preparing for the new school year. All of the collected and analysed posts revolve mostly around those two points on the timeline. The group offered continuous peer support for the teachers in need. More importantly, however, the teachers actively participated in the creation and maintenance of their virtual community by posting, commenting and sometimes just reacting to the meaningful content published by the group members. It could be observed that the teachers sought comfort and found support in this social media group, which suggests that, in crisis conditions, such online communities may function as compensatory professional spaces when formal support mechanisms are perceived as insufficient or delayed, pointing to its great potential for professional development.

Conclusion

The above presentation of the results highlights several needs of Polish EFL teachers of English when working with Ukrainian refugee students. Initially, they sought support in assessing language proficiency levels and selecting appropriate instructional materials, especially in areas such as writing skills. Moreover, the importance of access to tailored coursebooks and resources for students with limited proficiency in Polish or English was emphasised. Furthermore, assistance was required in navigating curriculum disparities between Ukraine and Poland and adapting teaching methods to accommodate the newcomers. Clarity on standardised procedures for evaluating language proficiency and developing personalised learning plans was also sought. Additionally, there was a demand for official regulations and guidelines to address the influx of refugee students. Moreover, teachers struggled with the lack of information on the learning history and experiences of the refugee students, which would help to better understand their academic and socio-emotional

needs. Peer support and shared experiences from other educators who had worked with Ukrainian refugee students were also essential. Finally, reassurance and encouragement were needed to overcome uncertainties and challenges in teaching refugee students, particularly in classroom management and maintaining a cohesive learning environment.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that social media groups can function as a valuable supplementary form of professional support in crisis situations, facilitating rapid information exchange, emotional support, and context--sensitive solutions. Although they cannot replace systemic interventions, such groups may help identify teachers' immediate needs and inform more responsive institutional policies and training. There are numerous ways of looking forward as regards future research. Future studies could complement the online data with interviews and classroom observations, to ensure triangulation, as well as address the comparative and cross-national practices regarding the teachers' needs and experience facing crises in language education across contexts.

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