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Student Engagement in a Remote Language Learning Environment: The Case of Ukrainian

OLENA SIVACHENKO, ALLA NEDASHKIVSKA

1. Introduction

The new digital realities presented during the COVID-19 pandemic opened avenues for furthering our knowledge of technologically enhanced education, based on lessons learned from our emergent digital language classrooms. The sudden transition to remote learning was disruptive to both instructors and students, who found themselves forced to adapt to new routines in a new setting without time to fully consider best practices. This article examines and reflects on students' engagement with the crisis-driven, remote environment.

Teaching observations, communication with other instructors, and research (e.g., Coleman et al. 2012, 166) indicate that students learning remotely often feel disengaged or find it challenging to engage with peers, instructors, and course material. This problem prompted our investigation of engagement in learning Ukrainian as a foreign language remotely.

2. Engagement

Engagement has been a familiar concept in educational theories since Moser and McGowan's (1985) introduction of the term. Engagement is "what students do, say, think, feel, and make, in classrooms," and "about the energy learners actually spend toward their achievement" (Oga-Baldwin 2019, 2). More recent developments stress its multidimensional nature (Reschly and Christenson 2012; Reeve 2013; Philip and Duchesne 2016; Oga-Baldwin 2019). In language learning, classroom engagement involves an interconnected combination of "behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic factors" (Oga-Baldwin 2019, 4). This article examines five types of engagement: the four mentioned by Oga-Baldwin (behavioral, emotional, cognitive, agentic), and social (Svalberg 2009; Philip and Duchesne 2016), which adds to this discussion.

Behavioral engagement refers to learners' actions, such as course participation, including academic, social, and extracurricular activities. Oga-Baldwin stresses that behavior is "the logical ignition moment for

the other aspects of engagement,” the impact of which had not been fully recognized in earlier work. He notes that “engagement in class at least partially begins with behavior, and the other parts of the process, including cognition, agency, and emotion, all result in part from students’ initial, subconscious decision to engage or disengage behaviorally” (2019, 5).

Emotional engagement concerns students’ feelings about and reactions to their instructors, peers, the learning context, or institutions, all of which influence their willingness to complete learning activities. This category includes task-facilitating emotions such as interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm, and the absence of task-withdrawing emotions such as distress, anger, frustration, anxiety, and fear (Reeve 2012, 150-51).

The cognitive dimension refers to “the intentional thoughts that students put into their school work” (Oga-Baldwin 2019, 5), namely student investment and readiness to put in the work to understand course content and to master the skills that are being taught. Cognitive engagement “remains the most difficult to both quantify or describe qualitatively” (Oga-Baldwin 2019, 5).

Agentic engagement relates to students’ constructive contributions to the learning environment as well as the quality and the flow of the instruction that they receive (Reeve and Tseng 2011; Reeve 2013). Agentic engagement refers to “the actual actions learners take in the classroom” in order to request changes or adjustments to their learning context (Oga-Baldwin 2019, 6).

Although social engagement is not present in all models of engagement, it can be significant in the context of remote learning. Social engagement, closely related to the emotional dimension, refers to students’ relationships within the learning process (Svalberg 2009), which includes paying attention and listening to their peers, “draw[ing] from one another’s expertise and ideas, provid[ing] of feedback to one another” (Philip and Duchesne 2016, 57). It also can include learners’ willingness to work collaboratively and a desire for group projects, including those that go beyond what is required in the classroom.

3. The survey

This paper discusses the results of a survey administered in Ukrainian classes at the University of Alberta during the transition to emergency remote teaching. Our goal is to examine students’ behavioral, emotional, cognitive, agentic, and social engagement in the remote learning of Ukrainian as a foreign language at the postsecondary level. In this empirical exploration, we are guided by the following questions:

- What are students' perceptions of their experiences in learning Ukrainian remotely?
- What do these perceptions reveal about students' engagement in the learning process at the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, agentic, and social levels?
- Do attitudes toward engagement differ by course level?

4. Participants and procedures

This empirical exploration involved 23 undergraduate students (17 female, 6 male) at a Canadian postsecondary institution.¹ Participants came from three instructional levels: first-year (5 female and 2 male), second-year (5 female and 3 male), and third-year (7 female and 1 male).

To examine learners' engagement in remote Ukrainian language courses, we administered an online survey at the beginning of the winter semester of the 2020-21 academic year. The survey was designed according to Oga-Baldwin's (2019) and Reeve's (2012; 2013) engagement frameworks, with certain elements adopted from Reeve and Tseng (2011). In total, the survey consisted of 22 items: 12 questions (3 closed-ended and 9 open-ended) and 10 question clusters (each containing a multiple-choice grid, followed by an open-ended question). Questions elicited participants' demographics (gender and remote Ukrainian language course that they took),² their overall experiences of learning Ukrainian remotely, (dis)advantages of the format, and recommendations for improving remote instruction. Each question cluster focused on one of the four levels of engagement: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic.

The open-ended questions concerned students' overall effort in the course, during in-class sessions, and while working in Breakout Rooms (behavioral); how they felt about the course in general, in-class activities, and working in Breakout Rooms, including their connections with others (emotional and social); strategies that they used in and outside of class to understand course content and master skills that were taught (cognitive); and how they contributed to the course (agentic).

¹ The response rate to the survey was 44% at the first-year level, 80% at the second-year level and 89% at the third-year level. As remuneration for participation, respondents were offered \$20 gift cards

² To respect respondents' anonymity, we did not collect data on students' age, program of study, and Ukrainian-language background.

Table 1. Question clusters

Engagement levels	Engagement components
Behavioral	(3 Question clusters): Learners' effort; preparedness; participation; paying attention to what is happening in class; communication in the target language; staying focused in the course in general, during in-class activities, and while working in Breakout Rooms.
Emotional	(4 Question clusters): Feelings of being engaged, motivated, interested, relaxed, overwhelmed, isolated, bored, anxious, and/or indifferent in the course in general, during in-class activities, and while working in Breakout Rooms; feelings of the amount and quality of interaction between students and between students and instructor.
Cognitive	(2 Question clusters): Actions undertaken during in-class sessions and outside of class to understand course content and master skills that were taught.
Agentic	(1 Question cluster): Learners' input in deciding how to learn in class, which topics, which materials and activities to choose; making suggestions on how to improve the course.

5. Results

In order to mitigate subjectivity, each author approached the data independently and used an “interpretive analysis to sift through data and group similar ideas together, to discover patterns of behavior and thinking” (Croker 2009, 9). The responses were coded to find common themes (Huberman and Miles 1994). The following themes emerged: general impressions of the remote format (format quality and effectiveness, flexibility and accessibility, material benefits) and those pertaining to behavioral (efforts in the course, class participation, staying focused, paying attention), emotional (comfort, enjoyment, respect, isolation, anxiety, stress), social (interaction, connection), cognitive (learning and troubleshooting strategies), and agentic engagement (providing and abstaining from feedback, control over learning). These themes are presented and analyzed below.

5.1. Learners' experiences

The data reveal varying perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of remote learning across the three language levels. First-year learners perceived the remote format mostly positively:³

- (1) The interactive Zoom classes and the website activities keep me on task. I do not feel like I am missing out on a crucial part of the course. Zoom allows me time to practice my Ukrainian with other students while the website is a good resource for at home practice.
- (2) It hasn't been an issue at all! [Instructor] is extremely patient and very good at taking time so that the students understand over Zoom. The class is organized and efficient. We speak in class then complete homework on our very well-put-together website [...].

Examples (1) and (2) reflect a general trend for this group: students' perceptions of their success in the course stem from its organization and the resources used. In our first-year course, we use an e-textbook that incorporates a blended model, 50% of which consists of an online self-study and 50% of which consists of in-person synchronous lessons; this textbook most likely enabled a more successful transition of the course to the remote format. Example (2) emphasizes the positive role of the instructor in the process of learning Ukrainian remotely at this level, which echoes the opinion of other students in the group.

The opinion of second-year learners,⁴ who had previous experience learning Ukrainian in-person, was split:

- (3) It [the Ukrainian course] was better prepared for than my other courses, but it's been difficult with [...] extra technology-related work and I find it harder to understand what's being said in class.
- (4) It's unfortunate that there are fewer ways to engage both in and outside the classroom with the Ukrainian language and culture, but in terms of education quality, I don't feel that the quality is significantly different than [...] in person.

Examples (3) and (4) complement the course organization, although, as (3) demonstrates, the use of technology can make learning remotely more challenging. However, in terms of educational quality, most learners

³ Due to space limitations, we provide the most representative examples for each point.

⁴ At the second-year and third-year levels, the instruction is not blended and includes only in-person synchronous online classes accompanied by homework assignments.

did not see significant qualitative differences between the two formats, as is illustrated by (4). In the view of some participants in this group, interesting topics and creative assignments compensated for disadvantages that the format brings. At the same time, (4) shows that second-year learners were beginning to express their need for engagement outside the class, which was not fully satisfied by the remote format.

The third-year respondents also perceived the remote format positively overall, particularly appreciating their learning activities related to Breakout Rooms. What stands out is the third-year learners' feelings of disconnectedness between students and instructor:

(5) Learning Ukrainian remotely definitely had challenges. Like all remote learning, it required our technology [and Wi-Fi] to work at all times. In class, we were often put in Breakout Rooms, which was nice to interact with other classmates. However, it felt slightly disconnected not having an instructor there at all times. But overall, it was a good interactive experience.

Other positive aspects of the remote format on which students commented are its flexibility and accessibility. Respondents across all levels pointed out that the new format offered them the convenience of working from home or joining their class from anywhere with Wi-Fi. Additionally, respondents noted that online office hours made connecting with the instructor easier, and remote instruction allowed easier access to external resources during in-class sessions.

A number of students reported on the material benefits associated with the transition to the remote format: students saved money on transportation and avoided lengthy commutes and heavy backpacks. Some said that they used the time which they saved on commuting to put more effort into their assignments by approaching them more creatively, which in turn brought more enjoyment to learning.

5.2. Behavioral engagement

Participants' overall effort in the courses, class participation, staying focused, and paying attention are aspects of behavioral engagement. The majority of participants said they invested a great deal of effort to do well in the course, handed in assignments on time, came prepared to class, actively participated in activities, tried to stay focused, and paid attention to what was going on in class. Our analysis yields some interesting findings as to what kept students engaged.

Some first-year and second-year respondents felt that they stayed engaged in the synchronous classes in part because the interface of videoconferencing meant that it was more difficult for them to fade into the background since every person's face was equally visible. The class format prompted learners to pay attention to what was happening in class and to stay on task, thereby promoting engagement. Some first-year respondents noted that the online course activities helped them stay on task even outside class. Some of them also did more than what was required and pushed themselves hard to learn the language. Several second-year learners indicated that interesting and creative assignments such as blogs and vlogs kept them engaged with the language outside class.

A number of factors deterred participants from being engaged. Many students mentioned phones, social media, and home distractions as engagement deterrents. Several respondents indicated that they struggled to put in their best efforts due to a lack of motivation in general and anxiety issues, and for some, the remote format contributed to this. One noted that they were more likely to stay in bed and miss class than they had been in the past because Ukrainian was usually the only synchronous class, they had each day.

Various technology-related factors affected learners' engagement during in-class activities. Many respondents complained about the effects of a poor internet connection on the quality of their class participation, with internet issues sometimes even preventing them from attending class. Some students noted that it can be difficult to properly hear someone with a bad microphone, while others commented that it is difficult to volunteer to speak in a remote class, because several students can accidentally talk over each other. One respondent wrote that unmuting also delayed students' engagement.

During synchronous Breakout Rooms, distractions did occur, such as occasional conversations with other students about things not pertaining to Ukrainian, often conducted in English. However, this was usually done after the assignment was completed:

(6) In Breakout Rooms, I [would] complete the assigned task [...] and did not distract myself with outside things. However, I did occasionally talk with other students about things not pertaining to Ukrainian, almost always in English [...] after the assignment was completed.

Example (6) demonstrates that in Breakout Rooms, focused learning was intact, instructor supervision was minimal, and the potential

for distraction was high. This example also signals the need for social interaction with peers, a point which we discuss below.

5.3. *Emotional engagement*

In the category of emotional engagement, participants mentioned level of comfort, enjoyment, and respect on the one hand, but also isolation, anxiety, and stress on the other. The majority of first-year learners felt comfortable and engaged in class, most often thanks to opportunities for interaction, helpful and respectful peers and instructors, effective learning resources, and the perception of progress in language learning. At the same time, many expressed that remote instruction cannot replace in-person interaction and did not allow for social connections. As a result, some students had increased feelings of isolation, which, in their view, exacerbated mental health issues.

Some participants felt stressed and anxious in class. However, these feelings decreased when participants worked in pairs or groups in Breakout Rooms:

(7) I felt a little nervous at times to speak in class but in breakout rooms I was very comfortable.

The feeling of discomfort in class gained prominence at the second-year (8) and third-year (9) levels:

(8) Due to the presence of more fluent speakers in the class, I definitely felt overwhelmed and intimidated by them, and that contributed to my unwillingness to volunteer, for fear of being wrong and embarrassing myself, as well as my anxiety. Therefore, I tended to adopt a demeanor of indifference to cope.

(9) Sometimes, I also felt there was more pressure to answer questions with everyone looking right at you on the screen.

Examples (8) and (9) are representative of those participants who felt anxious and disengaged in class, especially if intimidated by students with more advanced proficiency levels in the same class (8).⁵ Such situations can lead to the emotional and behavioral disengagement of less advanced students at the second-year and third-year levels, and the remote format, requiring students to speak facing others via screens, only added to their anxiety (9).

⁵ At the second-year and third-year levels, students were of different language proficiency backgrounds: students continuing after the first-year course, students from bilingual and heritage programs, and heritage speakers.

As with first-year students, anxiety and pressure decreased for second-year and third-year learners as they moved into Breakout Rooms. Working in Breakout Rooms reduced stress and made the environment more conducive to learning. One respondent noted that Breakout Rooms increased the quality of in-class interaction because, unlike in a regular classroom, students had complete privacy and did not have to worry about having to talk over other students in a nearby group. Also, because of the cameras, students were always looking at each other, and did not have to try and look across the classroom to see or hear someone.

Third-year respondents also made positive comments about Breakout Rooms:

(10) It was a highlight of my remote Ukrainian courses. Breakout Rooms functioned similarly to group work in class, and I enjoyed having that time to interact with others and work together.

(11) It was interesting to work with new people. It helped connect and get to know some of the classmates better.

(12) Working with peers was a nice chance to compare each other's answers and questions and simply to have some interaction with other people outside my house.

The level of emotional engagement increased when participants worked in Breakout Rooms. Examples (10) through (12) demonstrate the respondents' perceptions of Breakout Rooms as an important learning tool that assists in creating and maintaining social presence and enables instructors to recreate a physical classroom environment (10). The respondents emphasized the importance of Breakout Rooms for promoting social interaction (11) and producing feelings of social connection (12).

5.4. Social engagement

The category of social engagement surfaced in our analysis of emotional (10-12) and behavioral (6) engagement and is worthy of separate attention. Although all the students actively commented on their feelings of social interaction and social connection, the importance which they attached to the two components varied across the levels. Responses by first-year students include:

(13) Breakout Rooms were a great opportunity to get to practice Ukrainian with other students. They helped me become more confident in speaking the language. The time after we finished an activity also provided time to get to know one another better. This made me more comfortable to speak Ukrainian around them.

Example (13) shows the perception of social interaction as essential for the students to gain more confidence with the language. Social connection, as they viewed it, was closely linked to getting to know peers so that learners can feel comfortable speaking Ukrainian around them in the classroom. Thus, social interaction and social connection for first-year students overlapped, serving the same goal of making the in-class environment comfortable for learners using the target language.

The perceptions of social interaction and social connection differed with second-year respondents:

(14) [...] While my interaction with my classmates in class was always positive, I found that once class was over [...] it was like I was unknown and a stranger to my classmates. [...] In short, while I think that, during class, we were all friends, [...] outside of class, I did not feel the same sentiment.

(15) I didn't feel as connected to my classmates, unfortunately, with remote learning. During in-person classes, I felt that the classroom environment felt more like a second family [...].

Examples (14) and (15) demonstrate that both social interaction and social connection were present and constructed, but unlike their first-year peers, the second-year respondents perceived differences between the two (14). In their view, interaction did not necessarily translate into connection. This perception is particularly highlighted in (14), in which the respondent noted that good relations with peers did not go beyond the classroom, unlike during in-person instruction (15). The difference in perceptions between first-year and second-year students may stem from the difference in their needs for social engagement. For first-year students, community is essential in order to feel comfortable using the target language around each other. Most second-year students already know each other from their previous language courses, and they often feel comfortable speaking Ukrainian in class. Therefore, they generally seek to extend their interaction beyond the classroom, which they are largely unable to do in a remote format, and a greater need for social connection develops.

Some third-year students' responses are similar to those of the second-year students:

(16) Working with peers was a nice chance to compare each other's answers and questions and simply to have some interaction with other people outside my house.

(17) Remote learning doesn't really let you connect with new people. If we would have group projects that required us to meet outside of class hours, it would help with the connection.

In (16), the respondent notes the importance of interaction, noting that Ukrainian classes were their only opportunity to interact with someone outside their household. The comments in (17) reinforce what second-year respondents had stated earlier: remote delivery is not conducive to promoting a feeling of social connection among learners outside of class sessions, which may result in increased feelings of isolation. The respondent in (17) offered a practical suggestion for fostering social connection outside the remote classroom. These results point to a critical need for social connection, especially at the third-year level of instruction.

5.5. Cognitive and agentic engagement

Findings at the cognitive level of engagement are not specific to the remote format and could pertain to any language course. Students used various learning strategies to master the course content and skills both in and outside of class. For example, when respondents had any questions or concerns, they tried to find a solution on their own; when they failed, they reached out for help from their peers, the instructor, or other speakers.

At the agentic level, students' contributions to the course design were different at the three instructional levels. Unlike their first-year and second-year peers, who mainly limited themselves to completing instructor evaluations at the end of the course, third-year learners actively requested changes and offered suggestions on how to make the course more engaging and less stressful. They expressed a desire for less course weight placed on homework, advocated for more focused in-class interaction and group activities in Breakout Rooms, suggested various extracurricular activities through which students can become acquainted or reconnect with their peers, proposed creative and group projects that could enable students to work together outside of class and allow them to choose their own partners.

6. Engagement facilitators and deterrents and some pedagogical advice

Interpreting our results using the concept of engagement facilitators adapted from Egbert (2020) allowed us to draw pedagogical implications for remote learning. Egbert's categories of engagement facilitators and engagement deterrents are particularly relevant; they stretch across the various types of engagement outlined above, underscoring the interconnectedness of the various levels of engagement.

Table 2. Engagement facilitators and deterrents

Categories (from Egbert 2020, 315)	Engagement facilitators	Engagement deterrents
Interest:	personal; individual; relevance; creativity	[no clear indicators in the responses]
Learning support:	organization; clarity; balance; instructor	imbalance of class and homework; different proficiency levels
Learner agency and autonomy:	ability to contribute to course flow; control over learning; choice of assignments and partners	no role in choice of assignments and partners
Emotions:	comfort; enjoyment; respect; fear or expectation of being called on	fear of embarrassment; anxiety; stress; being put on the spot prompted by technology; low motivation
Technology and external factors:	flexibility and accessibility	technology-related challenges; social media as a distraction; home distractions
Social interaction:	with peers – peer support and assistance; with instructors; focused and with clear expectations	fear of embarrassment; anxiety; stress; being put on the spot prompted by technology
Social connection:	with peers; with instructors; focused in and outside class	a lack or insufficiency of social connections with peers and instructors in and outside of class

As Table 2 shows, students perceived relevant learning materials, as well as creative and personalized assignments and projects, as engagement facilitators. Many students stressed the importance of individualized and creative projects, with some expressing a preference for group projects that would lead to elevated interest in the learning process.

Recommendation to instructors: Provide relevant and engaging activities that extend beyond the classroom and promote creativity, including group projects such as blogs and vlogs.

In terms of *learning support*, as factors in engagement students listed clear course structure and organization, clarity of expectations and objectives, fair balance of course elements, and predictability of classwork and homework. A few suggested that in a remote environment, instructors may consider placing more weight on class work, with the amount of homework reduced. The presence of learners of various levels of proficiency working in a shared learning environment can be a deterrent to engagement. and, if not addressed, can lead to disengagement, particularly at the emotional and behavioral levels.

Recommendation to instructors: Strive for clarity, organization, and balance of course components. In a classroom with students with more than one level of language proficiency, instructors should communicate with their students about their awareness of and attention to these different levels of language proficiency.

For learner agency and autonomy, third-year learners appreciated being able to contribute to the course design. They requested changes aligned with their needs and facilitated greater engagement. A lack of attention to student desires could be an engagement deterrent.

Recommendation to instructors: Endow advanced language learners with more agency and autonomy in course practices.

In the category of emotions, students referred to comfort, enjoyment, and respect. An expectation of being called on was an engagement facilitator for students, which led to students paying attention in class and staying on task. However, fear of embarrassment, personal anxiety, stress, and low motivation are deterrents to engagement.

Recommendation to instructors: Since feelings of comfort, enjoyment, and respect stem from positive interactions in class, regularly use spaces such as Breakout Rooms for group work that promotes peer support and be aware of students' comfort level with technological tools used for class participation.

Technology and external factors are mostly engagement facilitators, especially with the many benefits technology brings into language learning. However, several engagement deterrents appeared in this category, including unreliable internet connections and inadequate physical surroundings.

Recommendation to instructors: Avoid the assumption that every student has equal access to technology and physical surroundings

conducive to language learning. Be open to accommodations or alternatives in certain situations.

Students emphasized social interaction throughout their responses. Peer support raised their comfort level and lessened their fear of speaking in class. Interaction in groups created a place for collaboration, practice, and peer assistance. Students also valued interaction with instructors, and foregrounded the significance of synchronous classes. At the same time, for some, technology created an environment that heightened their personal anxiety. Many stressed that class interactions must be focused and have clear expectations.

Recommendation to instructors: During synchronous classes, create spaces for collaboration and peer support, design interactive group activities with clear objectives and expectations to assist students with staying on task, and develop additional Breakout Room activities for those groups that finish early in order to maintain student engagement.

The category of social connection is of great importance; while the majority of our students enjoyed social interactions, many felt socially disconnected, particularly outside the classroom. This leads us to stress that interaction is not always connection. Many students mentioned that while interacting in their Breakout Rooms, and when finishing tasks early, they would like to connect with others, to get to know their peers better, to “bond” and learn more about them. They admitted that in such instances, they might switch to English in order to connect by checking in with small talk, and students loved this part of their classes. These practices demonstrate that students themselves took steps to initiate social connections in the classroom. Our results reveal that our remote learners wished to establish and maintain personal connections that could lead to socializing in and outside of class. These desires were particularly felt at the second-year and third-year levels. Satar (2015, 498) has pointed out that learners need opportunities for off-task talk, and instructors need to think about how to do this best in a remote context in order to connect our learners socially.

Recommendation to instructors: Design out-of-class activities to assist learners in staying connected, ensuring in- and out-of-class socialization, using collaborative projects, chat rooms, and extracurricular events.

7. Limitations

The survey was carried out with a limited number of participants from

our overall small population of students learning Ukrainian. Its results ideally would have been supplemented by data from student focus groups, student diaries, or journals, as well as more formal participant observations. An examination of the differences in perceptions at different instructional levels, and factors that influence such differences, would be of particular interest. The instructors' reflections could also have provided a valuable perspective on remote delivery.

8. Conclusion

This paper reported on students' perceptions of their learning experiences in this crisis-driven environment. It explored engagement at the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, agentic, and social levels. This exploration of the various levels of engagement added to the view of engagement as a multidimensional concept whose various levels are often interconnected. This approach established categories that should be considered in a remote environment: interest, learning support, learner agency and autonomy, emotions, technology and external factors, social interaction, and social connection (see Table 1). The results have implications for instructional approaches and are of interest to those involved in pedagogical design of language teaching materials, technologically-assisted ones in particular.

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