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Polycultural Approach to Teaching English Under Martial Law

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Abstract

The paper aims at substantiating the theoretical, developing and approbating the method of realization of the polycultural approach of teaching English to the future teachers at the HEIs of Ukraine in the martial law conditions. In doing so, we employed a mixed-methods approach intertwining theoretical analysis of legal and educational literature with empirical tools (questionnaires, diagnostic tests, and a pedagogical experiment). The participants were 320 B2level students from four Ukrainian universities, who were assigned to an experimental group (EG, *n* = 165) and a control group (CG, *n* = 155). Surveys of intercultural communication readiness, tests on linguistic and cultural knowledge, incompletesentence tasks on practical application skills, and a tolerance index were used to collect data. Subsequently, the data collected were analyzed by comparing the pre- and post-test scores on four facets of polycultural competence – motivational-targeted, cognitive, activity-based, and reflective. The findings indicate a clear advance in the experimental group: the percentage of learners achieving the intermediate level rose from 21.3 % to 31.2 % and that of those achieving the upperintermediate level went up from 12.5 % to 27. 3%; on the contrary, no remarkable progress was observed in the control group. In general, this study demonstrates that the incorporation of digital resources, mobile applications, and culturally marked materials in English language teaching promotes the development of polycultural competence, particularly in crisis-affected education settings.

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Introduction

Currently the Ukrainian society is facing social disturbances that are without parallel since the independence, and active military actions, destruction of educational infrastructure, and mass migration have been the cause of adapting the national education system. For the participants of such system, this means not just physical threats, but multiple psychotraumatic occurrences and chronic stress, which, in turn, implies an about-turn in teacher training: from narrow understanding of linguistic competences toward focussing on teacher's own resilience and capacity for adaptation to the situational conditions. This harsh truth has, however, ironically inspired Ukraine to reach out to the world in so many sectors, including education, through schemes such as overseas internships, academic mobility and international grants. This evolving international cross border cooperation has been highlighted by Sikorska et al. (2023) as a hallmark in the internationalisation of higher education involving intercultural EN interaction with global partners and other worldviews.

This visibility thus requires that future teachers do more than simply knowing English; they must also be able to accurately read the motives and reading behaviours of its users, a competence situated at the core of polycultural competence. In his conceptualisation of this competence, Yang (2002) focuses on aspects such as cultural tolerance and sociocultural identity whereas Bennett (2017) expands and conceptualizes the construct through intercultural introspection and adaptive behaviour. Galante (2015) adds that it is to become "part of another culture while retaining one's own," and Ilie (2019) also validates it as an essential personality characteristic that includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For the scope of this article, we operationally define polycultural competence as the ability to accept cultural differences, use culturally specific English words, to be able to think about one's own conduct during intercultural experiences, and to be cognitively dissonant in the face of inaccurate stereotypes. The successful acquisition of this competence requires at the same time the polycultural approach to language teaching, which is considered a pedagogical strategy resource by the researchers. Trouche et al. Literally for (2023), such a focus on the means is a key way in which they escape/ transcend linguistic and cultural borders, while Tektibayeva and Absatova (2015) conceptualize it as a foundation that contributes to the development of tolerant individuals and the society at large - a view that is harmonized with by Kara Özkan (2022) In terms of the activities in class and contents of textbook. The strategy can thus be conceptualized as one which facilitates learning a language through an ethno cultural coexistence and enrichment- in a nutshell, shared understanding about what language is about, anti-xenophobia stance and 'linguaculture' (cf. Joint reflection on one's own communicative behaviour.

To realize such a strategy in practice under the present conditions of war, educators have so far largely embraced digitalisation as destruction of educational infrastructures and rather shaky access to electricity and Internet have made remote and mobile learning not just an option but a requisite. Traxler (2007) views mobile learning as transformative in that education is now timely, personalized and contextualized, while Meñiado (2023) points out that contemporary technologies are changing the way English is taught across the globe by providing new methodologies to age-old teaching impediments. For Ukrainian higher education, synchronous applications like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams and other mobile platforms, blogs as well as podcasts are now not only established tools for ongoing self study but have become vital tool for basic teaching, especially in those areas near fighting zones or under temporary occupation.

And this technological transition is also solidly based on a sound legal and policy framework. At the international level, documents such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) and the 2022 Recommendation on the Significance of Plurilingual and Intercultural Education reiterate that language learning is a lifelong personal quality and hold that linguistic and cultural diversity must be converted into educational and social capital. On a national level, the Strategy for Higher Education Development in Ukraine for 2022–2032 (2020) emphasizes intellectual, cultural and professional development as well as social cohesion and European integration, and the Standard of Higher Education in the specialty "Secondary Education" (2024) clearly states that future teachers must respectfully treat cultural diversity, apply digital technologies ethically, and be prepared for lifelong professional development in an ever-changing environment. Therefore, promoting polyculturalism education is not only the educator's preferred choice but the key to the success of nurturing teachers with culture literacy who can travel across wartime intercultural turmoil.

Despite the European-recognized (Council of Europe, 2020) and national educational documentation underpinning the concept of the polycultural approach (Policy of Moldovan HE, 2020), and despite the transformative possibilities of digital technologies in education (Traxler, 2007; Meniado, 2023), there is an obvious lack of empirical data on a practically viable method of enhance polycultural competence, especially under the extreme conditions of martial law, where psychological trauma, disruption of infrastructure and limitations on face-to-face contact are a matter of fact. The aim of the study is to fill in this gap by providing theoretical substantiation and developing a technology of realization of the polycultural approach in the process of teaching English in HEIs of Ukraine in the conditions of war in an experimental study. In line with the stated objective, this study seeks answers to the following questions: 1) As martial law continues, what are the degrees of formation of these components in the future English teachers? and (2) Would the applicability methodology, which is based on systematic exploitation of digital resources and culturally marked content, significantly increase levels of these components on the traditional-based instructional methodology? With these questions in mind, the present study aims to provide empirically based suggestions for training culturally well-engaged, digitally informed, and emotionally resilient teachers who can deftly engage in intercultural communication and collaboration in education contexts affected by crises (Bakum et al., 2022; Bennett, 2017; Sikorska et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Legislative Framework

Among the international organizations that have the greatest influence on clarifying issues related to intercultural education are UNESCO and the Council of Europe. The legal and regulatory documents emphasize the development of social plurilingualism in intercultural interaction (Intercultural Competences. Conceptual and Operational Framework, 2013; Council of Europe, 2018; Council of Europe, 2020; Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers, 2022). This implies mobility and a holistic complex of social, psychological, and cognitive factors of coexistence of languages and cultures. For example, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) focuses on changing the purpose of language teaching. If earlier it was about achieving mastery in communication and focusing on the "ideal native speaker" as a model, now language acquisition is considered a personal quality that should be developed throughout life. The effectiveness of learning is determined not only by the acquired level of knowledge and skills but also by the ability to mediate in European society, mutual understanding and cooperation, and European mobility.

The "Recommendation on the Importance of Plurilingual and Intercultural Education for Democratic Culture" (2022) emphasizes transforming linguistic and cultural diversity into educational and social capital across all educational levels. It supports democratizing culture, valuing diversity, promoting respect for cultural differences, openness to other beliefs and practices, and developing analytical and critical thinking. The emphasis on the cultural component in language teaching is noted in a number

of legislative and regulatory documents of the education system of Ukraine: the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Ukraine for 2022–2032, the Law of Ukraine "On Higher Education," and the Higher Education Standards. According to the "Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Ukraine for 2022–2032", personal orientation is a priority area of higher education. Its goal is the individual's intellectual, cultural, and professional development, the formation of high-quality human capital, and the cohesion of society for the establishment of Ukraine as an equal member of the European community (Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Ukraine for 2022–2032, 2020). The Standard of Higher Education in the specialty "Secondary Education" focuses on respecting the diversity of cultures and using digital educational resources in compliance with ethical and legal norms. This is reflected in general competency № 16 – value and respect diversity and multiculturalism; № 17 – 15 the ability to 15 the ability to use information and communication technologies in compliance with ethical and legal norms in the context of European integration processes; and № 11 – 15 the ability to use digital technologies in the educational process, create and use digital educational resources (Standard of higher education in the specialty 014 Secondary education (by subject specialties) at the first (bachelor's) level of higher education, 2024). These competencies indicate the need to train a new generation of teachers who are ready for continuous professional and personal development in the context of dynamic changes and close interaction with other ethnic groups.

Categories of "polycultural approach" and "polycultural competence" in scientific discourse

The issue of high-quality acquisition of foreign languages begins with the correct choice of approaches to learning, which, from the point of view of scientists (I. Dyrda, G. Ellis, W. Griffith, H. Harvin, N. Holub, O. Horoshkina, S. Karaman, S. Nikolaeva, E. Rod) contribute to the formation of a comprehensively competent and highly cultured personality. The approach to language teaching is a strategic direction that facilitates the formation of the main aim, objectives, and content of the educational process and directs them to achieve a positive result (Bakum et al., 2019, p. 36).

In modern education, the scientists distinguish competency, communicative, activity, functional-stylistic, and polycultural approaches, which emphasize language learning through the acquisition of certain competencies (language, speech, digital, innovative, cultural, etc.) and their practical application in communication in everyday and professional spheres (Bakum et al., 2022; Bakum et al., 2019).

According to scientists (J. Bennett, D. Deardorff, A. Galante, L. Honcharenko, V. Mychkovska, L. Peretyaha, T. Polonska, J. Raven, L. Vorotnyak, R. Young), the polycultural approach to language teaching contains humanitarian and educational components (full-fledged education depends on the level of students' language proficiency as a means of communication); linguistic (a continuous relationship between languages ensures a comparison of a foreign language with one's own and switching from one language to another).

To sum up, we can single out the characteristic features of the polycultural approach:

- focus on cognition of the linguistic picture of the world;
- the ability to eliminate misunderstandings, which makes it possible to prevent racism and xenophobia and develop a climate of intolerance;
- learning foreign languages in the context of history, mentality, values, traditions, patterns of behavior;
- the ability to reflect on one's behavior in intercultural communication.

Some authors consider a polycultural approach as a fundamental resource for teachers' work that allows them to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries (Trouche et al., 2023). Others consider it the basis for the development of a tolerant personality and a tool that affects the well-being of society and the emergence of a new culture (Tektibayeva & Absatova, 2015; Kara Özkan, 2022). We define the polycultural approach to teaching future English teachers as a strategic direction focused on language acquisition through awareness of the coexistence in society of

various ethno-cultural communities and ways of their cultural mutual enrichment.

The implementation of the polycultural approach occurs through the formation of competencies. Today, European scholars in general and the heads of Lithuanian cultural centers in particular define common competencies closely related to the polycultural one multilingualism (communication in state, native, and foreign languages), digital literacy, personal, social, and civic activity, initiative and entrepreneurship, and cultural consciousness (Survutaitė et al., 2024). Therefore, we appeal to Young's definition (Yang, 2002) of the term "polycultural competence" – a combination of cultural tolerance and sociocultural identity; a person's awareness of the cultural diversity of the world, a friendly, open, and impartial attitude to any culture, and its bearers (p. 83).

According to Bennett (Bennett, 2017), polycultural competence covers the perspective of intercultural relations, cultural introspection, certain systems of views on the creation of cultural contrasts, the ability to analyze interactions, predict misunderstandings, and adaptive behavior. The formation of polycultural competence involves the mastery of adequate models of behavior, which helps to maintain an atmosphere of harmony, peace, and mutual trust, to eliminate intolerant attitudes towards people who differ in skin color, language, values, and culture.

From the position of Galante (2015), polycultural competence is the ability of an individual to integrate into another culture, provided that the relationship with the native language and culture is preserved; a combination of personal qualities, acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities of successful intercultural interaction, aimed at the formation of conflictfree identification of the individual in a multicultural society and their entry into the multicultural world space. Ilie (2019) considers polycultural competence to be the most important quality of personality that contributes to effective intercultural communication and contains knowledge, skills, and attitudes (p. 265).

We interpret a polycultural competence of the future English teachers as the ability to tolerate cultural differences, to use culturally labeled vocabulary, phraseological units, idioms, language clichés, and proverbs in English; to reflect on one's own behavior during intercultural interaction; correlate information with feelings and emotions; and refute erroneous judgments.

Structural Components of Polycultural Competence

Our research involves conducting an experimental study. It demands the determination of the structural components of students' polycultural competence in the preparation of a future English teacher: motivational-targeted, cognitive, activity, and reflexive. The motivational-targeted component is characterized by the improvement of value and social readiness for intercultural interaction, a set of motives and needs that motivate the student to intercultural dialogue (Johnson, 2025; Yılmaz, 2023).

The cognitive component involves the knowledge of lexical and morphological units, stylistic means, and ethno-cultural features of other cultures (Irgasheva, 2025). The activity component enables the application of linguistic, speech, and sociocultural knowledge and skills in practice (Schauer, 2024).

The reflective component demonstrates the ability to reflect on one's own behavior and knowledge of the system of moral, national, and universal values. It focuses on avoiding stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes and reveals one's cultural identity during intercultural interaction (Rakhimdjanova & Malikahon, 2025).

Aims. The aim of the article is to investigate the meaning and defining features of the polycultural approach; to analyze the features of the formation of polycultural competence of future English teachers in wartime conditions.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

In order to theoretically substantiate and experimentally prove the methodologis of the realization of the polycultural approach to education under the martial law, in this achievement of goal the authors used theoretical and empirical analysis based on leading approaches in research methodology – design of complex empirical studies the quasi experimental mixed methods design. The empirical

part was organized as a pedagogical experiment, which took its course in three successive phases: the initial phase, targeted at evaluating the baseline polycultural competence; the second phase, the formative stage of the proposed teaching methodology in the experimental group; and the control phase, which aimed at comparing the pre- and post-test results of both the EG and the CG. This structure allowed us to assess not only the baseline of the investigated skill but also the difference in effectiveness between traditional teaching and our experimental technique (Bakum et al., 2022). It was deemed that such a comparative rigour would be essential for producing credible findings on the potential for adapting digital tools and culturally specific content in EFL teaching in the pressurized circumstances of war-impacted education.

Participants

The study was conducted with 320 upper secondary students, both second (n=238) and third year (n=82) participants, whose English proficiency was at the B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. These individuals represent a sample of participants from four Ukrainian HEIs: Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University, Donetsk National University of Economics and Trade named after Mykhailo Tugan Baranovsky, Open International University of Human Development "Ukraine", and Kherson State University. After that, the sample was divided into two groups: the experimental group, which included 165 students, and the control group, which consisted of 155 students. This made for a fair comparison, because before the experiment both groups had a similar educational background, comparable levels of language proficiency, and were taught with similar curriculums.

Data Collection Tools

For data collection, a range of previously validated diagnostic instruments were used to assess four structural dimensions of polycultural competence: motivational targeted, cognitive, activity-based (behavioural), and reflective. Motivational on Line Component To measure motivational on line component, we used questionnaire on students' readiness for intercultural communication, their motives and in intercultural contexts representatives of other cultures preparedness goal setting orientation. The cognitive dimension was tested by a language test with multiple-choice and matching questions, in which students' morphological, lexical and syntactical knowledge required for intercultural communication were examined, i.e., they were assessed on their knowledge of culturally marked lexical units (Bakum et al., 2022) needed for effective ICC. Activity Component We used the "Incomplete Sentences" technique (Brown & Fritz, 1996) to analyse students' practical skills of using linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, which consists in having respondents complete unfinished statements dealing with intercultural encounters. The reflective element was also evaluated through a buttolance index with 22 items which enable us to measure the students' capability of introspection, the potential to fight their stereotypical thoughts and the disposition to view people from other cultures as their co-equal in humanity. While in its prototype stage, the design of the teaching kit was influenced by some digital tools like synchronous platforms (Zoom, Google Meet), multimedia presentation builders (Prezi, Canva, Piktochart), mobile applications (Duolingo, HelloTalk, Memrise), and podcast platforms (British Council Blog, FluentU) – that participated as agents of the delivery of culturally shaped content and real intercultural exchange (Traxler, 2007; Meniado, 2023).

Data Analysis

The above data was then processed quantitatively, by finding the percentage of students at four identified levels of polycultural competence: elementary, pre intermediate, intermediate and upper intermediate. At each of the four components, the proportions of students achieving each level were calculated separately for the experimental and control group at both the initial (pre test) and final (post test) phases of the experiment. This comparative technique enabled us to monitor changes in percentage distributions between time points within each group. To assess the performance of the suggested approach, we also compared the results of pre-test and post-test of the EG with that of the CG with a focus on the degree of advancement in the intermediate and upper intermediate bands. The results of this analysis are

shown in Table 1 and Table 2 in a manner that coherently represents the changes in all components, in this way providing a clear and easily understandable evidence to conclude about the acceptability of the experimental treatment.

Results

The first stage of the experiment

Based on that we activated diagnostic tools for the experimental group (EG, n=165) and the control group (CG, n=155) at the beginning of the pedagogical experiment to seize the current level of polycultural competence of English learners under pressure and distraction of war at both camps. The survey data confirmed that even though students are evidently consciously aware of the significance of polycultural interaction and have a basic understanding of stereotypes, traditions, and customs, they have persistently complained that they are pragmatically helpless in speech etiquette and that they lack reflection for themselves at least during their own behaviour in intercultural exchanges. This supposed deficit was supported by the structural tests-Bleo d diagnostic testsl subsequentl.

At the first stage of the pedagogical experiment, we conducted a survey with students with B2 foreign language proficiency. The respondents were asked to answer 6 questions aimed at assessing the level of readiness to use the acquired knowledge of foreign languages and culture in intercultural communication; finding out the reasons for the emergence of prejudice and misunderstandings; determining the level of development of a sense of tolerance; and defining the gist of the concept of "intercultural communication". The questionnaire form is provided in the appendix..

The results of the survey show that the students are conscious of polycultural interaction with representatives of other national communities and have a certain knowledge of the peculiarities of intercultural communication (a sense of tolerance, awareness of stereotypes, traditions, and customs of different countries). The respondents showed a willingness to positively perceive differences in the process of intercultural communication; however, they emphasize the lack of knowledge of speech etiquette and the ability to reflect on their own behavior during intercultural communication.

The first stage of the experiment also involved testing to diagnose the levels (elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate) of formedness of components of students' polycultural competence in the process of teaching foreign languages in the experimental and control groups.

The levels of formedness of the *motivational-targeted* **component were conducted by means of diagnostics of determining the formation of motives, which facilitated the assessment of the level of development of internal motivation when studying particular disciplines.** The results are presented in Table 1.

According to the results of the survey, it was established that in the first group, 51 students (31%) demonstrated the elementary level of formedness of the motivation-targeted component, 58 (34.3%) – the pre-intermediate, 40 (24.7%) – the intermediate, and 16 (10%) – the upper-intermediate. In the second group, 43 students (27%) had the elementary level of formedness of the motivational-targeted component of polycultural competence, 61 (40%) – the pre-intermediate level, 33 (21%) – the intermediate level, and 18 (12%) – the upper-intermediate level.

To determine the levels of formedness of the *cognitive* **component, we offered a test in both groups. The work contains 13 test assignments, which include 4 answer options and 2 matching tasks (statement - country, word - grammatical form). The purpose of the tasks is to check the knowledge of the language (morphology, vocabulary, and syntax) necessary for successful intercultural communication.**

The results show that in the first group, 46 students (27.5%) performed the work with an "unsatisfactory" grade, 61 students (37.5%) with a "satisfactory" grade, 36 students (22%) with a "good" grade, and 22 students (13%) with an "excellent" grade. In the second group, 37 students (24%) received an "unsatisfactory" grade, 57 students (36.5%) – a "satisfactory" grade, 37 students (24%) – a "good" grade, and 24 students (15.5%) – an "excellent" grade.

The diagnosis of the levels of formedness of the *activity* **component is based on the methodology of "Incomplete Sentences" (Brown & Fritz, 1996),**

which allows us to draw conclusions about the students' priorities and aspirations in the process of cultural dialogue. The results showed that 68 students of the first group (42%) and 53 students of the second group (34.2%) had low implementation of language, speech, and sociocultural knowledge, skills, and abilities in practical terms. The students were not interested in the interlocutor's reaction, did not have the skills to use appropriate communication styles in certain problematic situations, and did not try to understand the reason for unsuccessful intercultural interaction.

47 students of the first group (28.4%) and 46 students of the second group (30%) had a significant interest in intercultural communication; however, due to lack of knowledge, they did not master the skills and abilities to apply the necessary communication style according to the social status of a person or a certain situation.

28 students of the first group (16%) and 31 students of the second group (20%) demonstrated the ability to apply the acquired knowledge and skills to intercultural communication at the intermediate level. The analysis of the students' answers to the sentences "I like intercultural communication because..." and "In my opinion, a successful participant in intercultural communication is someone who..." showed that they have a culture of speech, communication skills, and the ability to solve problems of intercultural interaction.

The levels of formedness of the *reflective* component were diagnosed due to the determination of the tolerance index, which contained 22 statements. The elementary level of formedness of the reflective component was shown by 47 students of the first group (28.4%) and 40 students of the second group (25.8%), the pre-intermediate – by 59 students of the first group (35.7%) and 54 students of the second group (34.8%), the intermediate – by 38 students of the first group (22.9%) and 35 students of the second group (22.5%), the upper-intermediate – by 21 students of the first group (13%) and 26 students of the second group (16.9%).

Together these baseline data answer the first research question. On average, the distribution of students at the four competence levels at the beginning of the experiment was almost entirely concentrated at the bottom in both groups: 32.3% for EG and 33.9% for PG were at the elementary level, and only 21.3% and 12.5% reached the intermediate and upperintermediate level, respectively. The CG had a comparable distribution of students, with 27.9% elementary, 35.2% preintermediate, 21.8% intermediate, and 15.1% upperintermediate. These results suggest suggest that, in a situation of martial law, in the absence of a focused intervention, the future English teachers' polycultural competence is critically underdeveloped and so without them for a practical teaching model - particularly since found in the practical and reflective areas - which the proposed methodoglogy could remedy.

Table 1: Distribution of students by levels of formedness of components of polycultural competence at the first stage of the experiment

Component	Group	Elementary	Pre-intermediate	Intermediate	Upper-intermediate
Motivational-targeted	EG	31.0	34.3	24.7	10.0
	CG	27.0	40.0	21.0	12.0
Cognitive	EG	27.5	37.5	22.0	13.0
	CG	24.0	36.5	24.0	15.5
Activity	EG	42.0	28.4	16.0	13.6
	CG	34.2	30.0	20.0	15.8
Reflective	EG	28.4	35.7	22.9	13.0
	CG	25.8	34.8	22.5	16.9
Average	EG	32.3	33.9	21.3	12.5
	CG	27.9	35.2	21.8	15.1

The final stage of the experiment

After identifying the primary deficiencies, we applied the experimental method only in the EG, whereas the CG was taught in the usual way of foreign language teaching. At the end (control) phase of the experiment, post test that similar in structure and difficulty with the pre test was administered so as to make a direct comparison in order to find the answer

for the second research question. As can be seen from Table 2, the results show that there were significant increases on all four parts in the EG, but no such significant increases in the CG.

At the third stage of the experiment, we aimed to determine the feasibility of using the methodology for implementing a polycultural approach to teaching foreign languages in higher education institutions. 165 students of the experimental group and 155 students of the control group were involved in writing final assessment tests. The experimental group was taught according to the methodology of the development of polycultural competence, which involved the use of linguistic and country studies texts and a system of exercises aimed at developing the polycultural competence. The study in the control group was due to a traditional system of teaching foreign languages.

In order to objectively evaluate the assignment results, we created similar conditions for students of the experimental and control groups: an equal number of tasks, content, time for completion, and assessment criteria.

When testing the levels of formedness of the *motivational-targeted* component of polycultural competence at the final stage of the experiment (appendix), we used the methodology similar to the one at the final stage. The results (table 2) of the survey showed that in the EG, 25 students (15.2%) had the elementary level of formedness of the motivational-targeted component of polycultural competence, 48 (29%) – the pre-intermediate level, 50 (29.8%) – the intermediate level, 42 (26%) – the upper-intermediate one. In the CG, 36 students (23.2%) reached the elementary level of formedness of the motivational-targeted component, 64 (40.8%) – the pre-intermediate level, 32 (21%) – the intermediate level, and 23 (15%) – the upper-intermediate level. During the test, EG students, in contrast to CG students, demonstrated their readiness for intercultural interaction, motivation to succeed in intercultural communication, and the ability to set goals and achieve them.

To determine the levels of formedness of the *cognitive* component at the final stage of the experiment, we proposed exercises similar to those used at the first stage of the experiment. After the implementation of the experimental methodology, the number of students with the formed elementary level of cognitive component was 20 (12.1%), with the pre-intermediate level – 45 (27.3%), with the intermediate level – 56 (33.9%), and with the upper-intermediate one – 44 (26.7%). In the CG, 33 students (21%) were at the elementary level of formedness of the cognitive component, 58 (38%) – at the pre-intermediate level, 40 (25.6%) – at the intermediate level, and 24 (15.4%) – at the upper-intermediate level.

According to the results of the test, we can state that EG students demonstrate a more advanced knowledge of language (morphology, vocabulary, syntax). In contrast to CG students, they displayed the awareness of art, literature, architecture, and historical monuments; knowledge and understanding of native and world cultures; the phenomenon of polyculturalism; and the peculiarities of the culture of interethnic communication.

To determine the levels of formedness of the *activity* component of polycultural competence, the students were proposed to use the "Method of incomplete sentences" (Brown & Fritz, 1996).

The elementary level of formedness of the activity component was shown by 29 students of EG (17.6%) and 47 students of CG (30.3%), the pre-intermediate level – by 41 students of EG (24.5%) and 49 students of CG (31.7%), the intermediate level – by 49 students of EG (30%) and 31 students of CG (20%), the upper-intermediate level – by 46 students of EG (27.9%) and 28 students of CG (18%).

The students of EG were more successful in solving intercultural interaction problems, applying linguistic and sociocultural skills in practical terms, using the necessary communication style according to the social status of a person or a particular situation, and analyzing and evaluating the results of intercultural interaction.

The levels of formedness of the *reflective* component of polycultural competence were determined by using the diagnostics similar to the one applied at the first stage of the experiment.

In the EG, 19 students (11.5%) were found to have the elementary level of formedness of the reflective component, 48 (29%) – the pre-intermediate level,

51 (31%) – the intermediate level, 47 (28.5%) – the upper-intermediate level. In the CG 35 students (22.5 %) were at the elementary level, 57 (36.8 %) – at the pre-intermediate level, 38 (24.5%) – at the intermediate level, and 25 (16.2%) – at the upper-intermediate level.

The results obtained after the diagnosis of the levels of formedness of the reflective component show that EG students have significantly improved their ability to reflect on their own activities and behavior; to perceive a representative of another culture as an equal partner in communication; to resist stereotypes; and to attempt to objectively assess the situation.

Table 2: Distribution of students by levels of formedness of components of polycultural competence at the third stage of the experiment

Component	Group	Elementary	Pre-intermediate	Intermediate	Upper-intermediate
Motivational-targeted	EG	15.2	29.0	29.8	26.0
	CG	23.2	40.8	21.0	15.0
Cognitive	EG	12.1	27.3	33.9	26.7
	CG	21.0	38.0	25.6	15.4
Activity	EG	17.6	24.5	30.0	27.9
	CG	30.3	31.7	20.0	18.0
Reflective	EG	11.5	29.0	31.0	28.5
	CG	22.5	36.8	24.5	16.2
Average	EG	14.1	27.4	31.2	27.3
	CG	23.9	37.0	23.0	16.1

To sum up the total effect (middle rows of Tables 1 and 2), the EG showed a clear shift from the bottom to the upper levels of the proficiency scale: the percentage of EG students at the elementary level dropped from 32.3% to 14.1%, whereas the upper intermediate level showed an increase from 12.5% to 27.3%. The CG, on the other hand, did not show any substantial improvement: the percentage of students at the elementary level dropped marginally from 27.9% to 23.9%, and that of the upper intermediate level stayed nearly constant at 16.1% (16.1% is slightly up from 15.1%. These results clearly provide an answer to the second research question: the suggested approach, which is based on the intentional inclusion of digital tools and culturally marked materials, does greatly improve the polycultural competence of prospective English teachers in comparison to traditional methodology of teaching even in the context of martial law and by far the best results can be attained by addressing the previously unexplored activity oriented and reflective aspects. The discussion will focus on the potential impact of these findings on teaching and research.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to develop the theoretical rationale and the practical mechanisms of carrying out the polycultural approach to the process of Bradford English Course (BEC) (security-enhanced English-language course) in Ukrainian HEIs under the conditions of martial law and to monitor its effectiveness. The first research question was to determine the baseline levels of polycultural competence of wartime prospective English teachers, and the second was to investigate the potential effectiveness of the suggested digital enhanced methodology against the traditional instruction. The results provide strong evidence that experimental intervention success, and the results contribute important insights both for theory and practice in crisis affected educational settings.

Interpretation of Baseline Findings

The pre-intervention evaluations indicated a critical level of deficiency in students' polycultural competence in both groups, with the large number of students being at the elementary and pre-intermediate level in all four structural components. This was more so in the activity, in which more than 40% of the EG could not use linguistic and sociocultural knowledge in real life intercultural contexts, and in the reflective, in which students had difficulties when they tried to look inside themselves and also confronted stereotypes. These results

support Bennett's (2017) notion that intercultural sensitivity is a developmental trajectory which must be intentionally nurtured through exposure, reflection, and facilitated practice; in the absence of such scaffolding, learners are "stuck" at ethnocentric stages where their own cultural frame of reference is the only point of comparison. In a similar vein, the relatively poorer cognitive performance in detecting culturally marked words is in accordance with Galante's (2015) claim that intercultural competence is not reconstructing linguistic errors, but understanding the cultural connotations and pragmatic rules. Another proof for Yang's (2020) claim that below the surface knowledge and skills are crucial in intercultural communication is the students' difficulty in speech etiquette and non-equivalent language units. Yang (2002) cautioned that learners would be able to develop linguistic competence but not cultural competence in the absence of conscious recognition of the multiplicity of cultures, a concept which contributes to perpetuation of stereotypes and inhibits authentic dialogue.

Effectiveness of the Proposed Methodology (Research Question 2)

The posttest results showed clear evidence for the efficacy of the experimental treatment as the EG demonstrated significantly positive gains in all four subscales, while the CG did not show significant changes. The largest increases were in the activity and reflective components that had the lowest baseline scores, indicating that the method was particularly effective in dealing the practical and introspective levels of knowledge that are often overlooked in traditional teaching. The remarkable progress in the activity segment – basic level declining from 42.0% to 17.6% – is due to the gradual and harmonized application of digital resources (Zoom, Google Meet, Duolingo, HelloTalk, BBC Learning English) that permitted students to participate in virtual and real discussions across cultures, within a collaborative and integrated approach between theory and practice. This result is in line with Traxler's (2007) view that mobile learning endows education with timeliness, individually-customised and situational Modes of learning (of particular, if not more, value as wartime conditions advocate such considerations) and with Meniado's (2023) conception of digital technologies as solution-driven means of providing continuing education. Likewise, the significant enhancement in the reflective component – the upper intermediate level increasing from 13.0% to 28.5% – indicates the focused reflective activities and scaffolding analysis included in the methodology. This development follows Bennett's (2017) sequence because he views progression through the ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages as requiring intentional reflection on one's own cultural identity. Through this sequence, students also began to gain the ability to think critically about exchanges, to challenge stereotypes and to view cultural differences as avenues through which they could be mutually enriched — what Ilie (2019) referred to as the attitudinal aspect of intercultural competence.

In addition, the component of cognition was significantly improved, as students had more information about culturally marked vocabulary, phraseological units and idioms with realia and multimedia (Prezi, Canva, Piktochart). This corroborates with the definition of polycultural approach provided in Trouche et al. (2023) and Tektibayeva and Absatova (2015), highlighting the significance of breaking through language walls and shaping tolerant individuals. The motivational targeted component revealed a notable change towards a more intrinsic motivation, with the elementary level decreasing from 31.0 to 15.2%, in the line with the European discourse of lifelong language learning as a personal attribute (Council of Europe, 2020) and with the Ukrainian strategic visions of HE as a mechanism for professional growth (Strategy for the Development of Higher Education, 2020).

The Role of Digitalisation in CrisisAffected Education

The effectiveness of the proposed approach depended on the intentional combination of digital tools, which allowed for the delivery of culturally unique content and enabled the execution of intercultural exchanges that could not be carried out in traditional ways due to damaged teaching facilities, unstable connectivity, and displacement. Synchronous platforms, mobile applications, and podcasts are vital tools for ensuring educational continuity. This dependence

on digitalisation resonates with Meniado's (2023) statement that contemporary technologies are revolutionising the teaching of English and Traxler's' (2007) foresight that mobile learning would render education timely and situational. The multicultural dimension of all these materials – as far as they represent different cultures or allow access to native speakers – made it possible for the students to get into a foreign language situation without leaving Ukraine.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

The results indicate the polycultural approach as a potential meta-reference point for language teaching in that it supports language learning with an awareness of ethno cultural coexistence and mutual enrichment. The polycultural competence structural model was a solid foundation for identifying gaps, developing interventions, and evaluating progress, and extended previous conceptualizations (Yang, 2002; Bennett, 2017; Galante, 2015; Ilie, 2019) by breaking the construct down into assessable elements. From a pedagogical perspective, this research contributes with an internationally aligned (Council of Europe, 2020) practical and evidence-based approach that encompasses digital-based tools, culturally marked materials, and reflective practice. The kit is designed to be flexible and usable by teachers with very little in the way of resources in countries torn by war, and at the same time to be highly effective in terms of learning. Additionally, the research highlights a need to bring the personal aspect into the language teaching, as supported by Ukrainian strategic documents (Strategy, 2020; Standard, 2024); building resilience, empathy and tolerance is not just a educational aspiration but a wartime imperative.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are some limitations that need to be considered. First, this sample consisted of B2 level students from four Ukrainian universities, and thus the generalizability is limited. Second, the study was based mainly on quantitative indicators, which might not fully reflect the complexity of intercultural experiences; future investigations might include qualitative approaches such as interviews or reflective journals. Third, it is not known whether the observed gains are sustainable over the long term, which points to the need for longitudinal studies. Fourth, the study did not compare the relative contribution of each tool or the effectiveness of digital tools to enhance specific dimensions of the polycultural competence. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, this article advances a burgeoning scholarship that identifies polycultural education as a pedagogy of imperiled times in and beyond 2020. As Kara Özkan (2022) and Tektibayeva and Absatova (2015) have stated, "...developing tolerant and culturally informed individuals is crucial in ensuring the well-being of a society and in deterring xenophobia." In the context of Ukraine, where war has torn at lives and society across borders and borders within them, the polycultural approach offers a way forward not only for working with international partners but also for the diverse society of Ukraine itself, a way forward that takes apprehension, misunderstanding, and continuing conflict as condition not only of engagement but resolve. Future research may explore further the area in which crisis pedagogy, digital innovation, and intercultural education converge to formulate still more efficacious, contextual methodologies.

Conclusions

Conclusions

The purpose of the research is to theoretically justify, elaborate and empirically prove the feasibility of a polycultural approach to teaching English at the Ukrainian higher education institution amidst the extreme challenges of martial law. The results unambiguously attest to the possibility and the effectivity of the suggested approach, grounded in the strategic orientation toward learning the language in view of the equal coexistence of diverse ethno cultural communities and developing respectful attitudes toward their national values and cultural treasures. The intervention study, which combined digital materials, mobile-based applications and real culturally marked materials, was effective in remediating the grave midterm found deficiencies, especially in the activity oriented and reflective aspects of polycultural competence – aspects of competence wholly ignored by traditional language

teaching. Strong empirical evidence is provided for the success of the method. Among the experimental group, the percentage of students who reached the intermediate level of polycultural competence went from 21.3% to 31.2% (an increase of 9.9%), and the number of those who achieved the upper intermediate level from 12.5% to 27.3% (an increase of 14.8%). In contrast, the control group which was exposed to traditional teaching methods did not significantly differ for any of the four structural components – motivational targeted, cognitive, activity based and reflective. This sharp polarization waves the superiority of the polycultural paradigm over traditional methods of teaching, particularly in context of crisis-torn educational environment where psychological tension, infrastructural destruction and miniscule face to face engagement follows.

Theoretically, the findings establish that the structure model of polycultural competence is a powerful analytic for identifying gaps, mapping intervention, and tracking changes. By translating polycultural competence into tangible, assessable elements, this work expands and fine-tunes existing frameworks outlined by Bennett (2017), Galante (2015), and Ilie (2019), and serv es as a means to quantify (ithysical) (international) (p)(compatibilit) the i (compatibilit)(performance)abilities across educational and research fields drrtheelr inturrculturrtolabilities systesterically. These results further confirm the fundamental assumptions underlying the polycultural model as presented by Trouche et al. (2023) and Tektibayeva & Absatova (2015), and attest to the fact that the crossing of linguistic and cultural barriers is not a utopian ideal, but a realistic pedagogical objective that may be realized through well-planned teacher training and the use of suitable technological resources. On a practical level, the research confirms that digitalization – via synchronous channels, mobile apps, podcasts, and multimedia presentation software – is not just a luxury supplement to polycultural education, but a vital facilitator of it during the wartime restrictions. In areas devastated by destruction of educational facilities, intermittent electricity and Internet service, and mass displacement, digital resources represent the only realistic means to continue education and promote intercultural dialogue. As Traxler (2007) and Meniado (2023) point out, the multicultural nature of these materials enables students to experience real foreign language situations and communicate with native speakers at home despite war-related physical constraints.

The findings also highlight the deeply personal nature of teaching language in crisis times: building resilience, empathy and tolerance – which are at the core of the reflective element of polycultural competence – provides prospective teachers with the psychological means to resist pathogenetic influences, to cope with stress and to sustain positive intercultural relations even when their own cultures are under attack. This is in line with the strategic objectives presented in the Ukrainian policy documents (Strategy for the Development of Higher Education, 2020; Standard of Higher Education, 2024) and echoes the European concept of lifelong language learning as a personal competence needed for democratic culture and social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2020).

Recommendations

In view of the results, the below listed practical suggestions are given for teachers, school leaders and policy-makers. For the teachers, it is advisable that teachers of languages introduce culture-based contents linguistics units, idiomatic units, sayings, authentic a/v materials on a daily basis in their lessons and not simply as decontextualized grammar drills. Reflective practices such as guided journals and structured debriefings should be institutionalized as a means to facilitate the kind of introspection that is necessary to assist individuals as move from ethnocentric to ethnorelative positions of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2017). Educators are also invited to take advantage of other digital resources available – mobile applications (Duolingo, HelloTalk, Memrise), podcasts (British Council Blog, FluentU), and multimedia platforms (Prezi, Canva, Piktochart) – to provide students with more immersive and interactive learning experiences. As for the higher education administrators and policymakers, HEIs are advised to establish a reliable digital infrastructure to sustain their online services, especially in areas close to combat zones. Teacher education programmes should be reformed to integrate compulsory modules on polycultural education, intercultural

communication and digital technologies and hence to empower beginning teachers with competences that correspond with the national Standard of Higher Education (2024) and european frameworks (Council of Europe, 2020). Furthermore, schools should also enthusiastically encourage international academic mobility, virtual exchanges, and collaborations with overseas universities to facilitate real experiences of intercultural dialogue (Sikorska et al., 2023).

Prospects

There are a number of promising avenues for future research In the first place, longitudinal research is required to monitor the long term maintenance and further advancement of polycultural competence, as the present study only assessed outcomes directly following the intervention. Second, qualitative approaches (eg in depth interviews, ethnographic observations and reflective narrative analysis) should be used in conjunction with quantitative measures to understand the complex, individual experiences of students engaging in intercultural encounters. Third, it would be valuable to have comparative studies on the differential effectiveness of particular digital tool(s) in supporting the development of specific facets of polycultural competence. Fourth, future research should investigate the extent to which the proposed approach is transferrable to different proficiency levels, educational settings, and nations, as the present participants were B2 level students from Ukrainian universities. Finally, continued research should also examine how educating in polyculturalism can play a role in countering xenophobia, reducing prejudice, and fostering social cohesion in conflict-affected and displaced societies (e.g., Kara Özkan, 2022; see also Yang, 2002), moving from the individual classroom to the level of society at large.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it involved voluntary participation, anonymized data, and minimal risk to participants.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for Students

Purpose of the survey: to determine the level of readiness for intercultural communication, to understand the causes of misunderstandings, to assess the development of tolerance, and to explore the understanding of the concept of "intercultural communication." The survey is anonymous, and the results will be used in a generalized form for pedagogical research.

Instruction: Please read each question carefully and choose the answer that best reflects your opinion, or provide a detailed answer where necessary.

1. How do you assess your readiness to use your knowledge of a foreign language and cultural specifics when communicating with representatives of other countries? (choose one option)
   - Fully ready
   - Somewhat ready
   - Difficult to say
   - Somewhat not ready
   - Not ready at all
2. In your opinion, what is the most common cause of misunderstandings or biased attitudes in intercultural communication? (you can choose several options)
   - Lack of knowledge of the interlocutor's language
   - Differences in traditions, customs, and behavioral norms
   - Stereotypes and prejudices about other cultures
   - Personal negative communication experience
   - Inability to listen and understand the interlocutor
   - Other (please specify): _____
3. Rate your level of tolerance towards representatives of other cultures on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 – low level (I find it difficult to accept differences), 5 – high level (I easily accept and respect other cultures))
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
4. How do you understand the concept of "intercultural communication"? (give your own definition)
5. Do you have sufficient knowledge of speech etiquette (greetings, forms of address, politeness formulas) of different countries for successful communication? (choose one option)
   - Yes, I have full knowledge
   - I have partial knowledge
   - No, I do not have this knowledge
   - Difficult to answer
6. Do you analyze your own behavior after communicating with foreigners in order to avoid mistakes in the future? (choose one option)
   - Always analyze
   - Sometimes analyze
   - Rarely analyze
   - Never analyze

Additional information (optional):

Year of study : _____

Gender : _____

Age : _____

Thank you for participating in the survey! Your answers will help improve the process of teaching foreign languages.