

## PAPER

# Digital Inclusion in English Language Teaching in Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper authors research the digital inclusion in English language teaching in Ukraine. The authors concentrate on the investigation of the digital platform Sikorsky Distance that supports the digital skills development of University students. Special attention is given to forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and students-refugees and students from non-urban environments. This research has clearly shown that the usage of digital platforms is a valuable source that helps students from temporarily occupied territories, students-refugees, and students from non-urban environments adapt to the English language learning process and are integrated into students' communities.

## KEYWORDS

english language, digital inclusion, Sikorsky Distance platform, forcibly displaced students

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Current changes and the pandemic situation in modern society predetermine changes in higher education in Ukraine. Democratic transformations in our country contribute to the idea of adapting and developing learning resources to be inclusive. They promote a tolerant attitude toward minority ethnic students, disabled students, students with non-conventional body types, forcibly displaced students, student-refugees, students from temporarily occupied territories, students from non-urban environments, etc. The design of the principles supported their studying, and raise awareness concerning the inclusion of such students into society and educational process. Due to the war in Ukraine, our study focused on the needs of student refugees, forcibly displaced students, and students from temporarily occupied territories. The challenges of digital inclusion implementation attract the attention of the Ukrainian pedagogical community, parents, relatives, and friends of such students. According to the law, the above-mentioned students have the right to education, and parents, relatives, and friends of such students insist on their inclusion into the usual students' community. The results of the study substantiated that digital inclusion in Ukraine is developing. In many higher institutions, teachers can provide effective

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education for these groups and identities but difficulties arise when it comes to their social adaptation in the real world and digital space as well.

## 2 DIGITAL INCLUSION

For the past ten years, there has been a rapid rise in the use of digital inclusion as far as it determines the implementation of online platforms not only for barrier-free education in a higher institution but also for the further adaptation of students' identities and for creating a perspective-inclusive society where individuals are capable of team building. Currently, one of the main issues of inclusive higher education in Ukraine is ensuring and improving the quality of accessibility of educational information for student refugees, forcibly displaced students, and students from temporarily occupied territories.

Many hypotheses regarding digital inclusion in higher education appear to be debatable. But there is no doubt that human capital has acted as one of the driving forces providing a transition to an innovative economy. It takes an active part in the creation of the potential social development of the country, competitive advantages, and modernization of production. Most studies tended to focus on the implementation of inclusive education in education processes that expand the possibilities of the educational environment, contribute to the development of human capital, and facilitate access to the possibility of providing ideas for self-realization for identities. In [9], it is stated that an inclusive approach must be implemented at all stages of personal development, including the school and university period, respectively. All levels of education should be permeated with ideas and technologies of an inclusive approach.

In digital inclusion, innovative development processes inevitably lead to the formation of an information society, and an increase in the role of inclusive education. The emergence of the market in Ukraine necessitates a comprehensive reformation of the education system as a unified system of interaction of all its elements. [7] highlighted one of the main issues that we know about inclusive education, that design processes for inclusive education should be organized so that inclusive education becomes an integral part of systems of life-long education. This will ensure the integration of inclusive education at all levels of the educational process. Currently incorporating elements of inclusive education in the system of higher schools in Ukraine supports the realization of opportunities for the development of human capital and promotes involving students-refugees, forcibly displaced students, and students from temporarily occupied territories.

Rapid growth in the number of forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and student refugees as a result of the war in Ukraine has led to the significance of inclusive education and digital inclusion as a result. [12] shows that in 2020, in Ukraine, there were about 300 thousand students from temporarily occupied territories, of which about 90 thousand are refugees and 130 thousand are forcibly displaced students. This number is growing every day due to the full-scale war, and there is little or no evidence of reports indicating a positive change in this trend in 2023.

This paper examines the effects of the digital inclusion implementation, namely the role of the digital platform Sikorsky Distance in English language teaching to forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and student refugees. Authors believe that with the implementation of digital platforms in combination with the inclusive approach we have found, will be effective in developing students' digital skills, simplifying their learning process, adapting to the learning process, and helping them be integrated into students' community.

There appears to be great potential to accelerate the integration process in terms of providing online education in the form of mobile applications open educational resources and open online courses such as Sikorsky Distance (the online platform of Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute).

In recent years, in response to the current military situation in Ukraine, many universities have initiated a variety of innovative projects. In Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, the Sikorsky Distance platform was introduced. It provides courses for students with the possibility of obtaining English language knowledge, skills, and abilities. For forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and students-refugees, it is the way to study effectively at the university. It offers local support as well as a flexible mix of online collaboration and online self-study. This platform turned out to be popular among university students as it gives a possibility to develop skills for autonomous learning.

In this paper, we consider the impact of digital platforms in combination with the inclusive approach with regard to forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and student refugees. Throughout this paper, we use “students’ identities” and “forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and students-refugees” interchangeably.

Sikorsky Distance was introduced as a free digital learning tool for the inclusion of forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and student-refugees into the Ukrainian students’ community.

Using online educational resources, tools, and courses has numerous benefits for forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and student refugees in the process of adapting to their students’ community. Resources are always available and can be viewed at any time and as often as needed. One of the digital devices to which most students have access is a smartphone, and therefore, Sikorsky Distance is designed to be smartphone-friendly. Recent research studies [14] show that mobile learning applications for new language learning are particularly popular because they allow learners to practice vocabulary and pronunciation anywhere. YouTube is another extremely popular major source of content for education, often created by students themselves for other students, and is also readily available on a mobile device.

In Sikorsky Distance, learning resources are offered by educators according to students’ English language level (B1 or B2). The designed materials can be used both in the classroom and for self-study. They include lesson plans that assign studies, quizzes, and tests to enable teachers to incorporate multimodal digital resources into their lessons (Figures A1 and A2, see Appendix). In this way, classroom learning is supplemented with online resources to enable learners to practice the language whenever they want with the help of Internet access.

A wide range of online courses on Moodle or ClassTime or other forms of courses allow studying individually and at their own pace. For students with high English language proficiency and developed study skills, and the necessary digital literacy, it is the way to formal learning, especially if syllabi are noted for the recognition of informal learning achievements.

## 2.1 Challenges of digital inclusion in Ukraine

Although there are a large number of online educational resources catering to forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, students-refugees, and students from non-urban environments, they are not used

as widely, as you might expect. According to [14], some factors influence the use of online resources and courses from the perspective of students' identities. One of the main factors is that most students' identities have little online learning experience, and even if almost all have mobile devices, they do not know how they can be used in education for educational purposes. Teaching in the classroom is preferable because it allows students to learn to communicate and expand their social networking, which is an integral part of strengthening society.

[4] emphasized another problem, which is that some students do not have the digital skills to find and use general educational tools and resources, and students from non-urban environments have limited access to computers, mobile devices, etc. Limited Internet access can also be a hindrance as most students use paid mobile phone connections and can access educational content only when connected to a free wireless connection. Search for relevant materials on the Internet is time-consuming and, in this case, Sikorsky Distance is useful because all courses and materials are in the same place gathered together.

Sikorsky Distance can play an important role in providing students with access to higher education and developing necessary digital skills but personal support is essential as well. Especially for first-year students, since the online learning environment is unfamiliar, and students have not yet developed the necessary learning skills and digital literacy, it is easy to drop out of the educational process. More recent evidence [14] suggests that added local support groups and online chat rooms are important in motivating students and keeping them on effective online learning.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODS

The authors use empirical and theoretical methods to achieve the goals of the study. The study used such theoretical methods as the generalization of pedagogical and psychological literature to investigate the theoretical backgrounds of an inclusive approach in Ukraine, and the comparative analysis to highlight the role of digitalization in English for specific purposes of teaching. The study used such empirical methods as the observation of the educational process when the Sikorsky Distance online platform was used, and the quantitative and qualitative analysis of experimental data to show the impact of a digital platform for English language teaching from the inclusive points of view.

To illustrate the impact of digital inclusion in English language teaching, namely with the help of the digital platform Sikorsky Distance, the study was carried out among 120 students of Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute. The respondents are students from the first to the fourth year, studying in the faculties where classes enrolled forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, students-refugees, and students from non-urban environments.

The students who participated in the survey had to answer four questions:

1. Does the use of Sikorsky Distance during English language teaching help you develop your digital skills?
2. Does the use of Sikorsky Distance during English language teaching simplify the learning process for you?
3. Does the use of Sikorsky Distance during English language teaching help you adapt to the learning process?
4. Does the use of Sikorsky Distance during English language teaching help you be integrated into the students' community?

The students' answers may vary from Strongly Agree—Agree—Disagree—Strongly Disagree.

### 4 RESULTS

The authors analyzed the quantitative and qualitative experimental data indicating that the population where students learn English for a specific purpose (ESP) with the Sikorsky Distance platform demonstrates better and easier social integration.

Considering the data provided in Figure 1, we can see that almost all students give positive answers to all the questions. However, about 80 students strongly agree that the use of Sikorsky Distance during English language teaching can simplify the learning process. And about 7.4% of students disagree with the statement.

At the same time, there is a student who strongly disagrees with the statement that Sikorsky Distance simplifies the learning process. The student said:

*“I have no experience using learning platforms, so I can't see that Sikorsky Distance simplifies my studying, I feel it becomes more complicated”.*

The Sikorsky Distance platform is also used by students to communicate with classmates and teachers to solve learning issues. Nevertheless, three students strongly disagree and seven students disagree that it helps them be integrated into the students' community, while 82% agreed strongly. One of the students said:

*“I am glad that my classmates and I connected to the Sikorsky Distance. I can be in touch with my group and my teacher at any time, in such a way I feel safe”.*

At the same time, 100 students strongly agree that using Sikorsky Distance during English language teaching can help them adapt to the learning process in comparison to 5 students who disagree or strongly disagree.

While there are many successful examples of how students from temporarily occupied territories, forcibly displaced students and student-refugees, and students from non-urban environments used online platforms and educational applications to learn a new language and gain access to employment or higher education, at the same time there are students who suffer from a lack of skills and experience to take advantage of this option. Our results are well consistent with [13] and suggest that the relevance of online resources and digital platforms for students from temporarily occupied territories, forcibly displaced students, and student refugees is highly dependent on students' skills and motivation.

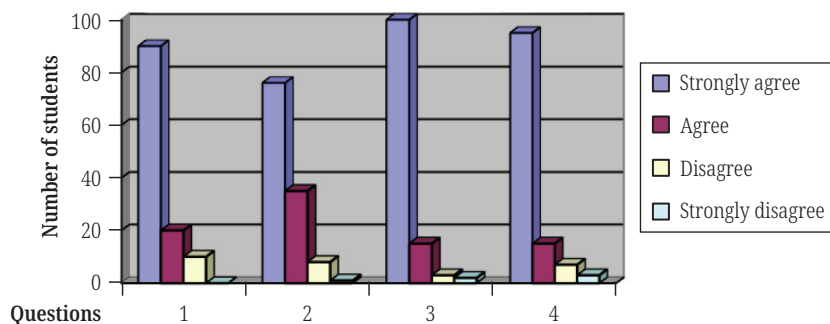


Fig. 1. The analysis of experimental data during ESP teaching with the Sikorsky Distance platform

Participants of the survey emphasized the need for contact with their classmates and local University support structures such as libraries, online platforms, and volunteer groups that can play a vital role in adapting to the learning process. Several

studies show that this kind of personal support has a positive effect on the students studying [8,11,14].

Thus, we can suggest that the use of the digital platform, namely Sikorsky Distance, provides valuable assistance to students' identities in developing their digital skills, simplifying their learning process, adapting to the learning process, and helping them be integrated into students' community.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The easy access for all members of society to all spheres of public life and the level of development of digital inclusion reflect the social model and characteristics that define the existing system of society's attitude towards the mentioned identities. Designing a digital platform to support inclusive education contributes to the social consolidation of society. According to [1], ensuring digital platform implementation into inclusive education can advance the ideas of an inclusive approach in all areas of social life and will accelerate overcoming co-social exclusion. As a result, a type of social model is formed when forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, student-refugees, and students from non-urban environments can harness the potential of inclusive education for the active development of social space.

We agree with [2] and [10] that the design of the systems of continuing education, including components of digital inclusion, should be carried out within the framework of an active social policy of the state and provide for public control of the quality of the educational process.

We agree with [6] and [14] that Internet resources should be primarily mobile-friendly devices as they are digital devices that students use to access the Internet. Digital resources should also have subtitles, both in the target language and, as far as possible, in the source students' language. This is particularly important in texts where learning activities are explained as far as it is important to understand the purpose of the activity, and not to try to understand often complex instructions in the target language. Since many forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, and student-refugees, especially if they live in non-urban environments, have limited internet access due to the cost of the subscription, there should be low bandwidth options for the number of resources, as well as alternative formats, for example, listening to audio text as an alternative to watching the video.

One more important aspect is the involvement of students themselves in the resource design process [14]. Co-creating resources allows students to ensure that resources are adaptable, connected to everyday students' reality, and thus become more relevant. The development of digital platforms and educational resources in peer cooperation can create a sense of empowerment for those involved in this activity.

English teachers have developed an online resource to download to the Sikorsky Distance platform, including students' materials, teachers' materials, lesson plans, modules for self-study, and self-assessment. Figure 2 demonstrates a detailed overview of these repositories available at the Sikorsky Distance platform. Moodle is a good example of a free and open online teaching platform. Except for Moodle, the Sikorsky Distance platform incorporates video courses and Google Workspace for Education. Students can find many other helpful things on this platform.



Fig. 2. The Sikorsky Distance platform

We support the idea that online educational resources can make an essential contribution to the knowledge of assistance to forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, student-refugees, and students from non-urban environments in their professional development. In [3], authors believe that they are of very limited value unless combined with personal support and activities in the local community.

There has been a breakthrough in understanding the importance of digital inclusion for our country in the legislation and mentality of society. Meanwhile, many forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, student-refugees, and students from non-urban environments try their best to adapt to the learning process and educational community. And they try in every possible way to integrate into their classes. In [5], scholars are correct that the issues may arise when it comes to University authorities, educators, and teachers.

Thus the socialization of students from temporarily occupied territories, forcibly displaced students, student-refugees, and students from non-urban environments can be done with the help of digital platforms.

Social integration presupposes adaptation in society. The use of digital platforms for English language teaching to forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, student-refugees, and students from non-urban environments taking into account the inclusive approach can assist with their adaptation into the student’s community. General education sets the basic requirements and rules for all students regardless of their location. It means that the mentioned identities achieve equal rights and it excludes discrimination relationships.

## 6 CONCLUSION

To sum up, the implementation of digital inclusion with the help of the platform Sikorsky Distance into English language teaching assists forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, student-refugees, and students from non-urban environments in effectively developing their digital skills, simplifying their learning process, adapting to the learning process and helping them be

integrated into the student community. Our study provides the ground to explore the impact of digital inclusion in English language teaching in Ukraine.

To effectively design platforms that support inclusive education, theoretical knowledge, advanced education technologies, and perception of the problems faced by forcibly displaced students, students from temporarily occupied territories, student-refugees, and students from non-urban environments must be factored in.

This research has raised many questions in need of further investigation of digital inclusion in English language teaching. The results provided by our survey are encouraging and should be validated by a larger sample size.

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## 8 APPENDIX

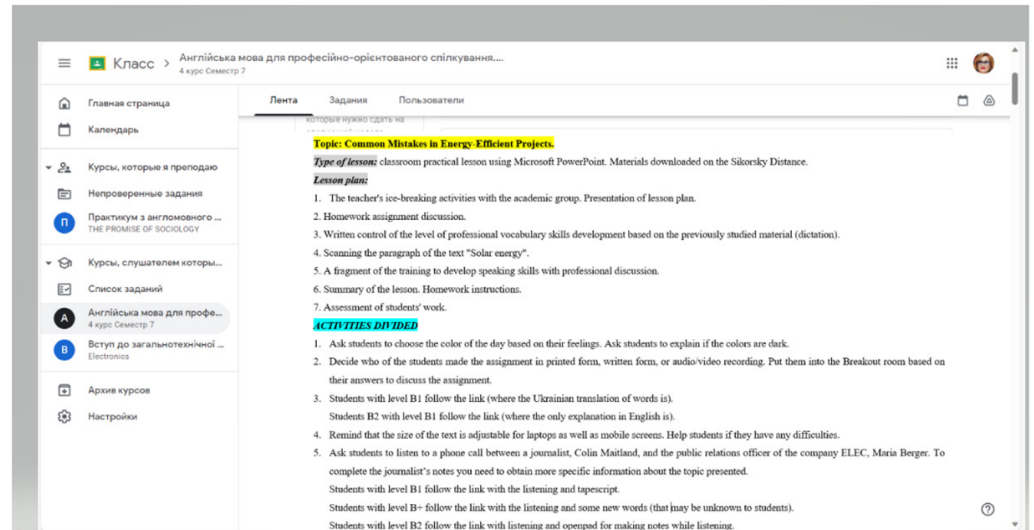


Fig. A1. The example of lesson progress

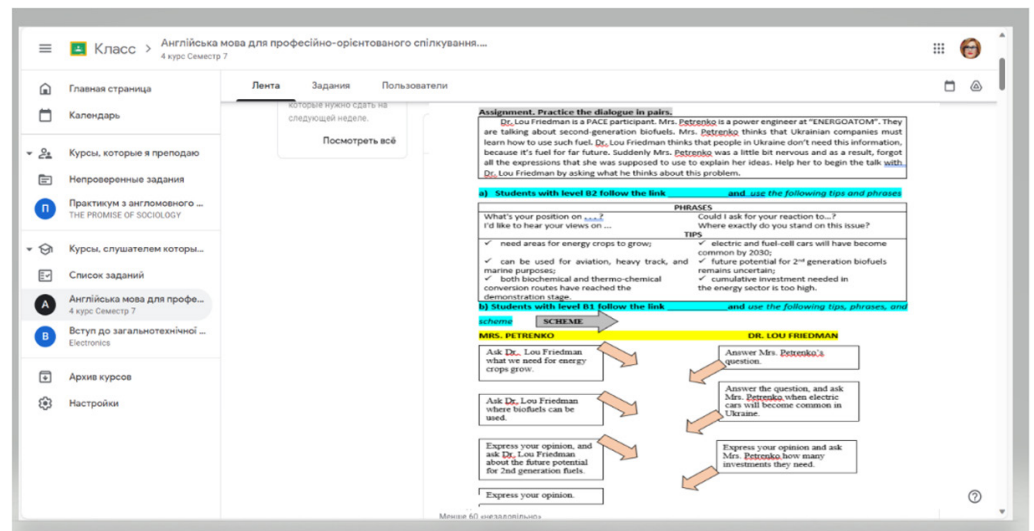


Fig. A2. The example of inclusive tasks

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