

HOW TO BE POLITICALLY CORRECT WITH AN INTERNATIONAL GROUP IN TIMES OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE?

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Abstract

The below article is a short summary of an observation conducted on students of UMCS, Lublin directly after the break of the war in Ukraine. The article shortly describes the concept of political correctness, how its meaning altered along the years, boundaries and vocabulary that should be used as well as the one that should be avoided. The observation was conducted on eight groups of students from various faculties. The examples provided are only some instances among many that occurred during the semester and were carefully chosen on the one hand to maintain the anonymity of the students and on the other hand to show the most significant elements from that period. The theme of the war in Ukraine is just a starter for the discussion on the topics that teachers should or can use in the classroom, and what the consequences may be for participants. The article gives a list of topics that can be used for further consideration on whether to include them in the curriculum or not.

Keywords: war in Ukraine, political correctness, teacher's impact, raising awareness, respect

1. INTRODUCTION

The first massive impact on teachers and their work was the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. The whole world had to adjust to the new reality and so did the teachers. For some of them, it was an easier task, as they had better technical knowledge and experience with the technology; for others it was a really painful experience and they would never want to experience anything like that. Some of the ones, who felt the great pressure and discomfort, went to such lengths as to decide to retire earlier simply because they were not able to remain at work with all the challenges they had to face.

Once this difficulty was over and the majority, if not all, of us believed the worst is behind us, a new reality hit us with an equal force. On the 24th of February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine as an escalation of the war that had already been undergoing since 2014. Hundreds upon hundreds of Ukrainians left their homes and started running towards their western borders. Within days, Eastern Poland was flooded with refugees of the war. There were hundreds of cars with women drivers (in greater majority), filled up to the brim with personal possessions and scared faces of women, children and the elderly that were going through Poland. Personally, I saw many of them on my way towards the border when I was going to visit my own mother, who lives 60 km from the Ukrainian border. Everybody knew, this would change our reality, and definitely the teachers were the ones who quickly realised that there is a new challenge standing there in front of them. They had to face the reality of new students coming into classes and the fact that they would have to adjust their style of work, their curriculum, and to explain the Polish students what is going on and who their new colleagues are (see Lindberg and Brinchmann 2023:142).

These, however, were the realities in the primary and secondary schools. At the universities, we had already had students from Eastern Europe long before the war. We had had students from Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Japan, Peru, France, India, Bangladesh and many other countries and we had already prepared our university for that reality. UMCS has courses of Polish for foreign students, special places for them like the Welcome Center, and many initiatives to make them feel comfortable and part of the academic community. Therefore, this was not something we needed to adjust to quickly. However, we wanted to help with other necessities like basic needs products or shelter. There were many initiatives in Poland and at the university to help the Ukrainians like food and clothes collections, translation services conducted by our staff and students, and accommodation in dormitories to mention

just a few. The real impact of all of that was when we all had to go to classes and face a mixed group of students where in one group we could have students from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.

The question is what to do in such a situation? Should we remain silent and not to bring up the topic of war at all? Should we let the students talk about it? Should the teacher start the topic and lead the conversation, but why? Should the teacher have a monologue about it and end the topic that way? Should everyone remain politically correct? But what does it mean to be politically correct in times of war? This article first looks at the concept of political correctness.

2. POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN CLASS

Firstly, an analysis of the expression “political correctness” should be presented. What is interesting, as stated by the Britannica (Roper, C. 2013), this term was first used in the post-revolution world in 1917. It was used in the Marxist-Leninist vocabulary and it originally referred to being in line with the way of thinking of the party. The term has undergone evolution from “politically wise or valid or hypersensitive or cowardice” even to be a good topic for comedians [Chow 2016]. Nowadays, the term stands for the language used in such a form as not to offend and cause discomfort among people who may be in some way excluded from the group or the society by the race, gender, culture or sexual orientation of the group or individual. However, this term has changed its force and direction with years from the material for the advocates of language improvement to a good topic for stand-up comedy and jokes on Twitter (Wikstrom 2016:160). As O’Neill (2011:282) says, what we once establish as politically correct can, in time, gain a new politically incorrect meaning. What should always be present, in terms of language that we use to address others, is respect. Respect for their feelings, their position or mental or physical state they are in. The below is a description of instances involving foreign students either during classes of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or classes of consecutive translation at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin.

3. DIFFICULTY IN CLASS WITH THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR

The observation has been conducted on two types of students, one online and one stationary. There were eight groups of students that participated in online classes still as a consequence of Covid-19 some of them once every two weeks and some and the second type were students in one group that participated in stationary classes and lectures were conducted once a week for 90 minutes. This distinction is crucial in understanding some of the aspects that influence the class and events that occurred.

There were eight groups of students in online classes that participated in lectures of English. Among these groups were 20 students from Ukraine and Belarus. The new semester started on the 28th February 2022 and the war in Ukraine erupted just four days before. Therefore, coming into class meant that the teachers and students had to face a new reality in class as well as in the outside world.

The first challenges appeared already with the first online classes. It was easily noticeable that some of the students were not logged in and the first difficulty appeared. Each student is obliged to log in to all but two classes in a semester. This is one of the obligatory requirements to complete the semester in the lecture. When a student does not log in to initial classes, it creates the first absence straight at the beginning of the course. It may happen, rarely but does happen, that the student is not yet present in class as they may not know their group, they are a bit lost in the system, or they do not appear due to overall turbulence connected with the beginning of the semester (missing a login, not appearing in the system etc.). The question remained, on how to establish if the student is absent due to the war or due to the abovementioned troubles. Judging only by the foreign names is not the right way to approach this topic and the teachers would have to ask for personal details, which should not occur due to RODO. The only way to establish the facts and remain respectful was to ask a general question: “Is everything OK as I noticed you were absent last week?”. All of the students advised (whether prompted or not) if they were from Ukraine and if they currently remained on the territory of Poland or Ukraine. All of them also, informed about that fact in public, in front of the group. This made the whole task easier as it was possible to address some of the possible issues immediately.

One of the potential problems was access to the Internet. There had been some disruptions due to the outbreak of war and it improved when Elon Musk provided support of the satellites to reconnect Ukraine to the Internet. The education via online classes is of key importance in Ukraine since the outbreak of war (Sherman, M., Puhovskiy, E., Kambalova, Y., Kdyrova, I 2022:16), hence the issue was resolved really quickly. This was the first fact, that stood in the way of equal treatment of the students. Those who remained in Ukraine and were not able to connect to the Internet were excused from classes. However, this can be a subject for a dispute from other students who may claim that they too had trouble with the Internet and they are not excused from class. It may seem absurd that anyone may think that way and use this as an excuse, yet, the range of excuses from students can be really vast and sometimes they would use any excuse they can to be absent in class – even the online ones. Out of the 20 students, five had serious trouble with attending the class and showed high absenteeism in the semester. All five of them were from Ukraine, three of them stayed in Ukraine and two were in Poland. All of the students were scrupulous in terms of material and on the one hand did all the assigned tasks and on the other hand they took the semester test and passed. Only one student from Ukraine attended all the classes and had no problem with absenteeism. It is clearly visible from the below table (Table 1) which of the students were from Ukraine and which were from Belarus. The attendance of the Belarusian students is nearly perfect and the ones with various levels of absenteeism are from the Ukraine.

The below is a collection of absenteeism record of some students from Ukraine and Belarus in online classes. It is divided into two types of groups: one had a schedule for English class every two weeks and the other every week. The dark grey cell fill belongs to students from Ukraine.

Date Students	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
2	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	✓							
3	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
4	✓	×	×	×	×	×	✓	✓							
5	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
6	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
7	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×							
8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
9	×	✓	✓	×	×	×	✓	✓							
10	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓							
11	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
12	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	×	×	✓	✓	×	×	✓
15	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×
16	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	✓	×	×	×	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×
19	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 1. Absenteeism in online groups of students, UMCS Lublin, winter semester 2021/2022

The second challenge appeared in stationary class. The absenteeism occurred during the first few classes. Out of 16 students in the group, five were directly and actively involved in helping the refugees at the beginning of the war as all five of them were helping either at the border or at one of the centres located in Lublin. They offered language services for these who were not able to communicate in Polish or English. The students were from Ukraine and studied applied linguistics in English-Russian combination. Again, a similar situation occurred as there were other students who were not given the leeway approach – these students were either Polish or Belarusian and were not involved in the actions occurring in Lublin area providing support for the refugees. Additional factor at the time was another outbreak of Covid-19 and some of the students remained in quarantine at home – these were by default excused from classes as well. There were instances of students who tried to take advantage of the situation and did not appear in class (not for any of the reasons mentioned above) however, these students were not excused and had to work the absenteeism off during consultation hours. As the conflict aggravated, there were more instances of absenteeism as the students had to either travel to the border to collect their parents who arrived to Poland (two instances in the group), to collect a brother (one instance), to provide further translation services (two instances), to look after a family member who got Covid-19 (one instance) or to participate in an action of collecting goods for the refugees (one instance). Please see the data from one stationary group of all the students in the group in Table 2.

No	1 Mar	8 Mar	15 Mar	22 Mar	29 Mar	5 Apr	12 Apr	26 Apr	10 May	17 May	24 May	31 May	7 Jun
1	B	✓	B	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
2	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	CP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Q	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	x	x	✓	✓	S	✓	S	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
7	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	P	✓	✓
8	CP	✓	SP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	S	✓	S
11	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
12	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	CG	✓	✓
13	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
14	T	✓	✓	CB	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
15	✓	✓	x	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
16	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

- B border
- CB collecting brother
- CG collecting goods
- CP collecting parents
- P passport-Collecting in Cracow
- Q quarantine
- S sick

SP	sick parent
T	translating services
×	absent
✓	present

Table 2. Absenteeism in an international group of Applied Linguistics, UMCS Lublin, winter semester 2021/2022

The most outstanding incidents happened in stationary groups. On one occasion, a student was very disturbed from the beginning of the lesson and held a mobile phone in hand at all times. She was not able to participate in class as obviously she was focused on something else. Being aware that the student was from Ukraine, I allowed for the situation to continue. After a quarter of an hour, the student sprang to her feet and left the classroom. She was absent for another quarter of an hour to half an hour and returned in a very bad mental state. She was shaking, cried and could not calm down. I asked her if she wanted to leave the class and she was not able to make any decision. Therefore, I sent her to her dormitory in company of her classmate as she was so distressed I was afraid she might have had some health or mental problems. Her classmates advised later that the reason for the distress was due to the fact that her family home had been bombed and she had not been able to contact her family.

In all of the classes, the topic of war occurred at some stage. Either it was mentioned when discussing the reasons for the absenteeism or due to some important events or stages of the war. In cases of sensitive topics, like the war or personal experiences it needs to be analysed whether these topics should be mentioned in class or not and what would be the purpose and outcome of such a discussion. In modern world, when everything is a matter of speed, where we all need to control our actions to ensure all is done very quickly and efficiently and there is no or very little space for real-life conversation, each member of the society loses themselves a little and closes within themselves. The situation is even worse after the pandemic and it may be even more difficult for all of us to come back to reality after having spent so much time online and at homes. However, to ensure that we all keep our mental health in good condition, difficult experiences should be addressed. The question remains should this be done in class and especially in English classes that have nothing to do with the psychological support. I strongly believe it should as we need to take any and every opportunity to discuss difficult topics and promote care (see Wessle 2020, Hess 2009) and to “engage in reflective inquiry” [Bolgatz:259]. The same refers to the war in Ukraine. We never know when the discussion may be helpful and allow the students to release the tension. The difficulty is how to introduce the topic, which vocabulary to use and which to avoid, and whether to allow the students to talk completely freely or to set some boundaries.

4. HOW TO LEAD A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE WAR

The introduction of the topic may occur itself during one of the events in the classroom, during the online check listing or during discussions of some political speeches that are used in class to practice the translation. It happened as one of the students had to leave the class to compose herself (as described above) and the group started discussion on the topic among themselves. The discussion was mainly conducted by the Polish students while the Ukrainian students only added some details to the discussion or were directly asked by their peers what the situation looks like in their hometown or the area where the rest of the family had remained. The students from Belarus did not participate in any discussion at all. The Polish students were very cautious to use politically correct terms, not to offend anyone. Every time they had any doubts about the correct usage of the word they looked at the teacher and sought for a non-verbal approval. The discussion referred to the current state of the war, which territories were occupied, what were the movements of the army, which way the army moved, what was the current state of the military equipment, the movements and numbers of the refugees to mention just a few. The information shared had come from the mass media and the Ukrainian students' families that remained

in the Ukraine. The Ukrainian students also shared their fears for their families and friends who were in constant danger of hunger, lack of safe place to stay and risk of bombing.

The main topics for the online classes were the lack of internet connection and current state of affairs in their hometown (very similar to the topics already mentioned above for the stationary class), access to food and clean water and safety of their families.

An interesting instance occurred when some of the Belarusian students claimed that they “do not care” what happens in their country as they now live in Poland and it is not within their interest to seek information on the situation in Belarus. They claimed they do not check the information sites, they do not read the online newspapers and do not watch the TV. The students stated that they now live in Poland and whatever happens in Belarus does not refer to them and their current life in Poland. When asked if they check the information in Poland and Polish mass media, they claimed they do not do that either as it does not refer to them as they are not Polish and it is not their country either. I challenged them with some questions regarding this situation. Firstly, I asked them what if Belarus joins Russia in the invasion and there is a general call up and the males would be drafted to join the army. Secondly, what if Poland had some new laws that refer to the foreigners remaining on the Polish territory and the law referred directly to them. They were not able to reply in any way. This was to make them aware of the fact, that wherever they lived they should be aware of the laws and regulations referring to their current country of residence. Additionally, it was to make them aware that once they are citizens of a country they should be aware of the current state of affairs in their home country.

One more example of introducing a topic of our interest is material for translation. Students of Applied Linguistics classes need to practice oral translation and choice of material for translation may include the speeches that refer to current state of affairs (the war in Ukraine) or any topic we may include. This may also be a good exercise for language classes (EFL) when the sentence refers to the particular topic we may want to introduce in the lesson.

The key element in this introduction of topics is the control of the discussion so that no one is offended and the whole speaking exercise respects the feelings and emotions of all involved. It is a good way to set the boundaries at the beginning of the class and tell the students they may express their personal opinions but they need to respect others and be prepared for the fact that they may be incorrect in their visions and allow others to present their arguments. As long as everybody listen to one another, we can only learn from this.

Such discussions will allow the students that are in a difficult position to release the tension and show the emotions. It also allows all the members of the class to learn new facts and be more aware of the reality and state of affairs in their own country and in their country of residence.

5. SOME EXAMPLES OF TOPICS TO BE INTRODUCED IN CLASS

With the increase of the gender awareness it may be a good idea to bring it up in class as well. Similarly, anyone can express their opinion as long as it is respectful and does not attack anyone or anyone's feelings.

It is similar to introducing the idea of consent in any class at any stage as it may be helpful (hopefully not) in the least expected moment. I introduce this topic via the metaphor of drinking tea. If you invite someone for tea to your house and they agree yet, they change their mind afterwards, do you drag them to your house as they initially agreed? If you invite someone for tea, they agree, they come to your house and **then** change their mind, you to force them to drink the tea anyway? If you invite someone for tea, they agree, they come to your house but fall asleep on your couch while you make the tea do you pour it down their throat? To be clear: the answer to all of the questions is no. We never know when the concept may appear useful and therefore it should be discussed at various stages of the school year.

These topics may be introduced in classes for future managers, translators, interpreters, logisticians, lawyers, sociologists and so on and on. To put it simply: it is good a topic for anyone as long as it raises awareness and opens people to difficult topics.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, it is important to talk to students or pupils about any topics they would like to talk about. Bearing in mind the internationalisation of the academic society (10 % of UMCS students are foreigners), it is crucial to include the topics that are important for our foreign students, topics relating to the situation in their home country or to bring them the culture and customs of their new country of residence. As long as it is not politically correct in the mocking sense but as long as it promotes openness and respect for all the parties involved.

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