Rethinking the Teaching of Ukrainian as a Foreign Language Through Digital Pedagogy

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Abstract
This article examines the pedagogical design of the Ukrainian Language and Culture course, a fully asynchronous A1 course in Ukrainian as a foreign language developed within the Erasmus+ DigiFLEd project. It explores how literacy development, learner autonomy, language–culture integration, and instructional design support language learning without continuous teacher guidance. The article argues that the effectiveness of fully asynchronous language learning depends on a coherent instructional architecture that systematically integrates guidance, practice, feedback, and reflection within a structured digital learning environment.
Key words: Ukrainian as a foreign language, asynchronous language teaching and learning, learner autonomy, language–culture integration, digital pedagogy, instructional design

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 dramatically increased international interest in learning Ukrainian. Around the world, learners sought not only opportunities to acquire the language but also a deeper understanding of the country whose history, culture, and identity had suddenly become the focus of global attention. For many, learning Ukrainian became inseparable from engaging with contemporary Ukrainian society and the cultural context in which the language functions.

Responding to this unprecedented demand, the Erasmus+ project *Modernization of University Education Programs in Foreign Languages by Integrating Information Technologies* (DigiFLEd, n.d.)[1] developed the *Ukrainian Language and Culture* (ULC) course, a fully asynchronous beginner course designed for international learners. Created collaboratively by seven Ukrainian universities and three European partner institutions of higher education[2], the course combines language instruction with cultural learning in a digital environment. Its development also posed an unusual pedagogical challenge: the course was designed by Ukrainian academics while their universities were operating amid the disruptions of Russia's full-scale war, requiring the team to rethink both the process and the principles of sustainable online language education.

The ULC course is a fully asynchronous A1 course (4 ECTS, 120 study hours) comprising 13 thematic lessons organized as a carefully scaffolded sequence in which language and cultural learning are progressively integrated. Through explicit instruction, interactive digital activities, formative assessment, and cultural content,

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learners gradually develop communicative competence while building on previously acquired knowledge.

Although the number of digital resources for learning Ukrainian has grown rapidly in recent years, relatively little attention has been paid to the pedagogical design of comprehensive asynchronous courses for international beginners (Wong, 2021; Oliynyk et.al., 2025). More broadly, recent research has highlighted the growing importance of digitally supported language learning aligned with CEFR principles and learner-centered pedagogies (Gjikolli & Gashi-Berisha, 2023). This article addresses that gap by examining the design principles underpinning the ULC course and situating it within the broader landscape of online Ukrainian-language provision. Rather than presenting the course as a finished product, the article analyses the pedagogical decisions that informed its design and considers how these decisions address the opportunities and constraints of contemporary online Ukrainian language education. Thus, the research question addressed in this article is: How can an asynchronous language course provide the guidance, interaction, and support that beginner language learners normally receive from a teacher?

1. The Current Landscape of Online Ukrainian Language Learning

To situate the ULC course within the rapidly evolving landscape of online Ukrainian language education, it is first necessary to examine the principal forms of digital provision currently available.

A review of the digital provision for learning Ukrainian reveals a digital ecosystem that includes MOOCs, commercial applications, open-access websites, podcasts, and teacher-led online courses. These resources vary considerably in their target audiences, languages of instruction, pedagogical design, institutional support, and the degree of learner autonomy they require. *The Ukrainian Institute* (2021) and *The State Language Protection Commissioner* (n.d.) maintain extensive directories of digital resources, including national platforms, mobile applications, podcasts, tutoring services, language schools, and independent learning websites. While these directories demonstrate the breadth and diversity of opportunities for learning Ukrainian online, many of the listed resources function primarily as supplementary materials or commercial services rather than as comprehensive, university-designed and hosted asynchronous courses for international beginners aligned with *the State Standard for Ukrainian as a Foreign Language* (National Commission for State Language Standards, 2024) and available through the institutionally hosted learning management system (LMS).

One of the closest examples of a free, structured online course is Prometheus's *Ukrainian in 27 Lessons* (Prometheus, n.d.). The course offers video lectures, interactive exercises, assessment tasks, discussion forums, and a certificate of completion. All materials remain permanently accessible, allowing learners to progress at their own pace, and the curriculum covers elementary proficiency broadly corresponding to CEFR levels A1–A2. However, the course is delivered entirely in Ukrainian and was developed primarily for Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking residents wishing to strengthen or transition to Ukrainian, including internally displaced persons and prospective applicants to Ukrainian higher education. Consequently, its language of instruction, interface, and pedagogical design assume linguistic knowledge and learning needs that differ substantially from those of international beginners with no prior exposure to Ukrainian or other Slavic languages. In contrast, the ULC course was conceived as an English-mediated introduction to Ukrainian language and culture for an international audience, and its instructional design reflects the needs of learners approaching both the language and the cultural context for the first time.

Another representative resource is *Learn Ukrainian for Free* (UkrainianCourse.com, n.d.), which provides free, self-paced learning materials for learners of Ukrainian. Its

provision includes three sequential courses—*How to Read Ukrainian*, *Basic Ukrainian*, and *Ukrainian Cases*—supplemented by audio recordings, dialogues, graded texts, grammar explanations, vocabulary exercises, English translations, and an online proficiency test. Like the ULC course, it is designed for English-speaking learners and is therefore broadly comparable in terms of its target audience. However, it functions primarily as an open educational website rather than as a university-hosted course delivered through an institutional LMS. Its content is organized as a series of webpages, and the publicly available description does not indicate mechanisms for monitoring learner progress, structured assessment, certification, or other forms of cumulative course completion typically associated with institutionally delivered online courses.

Commercial language-learning applications constitute another important segment of the digital ecosystem for learning Ukrainian. Among them, *Promova* (2023) offers an English-mediated Ukrainian course consisting of 48 short lessons that introduce the Cyrillic alphabet, pronunciation, everyday vocabulary, and selected aspects of Ukrainian culture. Other widely used resources—including *Duolingo* (n.d.), *Mondly* (Lăpușneanu, 2022), *Pimsleur* (n.d.), *LingQ* (n.d.), and the *Ukrainian Lessons Podcast* (Ohoiko, 2016)—support independent language learning through gamified exercises, audio-based instruction, vocabulary practice, graded reading, or podcast-based lessons. Although these platforms differ considerably in their pedagogical approaches, they share a common emphasis on flexible self-directed learning rather than on a structured university-level curriculum. As a result, they generally do not provide the combination of explicit learning outcomes, systematically sequenced language and cultural content, structured assessment linked to course outcomes, and institutional certification characteristic of university-designed online courses.

National resource portals constitute a further component of the online Ukrainian-learning ecosystem. The *SpeakUkraine* (Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, n.d.) national platform and the separate *Speak Ukrainian* (n.d.) platform curate collections of digital learning materials, including dictionaries, exercises, reference resources, and mobile applications for both Ukrainian citizens and international learners. Similarly, the Ukrainian Institute London lists specialized online resources developed by Marta Jenkala, including *A Taste of Ukrainian*, *Read Ukrainian*!, *Ukrainian Words*, and *Communicative Ukrainian for Research and Fieldwork* (Ukrainian Institute London, n.d.). These platforms provide valuable support for developing particular language skills or addressing the needs of specific learner groups. However, they function primarily as repositories or collections of learning resources rather than as integrated, university-designed A1 courses with structured assessment, learner progress monitoring, and institutional certification.

Major international MOOC platforms currently offer relatively limited provision for learning Ukrainian. At the time of the review, Coursera offered self-paced courses on Ukrainian history and culture, including *Ukraine: History, Culture and Identities* (Ukrainian Institute Staff, n.d.). Taught in English, this course comprises two modules and requires approximately five hours to complete; its primary objective is to develop knowledge about Ukraine rather than Ukrainian-language proficiency. A search of Coursera's language-learning catalog did not identify a dedicated Ukrainian language course. However, as online platform catalogs are continually evolving, this observation should be understood as reflecting the state of provision at the time of the review rather than a permanent absence.

Considered collectively, the reviewed resources illustrate both the rapid expansion and the considerable diversity of online provision for learning Ukrainian. At the same time, they reveal systematic differences in target audiences, instructional architecture, language mediation, approaches to language–culture integration, assessment, and

institutional support. These dimensions form the basis of the comparison presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Online Ukrainian Language Courses

Dimension	Typical Characteristics of Online Ukrainian Language Courses	Characteristics of the *Ukrainian Language and Culture* Course
Primary audience	Varies considerably (heritage learners, Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine, tourists, international learners)	International learners with no prior knowledge of Ukrainian who use English as the language of instruction
Instructional architecture	Apps, websites, synchronous classes, or self-study MOOCs	Fully asynchronous, self-paced course delivered via university LMS
Learner support	No teacher, forum only, or constant teacher	Teacher-designed self-paced learning, automated feedback, asynchronous discussion forums (S–S and S–T interaction)
Language mediation	Ukrainian-only, English-mediated, or bilingual, depending on the resource	English-mediated instruction with progressively increasing use of Ukrainian
Learning progression	Often modular or focused on individual skills	Sequential A1 course with scaffolded progression across lessons
Language–culture relationship	Culture often supplementary or presented separately	Language and culture integrated throughout the course content
Assessment	Varies from none to quizzes or tutor feedback	Continuous formative assessment with automated feedback and a summative final test
Institutional framework	Commercial, public, or independent providers	University-developed within the Erasmus+ DigiFLEd project with a certificate of completion awarded
Alignment with the standards	Rarely explicit	Explicitly aligned with CEFR (2020) and the 2024 State Standard
Crisis-responsive design	Normally not an explicit design principle	Instructional design explicitly addressing the challenges of wartime educational disruption through asynchronous self-paced learning

As Table 1 demonstrates, existing resources address different learner populations and pedagogical purposes, whereas the ULC course integrates these elements within a single university-level asynchronous program for international beginners.

2. Methodological Challenges

Designing a fully asynchronous beginner course required reconsidering several fundamental aspects of language instruction that are often supported by a teacher's continuous presence. The principal challenges encountered during the development of

the course were pedagogical rather than technical. Four interrelated questions guided the design process:

- **Literacy development in an asynchronous environment:** how to teach reading without a teacher
- **Learner's supported autonomy:** how to guide learners without constant supervision
- **Language–culture integration:** how to provide meaningful context without classroom discussion
- **Digital instructional design:** how to orchestrate digital tools to support language learning

These pedagogical questions shaped the overall architecture of the course and preceded decisions concerning the technological environment. Rather than adapting teaching practices to the affordances of a particular LMS, the design process began with clearly defined pedagogical objectives, after which appropriate digital tools—including H5P and other interactive applications—were selected to support their implementation. Technology thus functioned as an instrument for realizing pedagogical goals rather than as the driving force behind instructional design. This reflects the broader view that digital technologies should support meaningful language use and pedagogical objectives rather than determine instructional practice (Gjikolli & Gashi-Berisha, 2023).

Each of these methodological challenges subsequently became a distinct area of course development, informing decisions about literacy instruction, language–culture integration, learner engagement, assessment, and the selection of digital learning activities. Accordingly, the remainder of this article is organized around these four methodological challenges and the pedagogical solutions developed to address them.

2.1. Literacy Development in an Asynchronous Environment

Literacy development presented a particular challenge in a fully asynchronous beginner course, where learners had to acquire a new writing system without the immediate guidance and corrective feedback normally provided by a teacher. To address this challenge, the Ukrainian alphabet was introduced through a carefully scaffolded sequence in which letters were divided into six groups and taught cumulatively. Learners progressed from identifying individual letters by their spoken names to reading syllables and, subsequently, words composed exclusively of letters they had already encountered.

Initial literacy skills are developed in Lessons 1 and 2 of the ULC course. Learners are first introduced to basic phonetic concepts through short videos, including *letter*s and *sound*s, *vowels* and *consonants*, *hard* and *soft* consonants, *syllable*s, and *word stress*. After exploring the alphabet through a video presentation, learners complete interactive activities that address basic features of the Ukrainian writing system, for example, *How many letters are there in the Ukrainian alphabet? What is the first letter in the Ukrainian alphabet?*

As adult learners, course participants already possess developed analytical skills and an established English-language system. The pedagogical challenge is therefore not to teach reading itself, but to enable learners to decode and recognize an unfamiliar writing system efficiently enough to support early communicative use of Ukrainian. The teaching of Ukrainian letters and the sounds they represent, therefore, follows a contrastive-typological principle designed to make maximum use of learners' existing linguistic knowledge. A prolonged, letter-by-letter progression following the conventional alphabetical order is not well suited to adult learners. Instead, in the ULC course, reading instruction is organized around a functional typology of letters

developed by the course authors, allowing learners to develop Ukrainian literacy more efficiently. The letters are organized into six groups:

Group 1: А а, Е е, І і, К к, М м, О о, Т т. These are "friendly letters": they resemble their English counterparts and represent similar sounds.

Group 2: В в, Н н, Р р, С с, У у, Х х. These are "tricky letters": their forms resemble English letters, but they represent different sounds.

Group 3: Б б, Г г, Ґ ґ, Д д, З з, И и, Й й, Л л, П п, Ф ф. These letters have completely new shapes, but their sounds are familiar to English speakers.

Group 4: Ж ж, Ї ї, Ц ц, Ч ч, Ш ш, Щ щ. These letters are new in both form and sound.

Group 5: Є є, Ю ю, Я я. These are letters with a dual function.

Group 6: the soft sign (ь) and apostrophe (’), two distinctive orthographic signs used in Ukrainian.

After each group of letters is introduced in the presentation, learners complete a sequence of practice activities. These include recognizing a letter from its spoken name, reading syllables containing letters from the target group, and becoming familiar with words composed of letters already studied. The vocabulary selected for these activities consists primarily of high-frequency lexical items recommended for the A1 level. For Group 1, for example, learners encounter items belonging to different parts of speech: nouns such as *ма́ма* (mum/mom), *та́то* (dad), *те́ма* (subject), *кіт* (cat), *мі́тка* (aunt), and *о́ко* (eye); the conjunction *і* (and); and the response particle *так* (yes). When Group 2 is introduced, the new words are composed exclusively of letters belonging to Groups 1 and 2. The same cumulative principle—building systematically on letters already learned—is maintained throughout the subsequent stages of Lessons 1 and 2. Following the introduction of each letter group, learners complete scaffolded activities ranging from letter and sound recognition to the reading of simple phrases, with gradually increasing learner independence.

The next stage consists of activities designed to consolidate new vocabulary through continued work with letters, for example, "Let's make new words from the given letters." This is followed by activities focusing on recognizing words in spoken language, including "Connect the pronunciation to the spelling," Train your ear and your tongue," and "Read the words aloud as you see them." Both previously practiced and unfamiliar words are included, provided that the latter can be constructed from letters learners have already studied. Some items contain recurring syllables or similar combinations of letters, for example: *тема – Емма*, *мета – комета*, and *кома – Тома*. In this way, learners practice transferring previously acquired letter-sound correspondences to new lexical material.

Following the presentation of each letter group, learners progress through a carefully sequenced series of activities that move from recognition to increasingly independent reading. Early activities focus on identifying letters, sounds, and familiar words, while later tasks require learners to read phrases, sentences, and short texts constructed from previously introduced linguistic material.

Activities in the first two lessons gradually introduce learners to reading short phrases, sentences, and mini texts. For example, learners may encounter the sentence *Мама і кіт.* Its meaning can then be checked by turning over a flashcard displaying the English equivalents: *Mom and cat*. Lesson 2 introduces the mini text *Моя сім'я* (*My Family*): *Це фотоальбом. На фото моя сім'я. Це я, Наталя. Моє прізвище – Петренко. Це батьки: мати Марія і батько Юрій. Це мій брат Устим. Це моя сестра Анастасія.* A series of comprehension activities accompanies the text, for example, *Read the sentences and match the correct information: Марія і Юрій – це…*

Since Ukrainian orthography is predominantly based on the phonemic principle, the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is relatively transparent, notwithstanding certain assimilation processes. Consequently, once the relevant

letter–sound correspondences have been introduced, the short texts selected for reading generally require little additional phonetic explanation.

After all six letter groups have been introduced, the alphabet is reviewed and consolidated through examples drawn from carefully selected beginner-level vocabulary. The lexical content at the A1 level was informed by *1000 і 1 слово* (A1) (Borodin & Turkevych, 2023), which served as a reference for the selection of lexical materials. Some of these items are internationalisms, such as *А а – адреса* (address) and *Б б – бізнес* (business), making them readily recognizable to English-speaking learners while reinforcing letter recognition and decoding.

Although handwriting remains an important component of literacy instruction in many educational contexts (Graham, 2018), the online course replaces handwriting with keyboard-based text production. Learners therefore work exclusively with printed letter forms, while the course also provides guidance on the location of specific Ukrainian letters on the keyboard.

Each lesson begins with vocabulary lists designed to support the acquisition of new lexical material. Stress marks are consistently provided in both the vocabulary lists and individual activities. This is particularly important because Ukrainian word stress is free: it is not fixed to a particular syllable and may fall on different syllables in different words. Ukrainian stress is also mobile, meaning it may shift from one syllable to another when a word's grammatical form changes. Learners therefore need to acquire not only the written form of a new word but also its stress pattern.

In line with the action-oriented approach (Council of Europe, 2020; Piccardo & North, 2019), the course introduces functional language from the earliest stages of learning, enabling learners to perform basic communicative tasks in everyday situations. Learners acquire ready-to-use expressions for greeting, leave-taking, thanking, apologizing, and initiating simple interactions. These are presented through short videos in which each expression is first spoken at a natural pace, then repeated more slowly to support perception and pronunciation, and finally presented again at a natural rate. English translations in the accompanying presentation facilitate comprehension during the initial stages of learning. The cultural dimension is reinforced through short texts on Ukrainian traditions and everyday life, as well as conventional expressions appropriate to Ukrainian-speaking contexts, fostering both linguistic and intercultural communicative competence.

A further consideration concerns the specific needs of adult beginners. Although their cognitive and intellectual capacities are fully developed, their ability to communicate in the target language is necessarily limited at the initial stage. This discrepancy presents both psychological and pedagogical challenges. The course, therefore, adopts an intensive, action-oriented approach that helps learners move beyond basic decoding as quickly as possible. Self-assessment and continuous feedback enable learners to monitor their progress, revisit material as needed, and develop an individual learning trajectory.

2.2. Learner's Supported Autonomy

One of the major challenges in designing a fully asynchronous language course is providing learners with sufficient pedagogical support in the absence of regular real-time interaction with the teacher. Without carefully designed guidance, learners may have difficulty navigating the course, monitoring their progress, maintaining motivation, and identifying areas that require further practice. Supporting learner autonomy, therefore, becomes a key consideration in designing asynchronous language courses. In asynchronous learning, pedagogical support is not removed but embedded within the course structure, enabling learners to manage their own learning more independently.

Following Holec (1981), learner autonomy is understood as learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning. In a fully asynchronous course, the learning objectives and sequence are predetermined by instructional design, but learners retain control over how they engage with the course. They decide when, where, and how to study, monitor their progress, and revisit materials as needed. Benson (2012) characterizes this form of learner control as reactive autonomy. The ULC course was therefore designed to support independent learning through embedded pedagogical mechanisms that provide continuous guidance without requiring a teacher's constant presence.

These pedagogical principles informed both the instructional design of the course and the choice of its learning management system (LMS). The DigiFLEd Benchmarking Report (2024) identified Moodle as the most widely adopted LMS across the partner universities, highlighting its flexibility, learner progress tracking, assessment tools and integration with interactive learning resources. Consequently, Moodle was selected as the implementation platform for the ULC course. Although the course was developed in Moodle, the instructional design presented here is transferable to other LMSs providing comparable functionality. Within the ULC course, the LMS serves not simply as a repository of instructional materials but as an integrated learning environment in which pedagogical support is embedded throughout the learning process. Through formative assessment, automated feedback, learner reflection, progress monitoring and communication tools, the LMS supports learners in managing their own learning while maintaining a continuous pedagogical presence despite the absence of regular teacher-led instruction.

Learner autonomy is further supported by a set of embedded pedagogical mechanisms that foster self-regulated learning. Following Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) model of formative assessment, the course combines a consistent instructional organization, continuous formative assessment with immediate automated feedback, structured learner reflection through self-assessment, and teacher-supported communication via discussion forums. Rather than simply informing learners about their performance, these mechanisms encourage them to monitor their own progress, evaluate their understanding, and make informed decisions about subsequent learning. As Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006: 205) argue, effective feedback should "facilitate the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning" and "encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem." Together, these mechanisms provide continuous pedagogical support while enabling learners to assume increasing responsibility for managing their own learning.

One of the principal mechanisms supporting learner autonomy is the consistent instructional organization of the course. Drawing on principles of self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Zimmerman, 2002; Przybył, 2025), every module follows the same instructional sequence, beginning with clearly defined learning objectives and progressing through a coherent series of activities. This predictable structure helps learners monitor their progress, revisit earlier material when necessary, and decide when to move on. By reducing uncertainty and providing a clear learning pathway, it functions as embedded pedagogical support for independent learning.

Formative assessment is embedded throughout the course to provide continuous pedagogical support and encourage learners to monitor their own progress. Interactive H5P activities allow learners to complete tasks independently while receiving immediate automated feedback on their responses. In the absence of continuous teacher presence, automated feedback performs an important pedagogical function by providing immediate corrective guidance, helping learners identify errors, evaluate their understanding, and determine whether additional practice is required before progressing to subsequent learning activities. Because activities can be repeated without restrictions, learners are encouraged to learn from mistakes, consolidate

newly acquired language, and regulate the pace of their own learning. Thus, formative assessment functions not only as a means of evaluating learning but also as a mechanism for developing learner autonomy through continuous self-monitoring and informed decision-making.

Learner reflection is another important mechanism that supports autonomous learning. Each lesson concludes with a CEFR-inspired self-assessment ("Now I Can") activity that encourages learners to reflect on their achievement of the lesson outcomes. Rather than serving as a summative evaluation, these reflective activities help learners identify areas for further practice and make informed decisions about revisiting instructional materials before moving to subsequent lessons. By encouraging learners to monitor their own development and recognize their learning needs, self-assessment strengthens self-regulation and promotes greater responsibility for learning.

Although the ULC course is intended for independent study, opportunities for communication remain available throughout the learning process. Discussion forums enable learners to ask questions, seek clarification, discuss language-related difficulties, and receive guidance from the teacher when needed. They also encourage peer interaction and the exchange of learning experiences, helping learners feel connected to a learning community despite studying at their own pace. Overall, these mechanisms create an environment in which learners are supported throughout the learning process while progressively developing the knowledge, confidence, and responsibility required for autonomous language learning.

2.3. Language–Culture Integration: Representing Contemporary Ukraine Through Language Education

One of the central pedagogical questions that emerged during the development of the course concerned the representation of Ukraine itself. Although the integration of cultural content into language teaching is now widely accepted, designing a course for international beginners required a more specific decision: which Ukraine, which culture, and which narratives should language learning convey?

Following contemporary understandings of culture as a dynamic and continuously negotiated process (Hall, 1997) and drawing on Hrytsak's (2023) interpretation of Ukrainian cultural development, the ULC course conceptualizes culture as an evolving process rather than a fixed collection of inherited symbols. This perspective encouraged the authors to treat culture not as a discrete body of factual knowledge accompanying language instruction, but as an interpretive framework through which linguistic forms, communicative practices, and cultural phenomena acquire meaning. Accordingly, cultural content is integrated throughout the course and further developed through focused activities that connect language learning with broader historical and sociocultural contexts.

One such component is the Culture Focus section at the end of each lesson, which extends the linguistic material by situating it within a broader cultural and historical context. In Lesson 1, for example, learners encounter information about specific Ukrainian letters (*ї, п, ф, ь*) and they are invited to explore a 3D reconstruction of Kyiv from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. The concluding activities also encourage learners to reflect on and discuss their own experience of acquiring Ukrainian literacy, including which letters they find relatively easy or difficult to learn. In this way, cultural learning is combined with linguistic practice and learner reflection rather than presented as an isolated supplement to language instruction.

This conceptual position also prompted a reconsideration of the ways Ukrainian culture is commonly presented in educational materials. Traditional cultural symbols—such as *pysanka*, *vyshyvanka*, *Cossacks*, *hopak*, *trembita,* or *bandura*—remain important expressions of Ukrainian cultural heritage. However, they represent only one dimension of a much broader and continuously evolving cultural landscape.

Equally important was avoiding the opposite tendency of reducing contemporary Ukraine exclusively to the experience of war. While Russia's aggression inevitably forms part of today's Ukrainian reality, presenting Ukraine solely through this lens would produce another form of simplification.

Instead, the course introduces learners to contemporary Ukraine through multiple aspects of everyday life, including its cities, people, linguistic practices, cultural diversity, and social realities. Cultural materials were selected not only for their representativeness but also for their capacity to illuminate how language functions within contemporary Ukrainian society. Consequently, culture is not treated as an additional topic that supplements language instruction; rather, it constitutes the interpretive context through which learners develop linguistic competence while simultaneously gaining insight into how contemporary Ukraine understands and represents itself.

Thus, the central design challenge was not whether to integrate culture into language teaching, but how to represent contemporary Ukraine through language education in a manner that avoided both folklorisation and reduction to wartime experience.

2.4. Digital Instructional Design

Language instruction in the ULC course was organized through a coherent digital instructional design in which technologies were selected and integrated according to their pedagogical functions rather than their technological characteristics. Central to this design was a consistent instructional architecture implemented across all lessons. Although individual lessons differed in their linguistic content and communicative objectives, they followed the same recurring instructional structure throughout the course.

Within this instructional architecture, new language was introduced and practiced through recurring instructional cycles that followed the well-established progression from teacher-guided presentation towards increasingly independent language practice (Harmer, 2007), adapted to the affordances of a fully asynchronous learning environment.

Figures 1–3 illustrate the implementation of this instructional architecture through one instructional sequence from Lesson 6, *From Market to Table: Tastes of Ukraine*, which introduces the plural forms of Ukrainian nouns denoting fruits and vegetables.

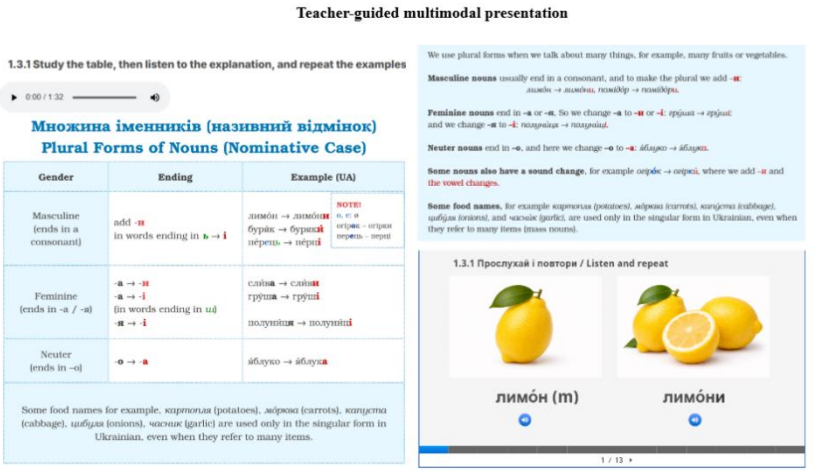


Figure 1: Teacher-guided multimodal presentation of target grammatical forms

Figure 1 illustrates the teacher-guided multimodal presentation stage, in which complementary multimodal resources support learners' initial understanding of the target grammatical structure. The sequence begins with explicit grammar instruction delivered through a teacher-recorded explanation supported by a grammar chart. Explicit instruction directs learners' attention to the target form and promotes metalinguistic awareness before they engage in independent language practice (Ellis, 2006). Learners then progress to a visually supported rule explanation in which color coding, typography, and model examples highlight salient grammatical features. This form of input enhancement facilitates learners' noticing of target forms, an important prerequisite for language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990). The presentation concludes with audio-supported examples integrating written text, images, and teacher modeling, enabling learners to associate pronunciation with orthographic and semantic representations. Combining auditory and visual modes supports initial comprehension and reduces unnecessary cognitive load (Mayer, 2009). Collectively, these complementary resources establish a shared conceptual foundation before learners progress to controlled receptive practice, illustrated in Figure 2.

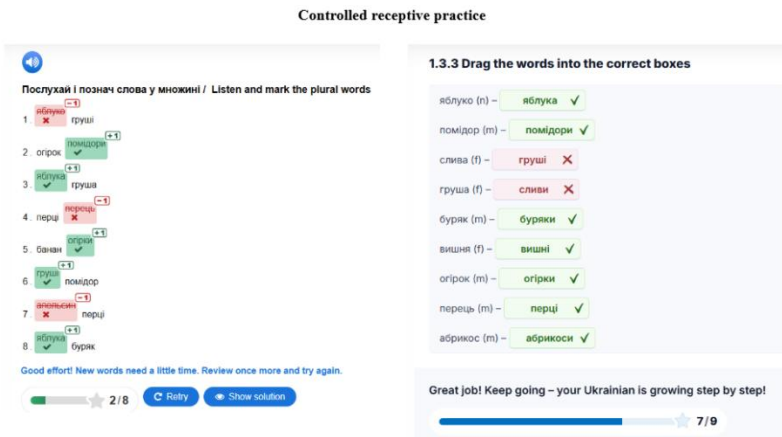


Figure 2: Controlled receptive practice through listening and form-recognition activities

Figure 2 shows how learners consolidate their understanding of the target language through listening discrimination, form recognition, and matching activities. Rather than producing the newly introduced grammatical forms independently, they focus on recognizing and interpreting them in highly structured contexts. This gradual increase in task demands allows learners to develop grammatical accuracy before engaging in more demanding productive tasks (Harmer, 2007). By moving from auditory discrimination to visual recognition and semantic matching, the activities provide repeated exposure to the target forms while reinforcing the form–meaning relationships established during the presentation stage. Immediate automated feedback enables learners to identify and correct errors, monitor their understanding, and repeat activities where necessary, supporting a gradual transition to independent language production.

Building on the receptive activities, learners begin to retrieve and produce the target grammatical forms independently. Instructional support is gradually reduced while immediate automated feedback continues to guide learning, encouraging greater autonomy and helping learners consolidate accuracy before applying the target

structures in communicative activities. Figure 3 presents two complementary stages of controlled productive practice that support this transition.

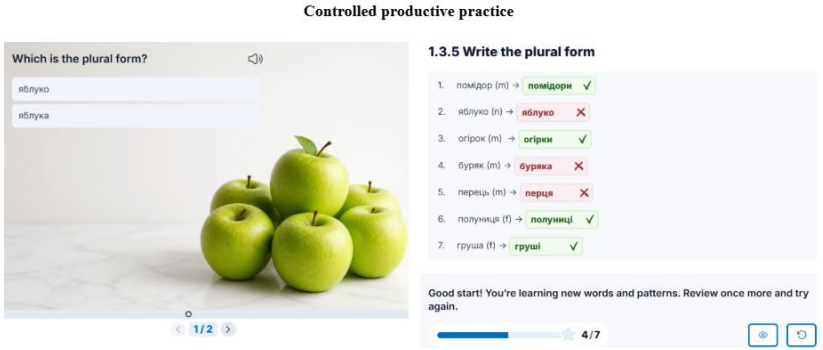


Figure 3: Controlled productive practice through guided and independent language production

Figure 3 demonstrates how learners move from supported retrieval to independent use of the target grammatical forms. Learners first complete a guided selected-response activity in which they identify the correct plural form from a limited set of alternatives. This intermediate step bridges receptive and productive language use while reducing cognitive demands, thereby enabling learners to produce the target forms more independently. Immediate automated feedback allows learners to identify and correct errors, repeat activities where necessary, and consolidate accurate language use. The availability of instructional materials provides learners with structured instructional guidance and the flexibility to engage with the lesson at their own pace.

The instructional architecture was not limited to internally developed learning activities. Where pedagogically appropriate, selected external applications were incorporated to extend the learning environment without disrupting the coherence of the course. Figure 4 presents an embedded interactive mapping activity from Lesson 9, *City and Travel*, demonstrating how language learning can be situated within authentic geographical and cultural contexts.

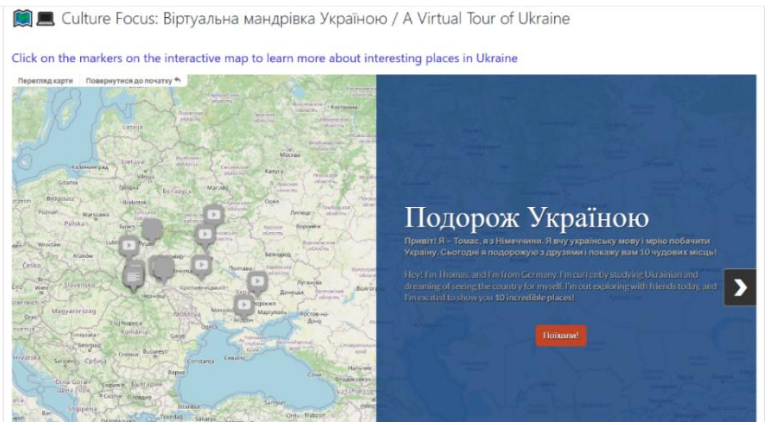


Figure 4: Interactive mapping activity using authentic cultural content

Unlike decontextualized language exercises, the mapping activity requires learners to interpret authentic place names, follow routes, and associate linguistic forms with real geographical locations. Embedding the application directly within the LMS allows learners to engage with authentic digital resources without disrupting the continuity of the learning process, illustrating how external technologies can complement rather than replace the core instructional design of the course.

The educational value of this digital instructional design lies not in the individual technologies employed but in their pedagogically purposeful organization within a coherent instructional architecture. Recurring instructional cycles provide a consistent framework for introducing, practicing, and consolidating new language across lessons. At the same time, the selective integration of external applications extends learning opportunities by situating language use within authentic contexts. Together, these complementary design principles support many of the instructional functions traditionally performed by teachers in face-to-face settings, demonstrating how a fully asynchronous language course can provide structured guidance, meaningful practice, and contextualized learning without continuous teacher presence. More broadly, this instructional architecture illustrates how pedagogy-driven technology integration can transform asynchronous delivery from a repository of digital materials into a coherent environment for beginner language learning.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

The central question addressed in this study was how a fully asynchronous beginner language course can provide the guidance, interaction, and support traditionally associated with teacher presence. The ULC course suggests that the answer lies not in reproducing classroom instruction digitally, but in redistributing pedagogical functions across the instructional environment.

A first and fundamental insight concerns the relationship between pedagogy and technology. The experience confirmed that the design of asynchronous language courses should be driven by pedagogical principles rather than by technological affordances. The central challenge was not selecting digital tools but identifying the instructional functions that were to be maintained in the absence of continuous teacher presence. Consequently, Moodle, H5P, multimedia resources, and automated feedback were chosen to serve pedagogical rather than technological priorities.

Second, the project demonstrated the importance of structured autonomy in fully asynchronous beginner language learning. Learner autonomy in this context did not mean leaving learners to navigate content independently with minimal intervention. On the contrary, greater learner independence required stronger pedagogical scaffolding embedded in the course architecture. Consistent lesson organization, explicit learning outcomes, incremental progression, unlimited opportunities for formative practice, immediate automated feedback, Now I Can self-reflection activities, and Check Your Progress tasks collectively performed functions that, in face-to-face instruction, would often be distributed across teacher explanations, correction, encouragement, and informal monitoring. The pilot experience, therefore, supports an understanding of autonomy as a capacity developed through pedagogical support rather than as a prerequisite for successful asynchronous learning.

The approach to initial literacy illustrates this principle. Teaching a new writing system without real-time teacher intervention required the course authors to reconsider a process that can easily be taken for granted in classroom instruction. The six-group typology of Ukrainian letters, the cumulative restriction of reading material to already introduced letters, the systematic movement from letter recognition to

syllables, words, sentences, and mini-texts, and the integration of pronunciation and vocabulary practice created an instructional pathway through which learners could gradually assume greater independence. The decision to prioritize keyboard-based production over handwriting similarly reflected the particular affordances and communicative demands of the digital environment. More broadly, this experience suggests that successful asynchronous course design may require not simply transferring established classroom practices online, but also reconsidering which practices remain pedagogically necessary, which need to be redesigned, and which can be replaced with forms of learning more appropriate to the digital environment.

Third, the project highlighted the importance of integrating language and culture within a coherent pedagogical framework. In the ULC course, culture was not conceptualized as supplementary factual knowledge added to linguistic instruction, but as part of the context through which language becomes meaningful. This principle had particular significance in a course created for international learners at a time of heightened global attention to Ukraine. The design team faced the challenge of representing Ukraine without reducing it either to a collection of familiar symbols or to the experience of war alone. The resulting approach sought instead to present Ukrainian culture as historically grounded, internally diverse, and continuously evolving, while connecting cultural material to everyday language use, communicative conventions, places, practices, and contemporary social realities. Language–culture integration thus became not only a matter of content selection but also one of representation: what learners encounter through a beginner language course inevitably contributes to their understanding of the society in which that language functions.

This dimension of the project also demonstrates that even elementary language education involves interpretive choices. Decisions about which names, places, foods, forms of address, everyday situations, historical references, images, and cultural practices appear in teaching materials contribute to a particular representation of the target-language community. Such decisions become especially consequential when learners have limited prior knowledge of that community. For international beginners, the course functions not only as an introduction to Ukrainian but also as an initial framework for understanding contemporary Ukraine. The wartime context intensified this responsibility, making it particularly important to provide learners with access to Ukraine as a living society rather than solely as the object of geopolitical attention or military conflict.

A fourth insight concerns the role of assessment and feedback in asynchronous instruction. Rather than serving primarily to measure achievement, assessment functioned as a continuous source of information for learners about their own progress. The distinction between low-stakes activities allowing repeated attempts and the more restricted Check Your Progress tasks enabled learners to use assessment both for practice and for self-evaluation. Immediate automated feedback could not replicate all the diagnostic and interpersonal functions of teacher feedback. However, it provided learners with timely information at the point of difficulty and allowed them to revisit explanations and repeat activities independently. In this respect, assessment became one of the mechanisms through which pedagogical support was embedded in the asynchronous environment.

The pilot implementation also suggests the value of incorporating learners themselves into the course-development process. Lesson-by-lesson questionnaires allowed the development team to identify pedagogical and technical difficulties during implementation and refine the course accordingly. The shift from requests for clarification in the earlier lessons to predominantly positive feedback in Lessons 9–13 suggests that this iterative process improved the learning environment. At the same time, learners' sustained interest in additional cultural material indicated that they regarded culture as an integral, rather than peripheral, aspect of language learning.

These observations, however, should be interpreted with caution, as the questions were primarily intended to support course development rather than to evaluate learning effectiveness.

The project further highlighted the inherently collaborative nature of digital course development. The creation of a comprehensive asynchronous course required expertise that extended beyond what is normally associated with individual language teaching. The course benefited from expertise in Ukrainian language pedagogy, literacy development, cultural studies, instructional design, digital technologies, external review, and learner feedback. Rather than following a linear process, it evolved through repeated cycles of design, implementation, evaluation, and revision.

The conditions under which the course was developed add another dimension to these findings. The project was undertaken while Ukrainian universities were operating under the continuing disruption caused by Russia's full-scale invasion. Under such circumstances, asynchronous design offered more than flexibility or convenience: it represented educational resilience. A course whose learning materials, activities, feedback mechanisms, and assessments are available independently of fixed meeting times can remain accessible when synchronous participation is disrupted by displacement, time zone differences, infrastructure instability, or other constraints. Although these circumstances are specific in their severity, the underlying design principle is more broadly relevant to institutions seeking sustainable forms of language education that can function under conditions of uncertainty.

At the same time, the experience of the ULC course points to limitations that should qualify the conclusions drawn from the project. The course was designed for A1 learners using English as the mediating language, and the pedagogical solutions described here cannot automatically be generalized to learners at higher proficiency levels, heritage speakers, or learners with different first-language backgrounds. Pilot feedback provides valuable evidence of usability, engagement, and perceived clarity, but cannot establish comparative learning effectiveness. Further research employing systematic analysis of learner performance and interactions would therefore be needed to more precisely evaluate the relationship between particular design features and measurable learning outcomes.

Future research should examine three questions: the balance between learner autonomy and teacher presence in asynchronous environments; adaptive instructional pathways that respond to differences in learners' needs; and the development of sustainable learning communities in courses without fixed meeting times.

Artificial intelligence introduces an additional set of questions. AI-supported systems may offer new possibilities for individualized explanations, conversational practice, pronunciation support, and more responsive feedback than conventional automated activities can provide. Their pedagogical value, however, will depend on whether they strengthen rather than displace learner agency, critical reflection, meaningful interaction, and appropriate forms of teacher mediation. The key question is therefore not whether AI should be incorporated into asynchronous language courses, but which pedagogical functions it should perform, which functions should remain human, and how the relationship between the two should be designed. In this respect, the pedagogy-first principle that guided the use of Moodle, H5P, and other digital applications in the ULC course becomes even more important as more powerful technologies enter language education.

Taken together, the experience of the ULC course suggests that the central problem of asynchronous language education is not the absence of the teacher as such, but the need to reconsider how the pedagogical functions traditionally associated with teacher presence are distributed across the learning environment. Careful sequencing can provide guidance; multimodal presentation can support explanation and modelling; interactive activities and automated feedback can sustain practice and formative

assessment; structured reflection can support self-regulation; and asynchronous forums can create opportunities for interpersonal and intercultural interaction. None of these elements alone substitutes for a teacher. Their pedagogically coherent integration, however, can create a structured environment that progressively develops learner autonomy.

The broader contribution of the project, therefore, lies not simply in the creation of a new digital course in Ukrainian. It lies in demonstrating how a fully asynchronous language-learning environment can be designed around a coherent set of pedagogical principles while remaining responsive to a specific linguistic, cultural, institutional, and historical context. Developed during a period of profound disruption, the ULC course illustrates how digital language education can combine accessibility and flexibility with structured pedagogical support, and how language teaching can simultaneously provide learners with linguistic resources and informed access to the culture and society in which those resources have meaning.

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AI Use Declaration

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Grammarly solely for language editing and stylistic refinement to improve the manuscript's clarity, grammar, and readability. The AI tools were not used in the conception of the study or in the development of its scientific arguments and conclusions. All AI-assisted text was critically reviewed and revised by the author. The authors confirm that the manuscript is the result of their own intellectual work and assume full responsibility for its accuracy, integrity, and originality.

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