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Abstract

Aims and Objectives / Purpose / Research Questions: This qualitative case study investigates the role of multilingualism in the integration of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It specifically asks: (1) What role does multilingualism play in the integration of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools? (2) How does proficiency in a commonly shared language influence the initial integration and emotional well-being of Ukrainian refugee students? and (3) What insights from this case study can inform broader understandings of refugee student integration in multilingual educational settings?

Design / Methodology / Approach: The study employs a qualitative case study design, utilizing semi-structured interviews supplemented by drawings, and focus groups with six Ukrainian refugee students aged 7–13 who have been in Polish schools for at least six months. Data collection was conducted in Ukrainian, with parents present, and ethical protocols adhered to trauma-informed care practices.

Data and Analysis: Data included individual interviews—supplemented by drawings from participants— and focus groups, yielding approximately 330 minutes of recordings and visual materials. Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework with MAXQDA software. Coding and theme development were collaborative, guided by translanguaging theory, Ager and Strang’s integration framework, and social-emotional learning principles.

Findings / Conclusions: Findings reveal that while the linguistic proximity of Ukrainian and Polish provided some initial advantages, English emerged as a crucial mediator for communication and emotional comfort during the early stages of integration. Students also relied on Ukrainian and Russian, as well as non-verbal strategies such as gestures, to communicate. Cultural and social activities further facilitated belonging. The study concludes that multilingualism, supported by social-emotional practices, significantly contributes to both linguistic and emotional integration.

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Originality: This research addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on Slavic-speaking refugee students in an Eastern European context, an area and population that has received less attention compared to refugee integration in Western Europe. It highlights the interplay of shared linguistic roots, multilingual practices, and emotional resilience in shaping the integration of refugees.

Significance / Implications: The study underscores the need for educational institutions to leverage students' full linguistic repertoires and to integrate social-emotional learning into school practices. It advocates for holistic, inclusive approaches that go beyond assimilation, promoting both academic success and emotional well-being of refugee students in educational settings.

Keywords

Multilingualism, refugee integration, emotional resilience, social-emotional learning, Ukrainian refugee students

Introduction

The onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, precipitated the massive displacement of over six million Ukrainian refugees, leading to significant socio-cultural adjustments in neighboring countries, particularly Poland. With an estimated number of close to one million Ukrainian refugees residing in Poland as of November 2023 (IOM, 2024), there is a crucial need to understand the factors facilitating their integration into this new society. Among these factors, linguistic integration stands out as pivotal. Language is not only a means of communication but also a tool for accessing education, employment, and social services, making it essential for the successful integration of refugees (Becker, 2024; Pentón Herrera & Byndas, 2023). After the war, many Ukrainian refugees found shelter with Polish families, creating unique opportunities and challenges for linguistic and cultural integration. These living arrangements have allowed for immersive language-learning experiences and cultural exchanges, which are vital for the integration process (Strekalova-Hughes & Wang, 2017). Yet, despite these dynamics, the complexity of linguistic integration for Slavic-speaking populations remains underexplored, particularly in the Polish context.

While research on refugee integration within Europe has proliferated in recent years, much of it has centered on Middle Eastern and African populations in Western Europe (e.g., Dixon & Parker, 2023; Putri et al., 2023). Few studies have examined the experiences of Slavic-speaking refugees in Eastern European host countries, leaving a gap in understanding how shared linguistic and cultural characteristics might influence the integration process. It might be assumed that the similarities between Ukrainian and Polish—both being Slavic languages—provide a distinct advantage for refugees, potentially easing their initial adjustment. Nevertheless, little is known about how this shared linguistic foundation impacts refugees' ability to navigate the educational, social, and emotional demands of their new environments. Furthermore, this gap in research points to the need for a focused study on how these linguistic overlaps, combined with multilingualism, shape the broader integration process, especially in school settings where language proficiency is closely tied to academic success and emotional well-being.

The shared linguistic history between Ukrainian and Polish presents a unique opportunity to examine how linguistic similarities, in particular, facilitate refugee adjustment. The question remains, however, whether the commonalities in vocabulary, syntax, and phonology truly mitigate the challenges that accompany displacement or whether other factors—such as multilingualism and emotional resilience—play a more significant role during resettlement. This qualitative case study, thus, explores the linguistic factors that influence the integration process of Ukrainian

refugee students in Polish schools, with particular attention to the role of language proficiency in their initial integration and emotional well-being. Throughout our study, we understand *integration* as a dynamic, multifaceted process that spans social, cultural, economic, political, linguistic, and emotional dimensions, reflecting the interconnected nature of personal growth, community participation, and social belonging. Drawing on the work of Ager and Strang (2008), we view integration as a process that involves the development of social connections, the removal of structural barriers, and the fostering of emotional resilience, all of which are essential for creating a sense of belonging and participation in a new society.

Although situated in the specific context of Polish schools, the study was also guided by an interest in informing broader audiences concerned with multilingualism and refugee education. Thus, the guiding research questions are:

1. What role does multilingualism play in the integration of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools?
2. How does proficiency in a commonly shared language influence the initial integration and emotional well-being of Ukrainian refugee students?
3. What insights from this case study can inform broader understandings of refugee student integration in multilingual educational settings?

Language and integration

The integration of refugee students into host countries' educational systems has been an increasing focus within the realm of educational research. The term refugee is used to describe individuals who have fled their countries to escape situations in which their lives were in jeopardy, such as violence, conflict, or persecution, and have sought safety in another country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], n.d.). Different from other types of migrants, refugees often face a myriad of challenges, including emotional and psychological barriers due to trauma from forced displacement (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2021). For this reason, educational institutions often incorporate different approaches to support refugee students, such as social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-sensitive practices, as they have proven instrumental in the transitional period and integration phase (Darragh & Pentón Herrera, 2026; Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024). Among and within these educational supports, language acquisition receives a primary focus, as it influences both the social-emotional and academic integration experiences of refugee students while navigating the complexities of a new cultural and educational landscape.

The role of language in the integration of refugee students is a recurring theme in the literature, particularly in discussions about both barriers and facilitators. Perez Peguero (2024) highlights the transformative potential of community-based, technology-enhanced, and culturally relevant curricula in empowering refugees, fostering not only linguistic competence but also social cohesion through active and adaptive learning experiences. Moreover, Hokkinen and Barner-Rasmussen (2023) emphasize how refugees' agency and sense-making shape their career aspirations, noting that while local language skills are crucial, they can sometimes act as obstacles rather than pathways to meaningful employment. Finally, Pentón Herrera and Byndas (2023) underscore the importance of English as a global lingua franca, especially in non-English-speaking countries, in allowing refugees to bypass restrictive local language expectations and align their linguistic efforts with broader career and personal goals. Together, these insights underscore the nuanced role of language in refugee students' integration, advocating for adaptable and inclusive language-learning frameworks.

Becker and Magno's (2022) work on multilingualism sheds light on the intricate ways in which refugee students integrate their linguistic repertoires within monolingual-oriented educational

systems. Their exploration of language portraits reveals how multilingual students benefit from visualizing and articulating their diverse linguistic identities, which can be especially empowering in host countries that may not initially support such diversity. This concept is particularly relevant for Ukrainian students in Poland, who often face the challenge of blending new linguistic expectations with their existing identities. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020) echoes the importance of supporting multilingualism in refugee education, emphasizing that access to mother-tongue instruction alongside second-language learning can alleviate trauma and foster a stronger sense of belonging. Together, these perspectives underscore the need for educational systems to embrace inclusive language policies that not only facilitate linguistic integration but also promote psycho-social well-being among displaced students (Becker and Magno, 2022; UNESCO, 2020).

The influx of Ukrainian students into Polish schools, especially following the 2022 Russian invasion, has prompted Polish educational institutions to explore various strategies to address the unique needs of these refugee children. Polish schools have implemented both full-immersion and semi-immersion models, which aim to facilitate language acquisition while fostering social integration. However, as Bobryk and Kochan (2022) observed, these approaches often lean toward an assimilation framework rather than proper integration. In this context, assimilation implies a one-way process where students are expected to conform to Polish linguistic and cultural norms with minimal emphasis on preserving their own cultural identities. Conversely, integration promotes a more reciprocal exchange, allowing students to maintain their cultural heritage while engaging long-term with the host society. Fridrikh (2022) underscores that while full-immersion strategies may expedite Polish language acquisition, they can also amplify emotional stress for refugee students, who face challenges in both academic and social settings due to language barriers. In addition, many Ukrainian parents prioritize rapid language acquisition, viewing it as essential for their children's future opportunities in Poland. However, they also express a preference for maintaining their cultural practices and language within the home (Bobryk and Kochan, 2022). Together, these studies indicate that while initial language acquisition is vital for Ukrainian students' integration, long-term integration requires educational policies that support cultural identity alongside social-emotional development, fostering a more holistic and inclusive educational environment (UNESCO, 2020).

Theoretical underpinnings

This study draws upon three main key theoretical perspectives to explore the linguistic and emotional integration of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools. By employing translanguaging theory, Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework, and SEL as theoretical lenses, this research illuminates how language, culture, and social-emotional factors intersect to shape the integration experiences of Ukrainian students. These three lenses collectively create a triadic structure for understanding the complexities of refugee integration: translanguaging represents the "language" aspect by focusing on how students use their multilingual abilities; the integration framework captures the "cultural-relational" aspects, emphasizing students' participation in institutional and community life while maintaining cultural identity and building meaningful connections across groups; and SEL encompasses the "social-emotional" dimensions by addressing students' emotional well-being and interpersonal skills, which are essential for their initial transition into a new educational system (Figure 1). Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive lens through which the multifaceted experience of Ukrainian refugee students can be analyzed.

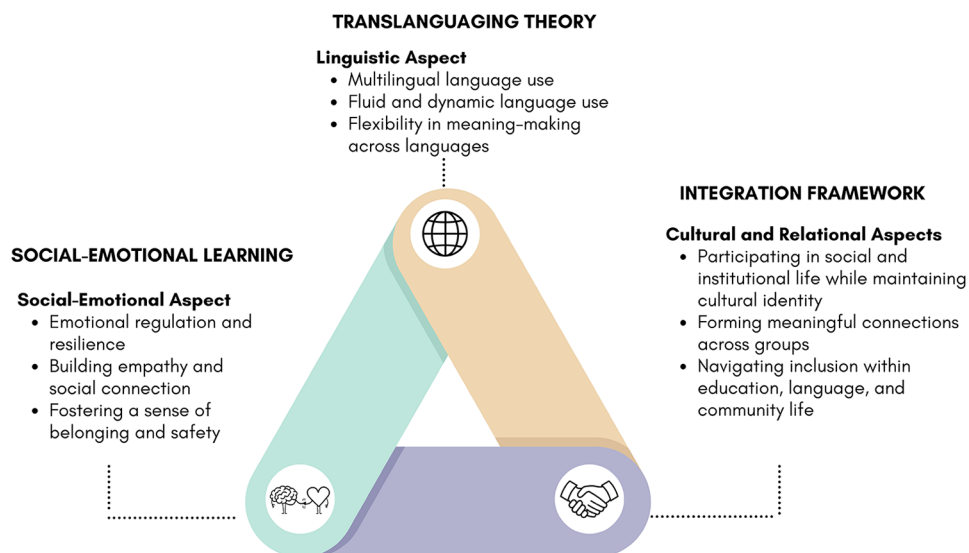


Figure 1. Visual representation of theoretical underpinnings.

Translinguaging theory

Translinguaging theory offers a critical framework for understanding how multilingual individuals utilize their entire linguistic repertoire to communicate, rather than relying on distinct, compartmentalized languages. This perspective views language use as fluid and dynamic, allowing speakers to draw from various linguistic resources depending on context, purpose, and interaction (García & Kleyn, 2016; Rafi & Morgan, 2022). Translinguaging extends beyond simple code-switching by emphasizing the active process of meaning-making across multiple languages in ways that are natural for the speaker. In the context of this study, translinguaging is particularly relevant because Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools navigate complex linguistic environments where they must draw upon their knowledge of the various languages they bring and are learning in Poland. Rather than switching from one language to another, these students, as multilingual speakers, often combine elements of multiple languages to communicate effectively with peers, teachers, and host families. This fluid approach to language use is essential for both social integration and emotional well-being (Song et al., 2022), making translinguaging a powerful lens through which to examine the students' integration processes.

Integration framework

The integration framework (Ager & Strang, 2008) provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how refugee students engage with their new environments through participation, connection, and a sense of belonging. Defined as a multidimensional and dynamic process, integration involves access to rights and services, active involvement in institutional life, and the development of social relationships that support inclusion (Ager & Strang, 2008). In this study, we draw particularly on the cultural and relational dimensions of integration, which include maintaining one's cultural identity while building meaningful connections with others. These connections span relationships within cultural communities, across different social groups, and

with institutions. Within the school context, integration involves navigating language and education systems, developing peer relationships, and participating in the routines and values of the school community. This framework enables us to analyze how refugee students position themselves within both cultural and institutional landscapes, and how their sense of belonging is shaped by their ability to participate meaningfully while preserving aspects of their heritage (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx, 2016).

Social-emotional learning

SEL is considered a framework and educational approach that emphasizes the development of essential social, emotional, and interpersonal skills to foster well-being and success in educational and life contexts (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). For refugee students, SEL plays a critical role in managing the emotional upheaval caused by displacement and the challenges of navigating in a new environment. By fostering skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, and social connection, SEL can help students navigate the stress and anxiety associated with adapting to new languages, cultures, and educational settings (Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024). In the context of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools, employing SEL as a theoretical lens is particularly relevant as it sheds light on the emotional resilience and interpersonal skills necessary for forming helpful relationships with peers, teachers, and the broader community. Incorporating SEL principles as part of the theoretical underpinnings of this study provides a foundation for understanding how social-emotional competencies can support emotional well-being and academic integration, ultimately promoting both personal growth and successful integration (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

Methodology

In this qualitative case study (Yin, 2017), qualitative, semi-structured interviews and a focus group were conducted by the first author with the purpose of examining the experiences of Ukrainian refugee students, which allowed for in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample included six students, aged 7–13 years, who had recently arrived with their parents in Poland. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, specifically chosen based on their status as Ukrainian refugee students who had been attending Polish schools for a minimum of 6 months, as this timeframe allowed them to reflect meaningfully on their integration experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant's information, such as name (pseudonyms), age, grade, gender, and languages spoken, was documented and is shared in Table 1.

Given the involvement of minor participants who are also refugees, ethical considerations were a priority throughout the study. Parents were present during all interview and focus group sessions to provide reassurance and emotional support to the children, aligning with best practices for research involving young participants (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Informed consent was obtained from both the parents and the children, with each participant fully briefed in their native language(s) to ensure comprehension of the study's purpose and procedures. In addition, approvals were secured from the participating schools and institutional review boards in compliance with ethical standards for research with vulnerable populations (Liamputtong, 2007). To further safeguard participants' well-being, this study adhered to the principles of trauma-informed care, which emphasizes creating a safe and supportive environment and empowering participants through autonomy and choice (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). These steps were taken to minimize any potential distress or discomfort, recognizing the particular vulnerabilities of refugee children (Block et al., 2013).

Table 1. Participant demographics.

#	Names (pseudonyms)	Age	Grade	Gender	Languages spoken
1	Tom	13	7th grade	Male	Ukrainian/Russian/English
2	Nelia	12	6th grade	Female	Ukrainian/English/Russian/German
3	Toma	13	7th grade	Female	Ukrainian/Russian/English
4	Maria	13	7th grade	Female	Ukrainian/English
5	Nick	7	1st grade	Male	Ukrainian/Some English
6	Michael	7	1st grade	Male	Ukrainian/Some English

Positionality statement

Given the qualitative case study methodology of our research and the sensitive nature of the population being explored (i.e., minor refugee students from Ukraine), it is essential to provide a positionality statement. Our statements aim to clarify our identities, roles, and connections to both the participants and the subject matter.

The first author spent a year and a half as a refugee in Poland. At the time of writing this article, she was residing in Denmark, serving as an invited fellow at Roskilde University. Following the outbreak of war, Poland emerged as a crucial haven for her and many other Ukrainian refugees. This group included numerous educators from various academic levels. The first author was among them, having fled Ukraine with her 12-year-old daughter on 6 March 2022. They settled in Warsaw, where her background as an English teacher and her PhD from Rivne State University of the Humanities, Ukraine, gave her the opportunity to join as an English as a foreign language (EFL) specialist for Ukrainian refugee students in the educational program “Warsaw University of Ukraine,” a component of the European Union’s program “Knowledge, Education and Development,” (from December 2022 to December 2023). Within the program, she taught the course “English Ups Your Life” to Ukrainian refugees.

The second author is a Cuban-born individual from a refugee background who migrated to the United States at the age of 17. He resides in Warsaw, Poland, where he teaches English and Spanish at the higher education level. His personal and professional experiences have significantly shaped his academic trajectory and interests. As someone who has firsthand experience with the challenges of adapting to a new country and navigating educational systems as a refugee—in addition to the realities of his family, who are also refugees in the United States and Costa Rica—he brings an insider’s perspective to the topic of this study. His current role as an educator in Poland, coupled with his personal story, allows him to approach this research with a deep understanding and empathy for the complexities that refugee students face, particularly in educational settings.

Before joining academia, the third author worked as an English as an additional language (EAL) specialist in a large primary and secondary school in East London, UK, which hosted a large number of migrant and refugee students. As the head of the school’s inclusion department, she was responsible, among others, for the integration phase for each EAL student, which included linguistic and socio-emotional support. In her current position at the University of Warsaw, she has supported various activities that support Ukrainian student refugees.

Our paths intersected in 2022 in Poland through shared academic interests and institutional initiatives aimed at supporting refugee professors and students from Ukraine. These initiatives fostered collaboration between local educators and displaced academics. Together, we have

undertaken various projects and applied for grants to further educational initiatives for Ukrainian refugee students and educators. Our commitment to the well-being and success of Ukrainians inside and outside of Ukraine motivated us to secure funding for this research. This shared commitment to advocacy and the desire to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by these students propelled us to conduct this study.

As a final point, drawing on Bukamal's (2022) discussion of insider–outsider ambivalence, we recognize that our positionalities are not fixed but instead shift depending on the context and the nature of our interactions with participants. This fluidity reflects our complex identities as both insiders and outsiders: as former refugees, current educators, and researchers. Just as Bukamal (2022) highlights the nuanced ways in which a researcher's background can simultaneously enable and complicate access to the research context, our collective experiences navigating diverse educational systems (as students, teachers, and scholars) and refugee pathways inform our understanding of the challenges faced by the Ukrainian students in this study. This ambivalence, while challenging, also enriches our insights into the data, as it allows us to approach the research with both empathetic understanding and critical distance.

Data collection procedures

Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with each participant in the presence of their parents and supplemented by two focus group sessions with all participants (with their parents present). This approach allowed for a guided exploration of specific themes, enabling participants to express their experiences freely (Patton, 2015), either orally or by drawing. The interview protocol consisted of 18 questions for the children, with parent input occasionally integrated to provide additional context, and nine questions for the focus groups. These sessions addressed key areas such as communication barriers, language use, and effective communicative strategies while delving into both immediate challenges and longer-term solutions associated with the integration process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

In addition to the six individual interviews conducted, two focus groups were organized to enrich the qualitative data and to explore shared experiences among participants. The purpose of these focus groups was to provide a complementary perspective to the individual interviews by highlighting peer interactions and collective narratives that may not surface in one-on-one conversations. Each group was tailored to the developmental stage and comfort level of its participants, ensuring meaningful participation and rich qualitative data. For the first focus group, we invited the four participants aged 12 and 13 years. Their age proximity was deliberate, fostering a more cohesive and relatable discussion environment. The participants spent a similar amount of time in Poland. This shared context ensured they were at comparable stages of integration into Polish school life. While they attended different schools, differences in the support systems for Ukrainian students contributed to the diversity of their perspectives.

The group was intentionally kept small to facilitate active participation and to minimize the risk of participants becoming passive or overwhelmed. The participants' mothers knew each other, which contributed to a sense of familiarity and comfort among the children. These features resulted in a dynamic and engaged discussion. The children were comfortable expressing themselves, frequently (and respectfully) interrupting, exchanging ideas, and extending the discussion beyond the moderator's questions. Topics included both academic and non-instructional aspects of school life, such as activities during breaks, social dynamics, and participation in extracurricular activities. To enrich the discussion, participants were also invited to complete a creative drawing task. They illustrated scenes representing their out-of-class experiences, what they enjoyed, and what they

found lacking. This multimodal approach surfaced insights that might not have emerged through verbal discussion alone, offering a more holistic understanding of their integration experiences.

The second focus group involved the two younger participants, aged 7 years, who were twins. These children had recently arrived in Poland, and their experiences were explored in the presence of their mother, which helped establish a secure and familiar atmosphere for the young participants. The inclusion of this younger cohort allowed for an age-based comparison with the teenage group. The structure of the focus group was adapted to suit the developmental stage of the participants, incorporating more age-appropriate language. While the depth of verbal reflection was more limited compared to the teenagers, the younger children still offered meaningful insights into early school adjustment, feelings of inclusion, and their perceptions of classroom and break-time experiences.

The focus groups provided several distinct advantages over the individual interviews; in particular, focus groups revealed how shared experiences shaped their perceptions. The spontaneous exchanges, affirmations, and even disagreements helped uncover collective norms and group-specific concerns. The creative drawing task employed during the teenage focus group encouraged reflection and expression through non-verbal means, capturing emotional and experiential dimensions of school life that complemented spoken narratives. By including both younger children and early adolescents, the study gained a comparative perspective on age-specific challenges and coping strategies during school integration. Differences in how children engaged with school and responded to institutional support were essential. The focus groups were a vital component of the research design, offering nuanced, peer-informed insights that both supported and expanded upon themes emerging from individual interviews.

Data collection took place through a mix of in-person and virtual formats to accommodate participants' schedules and facilitate accessibility. Focus group sessions were held face-to-face, while individual interviews took place via Zoom, allowing participants to engage from their familiar environments. Conducting the sessions in Ukrainian minimized language barriers and enhanced participant comfort, a crucial factor given the sensitive nature of the topic (Squires, 2009). Audio recordings of each interview were subsequently transcribed and translated into English, yielding approximately 330 minutes of recorded data. Individual interviews averaged 30–35 minutes, and focus group sessions lasted about 1 hour each. This dataset includes both verbal data and supplementary visual materials, such as drawings created by the children to convey their experiences and emotions regarding the integration process (Yin, 2017). These drawings, beyond facilitating expression, were analyzed thematically alongside interview data, providing additional insights into the children's emotional landscapes. The interview protocol was kept in two languages—in Ukrainian to preserve the nuances of participants' expressions, and in English to allow for collaborative analysis among the research team.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using MAXQDA 2020 software, enabling an organized approach to coding and identifying thematic patterns within the interview and focus group data. This process was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which involves familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This approach provided a structured yet flexible method for exploring participants' experiences and insights.

Coding was conducted separately by the first and third authors, first in Ukrainian (the language in which the data was collected) by the first author and then in English by the third author after the first author translated it. Subsequently, the codes were reviewed and refined by all the authors to develop themes that aligned with the theoretical frameworks, such as translanguaging and SEL. The use of MAXQDA 2020 further supported our process by facilitating comparisons across

interviews, identifying patterns of language use, and highlighting significant themes that were relevant to the integration process (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Guest et al., 2012).

The themes were then analyzed for coherence and distinctiveness, ensuring they accurately represented the participants' experiences. For example, linguistic integration and emotional resilience emerged as central themes, each with subthemes such as "translanguaging practices" and "non-verbal communication." These themes were then reviewed in light of the theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Finally, themes were defined, named, and synthesized to create a cohesive narrative that aligned with the study's objectives, emphasizing the nuanced role of language and emotional support in the students' integration process (Nowell et al., 2017; Saldaña, 2016). This systematic analysis ensured a thorough examination of the linguistic, cultural, and social-emotional dimensions of the participants' experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that support refugee students' integration in Polish schools.

Findings

This study's findings reveal the crucial role of multilingualism and non-linguistic facilitators in the integration process of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools. Through narratives and drawings, participants described language as both a bridge and a barrier, with English serving as a critical mediator in the initial period of adjustment. They also highlighted how cultural and social activities, some of which included non-verbal communication, acted as essential facilitators, enhancing their ability to connect and interact. These themes align with our research questions, showing how multilingualism and language proficiency influence refugee students' integration experiences and emotional well-being.

The role of English as a mediator in early integration

English emerged as a central tool for Ukrainian refugee students, particularly during the initial weeks of their transition to Polish schools. Given the widespread use of English in the school environment, participants found it instrumental in overcoming the language barrier presented by Polish. Tom explained, "*The main thing there [in school] is that everyone there speaks English, and English was a real help.*" Nelia echoed this sentiment, adding, "*At first, of course, I didn't know anything about [the] Polish [language], but it [English] really helped.*" In addition, Tom, describing his drawing (Figure 2), explained that "*this is a man. And he speaks English.*" To Tom's surprise, "*in my Polish school, everyone speaks English very well.*" These excerpts highlight the participants' appreciation of English as a conduit for interacting with peers and teachers in the initial phases of integration.

Furthermore, the data suggest that English, in addition to facilitating communication, also provided emotional comfort by reducing feelings of isolation. This theme directly responds to the first research question, emphasizing how proficiency in a common language can ease the integration process. Participants reported that teachers often attempted to communicate in English to support their understanding; as Nelia shared, "*. . . the class teacher tried to explain [the information we were learning] to me in other words [in Polish] or in English [smiles]. I was happy and could understand [the content].*" Findings clearly signaled that English was a bridge in communication and was considered a key mediator during the early stages of their transition into Polish schools. Thus, teachers' and peers' use of English as an intermediary language during the early stages alleviated participants' initial emotional stress, suggesting a need for schools to provide multilingual resources, particularly in English, to assist during the early transition period.



Figure 2. Tom's drawing of his experience in his Polish school.

Multilingualism as a resource: Ukrainian and Russian in social interactions

In addition to English, students leveraged their knowledge of Ukrainian and Russian as they navigated their new environment. Participants noted instances where they attempted to communicate with Polish peers and school staff in Ukrainian or Russian, which they often found partially effective. Nelia shared, *"From my experience, we had a teacher-psychologist who spoke Russian. 50/50 was comfortable because almost everything was translated to me and told, in other words, Ukrainian-Russian words."* The data highlights the adaptive strategy of combining languages, as participants drew on elements of all their spoken languages to communicate and connect with others. As Nelia explained,

At the beginning of my stay, everything was new, I did not understand or know anything. And these were the most global problems [the biggest problems]. Decided . . . Well, for example, about the language. I tried to speak English at first. If, at first, someone didn't understand, I tried to explain it with some movements [gestures]. Or to say it in Ukrainian because the words in Ukrainian and Polish are a little bit similar. And so a person can sometimes understand me.

Some students even attempted to teach Ukrainian to their Polish classmates, with Nick expressing frustration, *"I feel that they do not understand me. And they already know Ukrainian because I have already taught them some words, but they immediately forget. I get upset when I can't explain what I need."* Findings under this theme underscore the value of a flexible, multilingual approach, suggesting that empowering students to use all linguistic resources at their disposal can foster emotional resilience, potentially reducing frustration when communication barriers arise. Encouraging such practices may help refugee students feel more supported and capable in their multilingual environments.

The emotional impact of learning Polish

Participants described a complex relationship with learning Polish, characterized by both hopeful aspirations and challenging emotions. Many expressed a desire to learn Polish, noting its importance for immediate and long-term integration. Maria shared, *"As soon as I arrived, I started*

learning Polish, and then I went to school because I knew I would have to go to school [here in Poland], so I started learning Polish.” However, feelings of fear of judgment, anxiety, and shame were also common, particularly during the early stages of adjustment. As Maria explained,

[I felt] fear. Well, it was scary; suddenly, everyone would look at you, not look like that [referring to a gentle look], and discuss something behind your back. Or you can be ashamed there, say something wrong in Polish, something like that... Also, you do not know Polish yet, and at school, you can say something wrong.

Other participants felt excluded or judged because of their limited Polish skills. As Tom confessed, *“Everyone looked at me as something new. It gets sad. Everyone [Polish speakers] can get along, but you can’t. But I have not yet learned the language. But I’m learning it now.”* These findings highlight the emotional challenges students faced in acquiring Polish. Schools could benefit from implementing inclusive practices, such as SEL and/or trauma-informed practices, where relationships are prioritized and where language-learning mistakes are embraced as growth opportunities. Such strategies may alleviate feelings of shame and promote active interaction and participation, supporting refugee students’ academic and emotional development.

Cultural and social activities as non-linguistic facilitators

Participants identified cultural and social activities, including sports, games, and class events, as significant facilitators of integration. These non-linguistic forms of engagement allowed students to participate meaningfully, even when the Polish language presented a barrier. For instance, Toma expressed enjoyment about a class trip, sharing,

I liked the way we spent our time . . . how to explain it . . . well, there were no phones, you couldn’t use them, we played different games and it was really cool. They came up with their own games, we didn’t play like that in Ukraine. And we do not know this at all . . . And for me, when we went on a trip with the class to Lublin. In general, they came up with all kinds of sports games for us, and the teachers bought us ice cream, and it was a lot of fun . . . and we also constantly played during breaks.

Social events, such as Children’s Day celebrations or free time for shared games during recess, enabled participants to feel a sense of belonging that extended beyond linguistic abilities. Participants described these events as pivotal to their integration, with Nelia stating,

Yes, Children’s Day is celebrated on a large scale. It was the same as Science Day before. It was also a very large-scale holiday, and all the children [at our school] were preparing. There is no such thing as “no,” “I will not,” or “boring.” That is for everyone, all. Everyone was preparing from the fifth to the eighth grade.

Similarly, participants found joy in games and creative activities that did not rely on language, such as drawing. Maria shared how she and her classmates engaged in daily ping pong matches, a routine that became a cherished part of her school day. We asked Maria to draw what this looked like and, when explaining the drawing to us (Figure 3), she shared:

We played ping pong every break, every day. It was really cool. We spent our time like that all the time. And here I also drew the rain. Usually, the weather was cloudy, and it was always raining, but we still played. It was cool, cool.

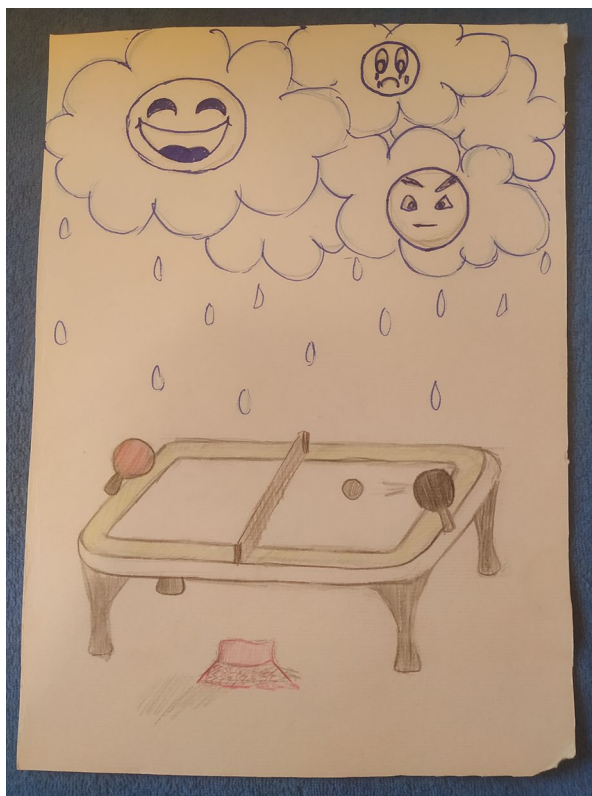


Figure 3. Maria's drawing of playing ping pong.

Maria's experience illustrates the importance of allowing students free time to engage in activities that do not require language, such as play and sports. These shared experiences provided opportunities for connection, camaraderie, and fun for Maria and other participants, allowing them to transcend language barriers, even if momentarily.

The findings suggest that schools should emphasize culturally inclusive and socially engaging activities to support refugee integration, including free time for play and physical activities. Incorporating games, sports, and other activities can serve as non-verbal bridges to inclusion. Schools might also consider organizing regular social events that foster collaboration, allowing refugee students to engage in ways that transcend linguistic limitations.

Discussion and conclusions

In response to our research questions—*What role does multilingualism play in the integration of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools? How does proficiency in a commonly shared language influence the initial integration and emotional well-being of Ukrainian refugee students? and What insights from this case study can inform broader understandings of refugee student integration in multilingual educational settings?*—findings indicate that multilingualism plays a vital role in facilitating the integration of refugee students by allowing them to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to navigate and communicate in their new environment. In addition, the linguistic similarities between Ukrainian and Polish provided a foundational benefit, easing the early stages

of language acquisition and helping students navigate academic and social interactions. However, shared linguistic family (i.e., Slavic) alone was not sufficient for participants to be able to communicate comfortably, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems that address both language development and emotional well-being, regardless of linguistic similarities.

Multilingualism, specifically the strategic use of English, Ukrainian, and Russian, emerged as a central linguistic strategy that participants employed to establish initial connections with peers and teachers in the absence of fluency in Polish. English, in particular, acted as a bridge during the early stages of integration, providing students with a sense of familiarity and a medium through which they could communicate. These findings align with translanguaging theory, which emphasizes the flexible use of one's entire linguistic repertoire to facilitate communication and meaning-making across diverse contexts (García & Kleyn, 2016; Rafi & Morgan, 2022). This approach not only validated the participants' home languages but also allowed for a smoother social and educational integration, as they were able to leverage all of their linguistic resources. Participants' ability to fluidly incorporate the various languages they brought with them, alongside body language and gestures, supported them during their arrival, underscoring the value of recognizing and encouraging multilingualism as both a social and linguistic—including non-verbal forms of language—resource in the classroom.

The study's findings suggest that the effectiveness of language learning during the early stage of integration is enhanced when non-linguistic strategies are also employed. Participants used body language, such as gestures and facial expressions, as immediate tools to overcome linguistic barriers in their interactions and to compensate for their developing Polish skills. Findings reflect that non-verbal strategies were instrumental tools for communication during the early integration phase and promoted a sense of belonging, as students could engage socially even without full language proficiency, a process also highlighted by Khawaja et al. (2008) in their studies on refugee integration. Furthermore, by incorporating cultural and social activities into the school environment, participants were given the opportunity to build relationships and participate meaningfully with their classmates, even when language remained a challenge. Findings suggest that free time for social activities, such as participating in sports, games, and cultural celebrations, provided participants with essential opportunities to connect, thereby contributing positively to their emotional well-being.

The relationship between language and emotional health is a crucial aspect of this study. While students encountered stress and adverse emotions due to limited Polish proficiency, they found emotional relief through supportive, non-linguistic activities and through initial communication in familiar languages such as English. SEL principles were apparent in school practices (e.g., free time for games and opportunities to socialize), which contributed to students developing resilience by navigating these new social experiences while utilizing their entire linguistic repertoire, including body language, to establish a sense of belonging (Durlak et al., 2011; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). Moreover, the connection between language and emotional resilience is echoed in the broader literature, which emphasizes the importance of fostering SEL competencies among students to facilitate both academic success and psychological well-being (Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024).

These findings suggest that language acquisition and emotional well-being are deeply interconnected, highlighting the need for educational programs supporting refugee students to equally address both areas. Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework—particularly its emphasis on language competence and social connectedness—offers a valuable lens through which to interpret these results. While their model does not explicitly center emotional support, our findings suggest that social connection and language development often serve as pathways to emotional resilience for refugee students. By fostering emotional resilience alongside language support, educational settings can better assist refugee students in managing the stress and trauma associated with displacement. This reinforces the importance of a holistic approach to refugee education (Koehler

et al., 2022)—which emphasizes language growth while also prioritizing emotional and social support through inclusive, culturally responsive activities.

Despite the advantages of shared linguistic roots between Ukrainian and Polish, students encountered significant challenges as they attempted to acquire more advanced Polish language skills. While the Slavic connection offered some initial comprehension benefits, the complexities of mastering academic and nuanced Polish presented a substantial hurdle. As noted by Evans and Levinson (2009), even shared linguistic roots can present challenges, as differences in vocabulary, syntax, and cultural nuances complicate advanced language learning. This underscores the importance of providing flexible language support systems that address the specific needs of refugee students, enabling them to develop a more robust proficiency over time. Even when linguistic roots are shared, the subtle differences among languages can make advanced language learning challenging and often require tailored support (Cummins, 2000). Schools can benefit from incorporating peer support programs and fostering a classroom culture that frames language-learning challenges as opportunities for growth. Such an approach can help alleviate the stress and anxiety associated with learning a new language, allowing refugee students to engage more confidently in their educational environments.

While the shared Slavic linguistic background between Ukrainian and Polish facilitated certain aspects of the initial adjustment period, findings from this study underscore the importance of a multifaceted approach to supporting refugee students. Multilingualism, particularly the strategic use of English as a common communication tool or bridge, enabled students to engage in their new environment while they developed proficiency in Polish. Furthermore, data showed that emotional resilience, bolstered through SEL practices, seemed to be a crucial factor in the successful integration of refugee students in Polish schools. Research indicates that combining these approaches—that is, multilingualism and SEL practices—can lead to more successful outcomes, as demonstrated in prior work on educational support for refugees (Block et al., 2013; Midgett & González, 2023; Pentón Herrera et al., 2022). The findings of this study indicate that educational institutions should adopt an integrated model that equally values linguistic diversity and emotional support, fostering a school culture where refugee students can thrive academically and socially (Becker, 2024; Pentón Herrera, 2023).

Although this study specifically examines the experiences of Ukrainian refugee students in Poland, its findings hold broader implications for educators and policymakers globally. The insights gained regarding multilingualism and translanguaging underscore the importance of leveraging students' full linguistic repertoires, not merely their proficiency in the dominant local language. This perspective echoes Ager and Strang's (2008) emphasis on the centrality of language in the integration process—not only as a practical tool, but as a cultural and relational resource essential to participation and belonging in society. Refugees worldwide often navigate similar complexities, balancing the preservation of their linguistic identities with the necessity of integrating into new educational and social environments (García & Kleyn, 2016; UNESCO, 2020). The strategic use of English as a bridging language identified in this study highlights how multilingual practices can be generalized to various contexts where refugees encounter linguistic barriers. Furthermore, emphasizing emotional resilience and incorporating non-verbal communication strategies provides a universal template for educators seeking effective integration practices. Thus, this specific case underscores translanguaging and multilingualism as more than linguistic phenomena; they are essential socio-emotional tools facilitating refugee adaptation and belonging in diverse educational settings.

As a final point, since this study focused primarily on students' experiences and perspectives, we recommend that future research explore these topics from the perspectives of parents, teachers, and other school stakeholders. Expanding the research base in this way can provide a fuller picture of the integration process, thereby contributing to more effective and inclusive educational policies

that support refugee integration. This diversity of perspectives and findings from different viewpoints can contribute to providing insights into best practices for promoting equity and inclusivity in refugee education in Poland and beyond.

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The study was conducted according to the recommendations of the Rector's Committee for the Ethics of Research Involving Human Participants.

Authors' contributions

Alla Fridrikh: study design and conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, co-writing of the manuscript

Luis Javier Pentón Herrera: study design and conceptualization, data analysis, data interpretation, leading role in the writing of the manuscript

Agnieszka Kaldonek-Crnjaković: study design and conceptualization, data analysis, data interpretation

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to privacy and ethical concerns, the data include sensitive information and are not publicly accessible.

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