

Цитування:

Babushko, S., & Halytska, M. (2025). Adult education for displaced Ukrainians: motivations and communication barriers in English language learning. *Освіта дорослих: теорія, досвід, перспективи*, 1(27), 24–33. [https://doi.org/10.35387/od.1\(27\).2025.24-33](https://doi.org/10.35387/od.1(27).2025.24-33)

УДК 374:81'243:314.745.5-053.9

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.35387/od.1\(27\).2025.24-33](https://doi.org/10.35387/od.1(27).2025.24-33)

**ADULT EDUCATION FOR DISPLACED UKRAINIANS:
MOTIVATIONS AND COMMUNICATION BARRIERS
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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Abstract. Millions of Ukrainians have migrated and have been displaced since the beginning of a full-scale invasion in 2022. The displacement has presented significant linguistic and adaptation challenges for older Ukrainians in host countries. The purpose of the research is to investigate the motivation of older Ukrainian refugees and the barriers they face in adult English language learning. Methodologically, the study utilized a quantitative survey administered to older Ukrainian refugees attending the English language courses at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU). The findings of the research show the primary motivations and the significant barriers older Ukrainian refugees encounter, emphasising the crucial role of effective communication in their adaptation and integration into host communities.

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The research reveals that social integration, personal development opportunities, and travel are key drivers for learning English, with social aspects proving particularly crucial. However, elderly refugees face substantial communication difficulties, predominantly stemming from fundamental linguistic elements like grammar and insufficient vocabulary, alongside significant comprehension issues. Psychological barriers, such as the fear of making mistakes and uncertainty, are also present, though their impact varies among individuals. Listening and writing are identified as the most challenging aspects of language acquisition for this category of adult learners. The study underscores that older Ukrainian refugees who are staying in Great Britain, primarily rely on informal, self-directed, and socially interactive methods such as engaging with media, communicating with sponsors, and reading in order to supplement their English learning. This highlights the need for available adult education programs to adapt them to the needs of older adults and facilitate practical, accessible, and integrated learning experiences.

Key words: Ukrainian refugees; elderly learners; adult education; English language learning; communication barriers; motivation; non-formal learning.

ОСВІТА ДОРОСЛИХ ДЛЯ УКРАЇНЦІВ-БІЖЕНЦІВ: МОТИВАЦІЯ ТА КОМУНІКАЦІЙНІ БАР'ЄРИ У ВИВЧЕННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ

Анотація. З початку повномасштабного вторгнення у 2022 році мільйони українців мігрували та стали переміщеними особами. Ці переміщення створили значні мовні та адаптаційні виклики для літніх українців у країнах перебування. Метою дослідження є вивчення мотивації літніх українських біженців і бар'єрів, з якими вони стикаються у вивченні англійської мови в рамках освіти дорослих. Методологічно, у дослідженні було використано кількісне опитування, проведене серед літніх українських біженців, які відвідують курси англійської мови в Університеті Кентербері Крайст Черч (CCCU). Результати дослідження вказують на основні мотивації та ті бар'єри, з якими стикаються літні українські біженці, підкреслюючи вирішальну роль ефективної комунікації в їхній адаптації та інтеграції в приймаючі громади. З'ясовано, що рушійними силами для вивчення англійської мови дорослими літнього віку є їх соціальна інтеграція, особистісний розвиток і подорожі, причому соціальні аспекти є особливо важливими. Біженці літнього віку стикаються з суттєвими комунікативними труднощами, що стосуються, насамперед, фундаментальних мовних елементів, таких як граматики та недостатній словниковий запас, а також проблеми з розумінням. Особливе місце займають психологічні бар'єри, зокрема страх зробити помилку та невпевненість. Визначено, що аудіювання та письмо є найскладнішими аспектами вивчення мови для цієї групи дорослих учнів. У статті підкреслено, що українські біженці літнього віку, перебуваючи у Великій Британії, переважно покладаються на

неформальні, самостійні та соціально-інтерактивні методи для доповнення свого вивчення англійської мови: використання соціальних медіа, спілкування зі своїми спонсорами, читання. Це вказує на необхідність адаптації наявних програм освіти дорослих з вивчення англійської мови до потреб літніх людей, зокрема збільшуючи їх практичність і доступність.

Ключові слова: українські біженці; літні учні; освіта дорослих; вивчення англійської мови; комунікативні бар'єри; мотивація; неформальне навчання.

Introduction. The displacement of millions of Ukrainians since the beginning of a full-scale war of Russia against Ukraine in 2022 has created immense challenges, especially for older individuals.

While there's no precise number specifically for displaced older Ukrainians, the total number of displaced people in Ukraine due to the war is rather significant. According to the Operational Data Portal, by 31 May 2025, there have been recorded 5,619.670 refugees from Ukraine globally, and around 5,059.110 Ukrainian refugees have been recorded in Europe. Particularly, the UK has adopted 254580 refugees from Ukraine (Operational Data Portal, 2025).

Older Ukrainians make up a substantial portion of those refugees. The challenges they face because of the displacement are more severe than for the younger generation. Unlike younger refugees who might adapt quickly through formal education or work, older adults heavily rely on informal communication for daily life, social ties, and essential services. Besides, they may already face cognitive changes, limited tech exposure (Van Leersum, et al. 2023), and ingrained language habits (Pot, et al. 2018). Due to the last issue, it can be difficult for the elderly to learn a new language. These barriers can impact their ability to integrate socially, find employment, and access crucial services, ultimately affecting their overall well-being and quality of life.

Without effective communication skills, the elderly refugees risk isolation, restricted access to healthcare and legal aid, and an inability to fully participate in their new communities. This impacts their well-being and poses a significant integration challenge for host nations.

Hence, communication is considered very essential for immigrants' adaptation and integration into host communities/ Moreover, it is an even more critical point for refugees seeking safety. For older adult refugees, communication facilitates socialization by connecting them to their new surroundings. It helps them navigate unfamiliar societies, often despite unique linguistic, cultural, and technological hurdles (Pot, et al. 2018).

Given this, communication as a tool for adapting older refugees in new communities requires further attention from host communities, volunteer organizations and, of course, researchers. Consequently, research in adult

education is deemed vital. Adult education offers flexible structures to address the specific language and cultural adaptation needs of older refugees. Traditional language teaching methods may not suffice for this group, necessitating innovative approaches that consider their life experiences, learning styles, and motivations. Investigating community-based language programs, intergenerational learning, and culturally sensitive communication strategies is crucial.

To facilitate the adaptation of refugees from Ukraine, governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions launched various courses. Recognizing the crucial role of communication, numerous English language courses, ranging from beginner to intermediate levels, were specifically arranged for Ukrainians. A notable example of this initiative is the language courses offered at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU, 2023).

Literature review. Researchers have consistently focused on the communicative adaptation of refugees, including the elderly, either as part of broader migrant integration studies or as a distinct area of investigation. However, a literature review reveals a scarcity of publications specifically addressing the communicative adaptation of older people, not to mention older refugees displaced by the war. Our analysis, therefore, concentrates on recent publications relevant to this topic. This body of literature primarily explores the challenges and processes of communicative adaptation through English as a Second Language (ESL) learning for refugee integration. A key issue consistently highlighted is that language acquisition for refugees goes beyond mere linguistic proficiency, significantly impacting their social integration and psychological well-being.

For instance, language difficulties significantly impede access to healthcare services, as evidenced by studies in Canada (Lai and Chau 2007; Asanin and Wilson 2008) and Portugal (Dias, Severo, and Barros 2008). These barriers are often intertwined with the level of acculturation (Ince et al. 2014; Banit, et al, 2021; Halytska & Hryshchuk, 2024). It is no wonder that Asfar & Oostrom (2020) describe language acquisition as «not an easy pie» but rather as a «bitter pill», illustrating the emotional and cognitive burdens older refugees face, influenced by factors like prior education and psychological trauma. This sentiment is echoed by Liu (2025), whose study on language anxiety among elderly Chinese migrants highlights how such anxiety can severely hinder social integration, drawing clear parallels to vulnerable elderly refugee populations.

Thus, the available research suggests that a lack of fluency in the host country's language directly affects a migrant's ability to access and utilize essential services.

In summary, the key issues identified in the literature include the demand for more participatory, community-driven ESOL models; the challenge

of holistically assessing integration through language; the substantial psychological impact of language anxiety and trauma; and the often-neglected specific needs of elderly refugees in their language learning journey.

Research methods. The purpose of the research is to investigate the motivation of older Ukrainian refugees and the barriers they face in adult English language learning.

To achieve this, the following tasks have been performed:

- the reasons for older adults' learning have been investigated;
- communication difficulties have been identified;
- overcoming speaking anxiety has been outlined;
- effective strategies that help adult refugee learners overcome the fear of speaking English, drawing on the experiences and suggestions provided by the respondents.

The research surveyed 72 individuals between 16 and 75 years old. A significant portion of the participants, 66%, were aged 33 to 60, while 34% (equaling 24 individuals) were elderly, aged 60 to 75. The majority of these older participants arrived in the UK through the «Family Scheme». The program was designed to allow Ukrainians escaping the war, and their family members, to join relatives already residing in the UK.

To collect the necessary data relevant to motivations and barriers, the researchers developed a questionnaire. This instrument was refined after initial testing to remove any ambiguous questions and received ethical approval from Canterbury Christ Church University. Data collection occurred between March 1 and April 28, 2023, from students enrolled in the English language courses at the same university. Participants were fully briefed on the study, ensuring their responses were independent and anonymous, with no associated risks.

The questionnaire comprised two main sections: personal details (including age, education level, employment, arrival scheme, and duration with sponsors) and research-specific information. For this particular study on motivations and barriers, key questions focused on the perceived importance of learning English, the significance of various communication difficulties, the perceived difficulty of learning materials, and the additional methods employed by learners to improve their English. These questions directly aimed to uncover the driving forces behind their learning and the obstacles they encountered.

Research results. For displaced Ukrainians seeking refuge in the UK, effectively adapting to their new society hinges significantly on communication. This is because communicative adaptation – the process of adjusting one's communication style to fit new cultural norms – is fundamental for all immigrants to navigate and thrive in a new environment. While the intrinsic motivation for such adaptation is clear, achieving proficiency demands substantial practical effort (Cereci, 2023, p. 12).

The research results showed that the English language courses at CCCU were organised in three levels: beginner, elementary and intermediate.

All older respondents had higher education. However, out of all of them, 25% of respondents did not know English, 41.7% could speak at the elementary level and 33.3% were beginners.

1. Reasons for learning English

The respondents answered the question What reasons (travelling, business/career, social or educational) were more important for them to learn or to improve the host community language? The statistical data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Importance of reasons for learning English by elderly Ukrainian refugees

Degree of importance / Reasons	Not important	Slightly important	Important	Fairly important	Very important
Travelling	1%	6%	19%	28%	46%
Business/career	8%	10%	13%	19%	50%
Social	0%	1%	17%	18%	64%
Educational	2%	4%	19%	26%	49%

Source: created by authors.

As is seen from Table 1, all the listed reasons for learning English are highly important to the older respondents, with very low percentages for «Not important» or «Slightly important» categories. However, social reasons emerged as the most significant, with 64% of respondents rating them as «Very important» and only 1% as «Slightly important». This highlights the *strong motivation* of the older refugees for integration and communication within their new environment.

The older refugees also hold extremely high importance to *business/career reasons*. Exactly half of the respondents (50%) rated them as «Very important» indicating a focus on employment and professional development.

Educational reasons are important for a substantial portion of the respondents, with 49% considering them «Very important» and an additional 26% deeming them «Fairly important». This points to a drive for self-development and acquiring new knowledge. *Travelling* is also a significant motivator, with 46% of respondents rating it as «Very important» and 28% as «Fairly important» suggesting a desire for free movement and interaction during travel.

2. Difficulties in communication

The next phase of the research focused on establishing the level of importance of communication challenges as experienced by elderly respondents. The findings regarding the importance of these communication difficulties are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Importance of difficulties in communication for older refugees

Level of significance/ Difficulties	Not important	Slightly important	Important	Fairly important	Very important
Uncertainty	15%	17%	21%	19%	28%
Fear of making a mistake	11%	21%	24%	14%	31%
Difficulties in pronunciation	6%	10%	33%	26%	25%
Difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences	0%	3%	26%	28%	43%
Insufficient vocabulary	0%	3%	25%	32%	40%
Misunderstanding	3%	6%	26%	32%	33%

Source: created by authors.

Based on the data from Table 2, which illustrates the perceived importance of various communication difficulties for older refugees, several trends are evident.

Firstly, difficulties related to «constructing grammatically correct sentences» and «insufficient vocabulary» are overwhelmingly considered the most significant barriers for the elderly. A combined 71% (for grammar issues) and 72% (for vocabulary issues) rated them as «Fairly important» or «Very important». This suggests these are fundamental areas where older refugees face substantial challenges.

Secondly, «misunderstanding» is also a major concern, with 65% of respondents deeming it «Fairly important» or «Very important». Moreover, «Very important» is the largest single category at 33%. This highlights a significant struggle with comprehension in new communication contexts.

Thirdly, «difficulties in pronunciation» is a slightly less dominant issue as compared to grammar, vocabulary, or misunderstanding, as a notable portion of respondents (51%) found it to be «Fairly important» or «Very important».

Fourthly, while 31% of the respondents considered «fear of making a mistake» «Very important», a considerable portion (32%) found it «Not important» or «Slightly important».

Finally, the issue with «uncertainty» was rated by 28% of the respondents as «Very important», while 32% considered it «Not important» or «Slightly important». These figures indicate that while psychological factors like fear and uncertainty are very significant barriers for some older refugees, they are not universally perceived as critical by all, suggesting a diverse range of coping mechanisms or experiences within the group.

3. Difficult aspects of learning English

It was interesting to know what particular aspects of learning English were most difficult for the elderly. Hence, the question on rating these difficulties in listening, writing, speaking, memorizing words or grammar according to the Laker's scale was given to the respondents. The obtained results are represented in Table 3.

Table 3

Difficult aspects of learning English for the elderly

Level of difficulty/ Aspects	Very easy	Easy	Difficult	Fairly difficult	Very difficult
Listening	10%	15%	28%	17%	31%
Writing	3%	22%	33%	11%	31%
Speaking	6%	22%	35%	25%	17%
Memorizing words	0%	23%	35%	25%	17%
Grammar	6%	17%	35%	22%	21%

Source: created by authors.

The data from Table 3 reveal several key trends regarding the difficulties older Ukrainian refugees experience when learning English.

Firstly and most importantly, all listed aspects of learning English are predominantly perceived by older learners as challenging. For every category (listening, writing, speaking, memorizing words, grammar), the combined percentage of «Difficult», «Fairly difficult» and «Very difficult» responses significantly outweighs those finding it «Very easy» or «Easy».

Secondly, listening and writing are the most challenging aspects of learning English. Listening is notably difficult, with 31% finding it «Very difficult» and a total of 76% considering it «Difficult», «Fairly difficult», or «Very difficult». Writing is also highly challenging, with 31% rating it «Very difficult» and a combined 75% finding it «Difficult», «Fairly difficult», or «Very difficult». It also has the lowest percentage of «Very easy» responses (3%), suggesting it's almost universally perceived as at least somewhat hard.

Thirdly, speaking, memorizing words, and grammar are consistently difficult rated for each by 35% of respondents. While the «Very difficult» percentage for these three aspects is lower (17-21%) compared to listening and writing, the combined «Difficult» to «Very difficult» range remains high (77% for speaking, 77% for memorizing words, and 78% for grammar). This indicates a broad experience of challenge across these areas.

4. Additional ways of improving English

To make a picture look more holistic, the authors asked the question about the ways the elderly Ukrainian refugees were using to improve their English in addition to the language courses at CCCU. Several options were offered: attending other language courses' attending language clubs, watching movies, listening to songs' reading books, articles, and online applications; having private lessons; and communication with a sponsor.

Analyzing the respondents' answers the authors found out that the respondents predominantly favor informal and practical methods to enhance their English proficiency. Many improve their skills by engaging with media like movies and music, and a significant portion benefits from regular communication with their sponsor. Reading various materials, including books and online content, is also a widely adopted strategy for older adult learners for their language improvement.

In contrast, more structured or formal supplementary activities are less common. Fewer individuals opt for additional language courses or private lessons, and attending language clubs is the least popular choice. Essentially, older adult learners primarily depend on self-directed activities and social interactions for ongoing English development, rather than relying on formal instructional settings. This highlights a strong inclination towards practical, accessible, and integrated learning experiences within their daily lives, suggesting that effective support for this category of adult learners should embrace and facilitate such informal learning opportunities.

Conclusion. The key findings of the research are the following:

- social integration, professional opportunities, educational advancement, and the ability to travel are the primary driving forces for learning English among the surveyed Ukrainian respondents, with social and career aspects being particularly critical;

- the most pressing communication difficulties for older refugees revolve around fundamental linguistic elements like grammar and vocabulary, followed closely by issues of comprehension (misunderstanding). Psychological barriers, while significant for a notable portion of the respondents, are experienced with greater variability;

- older refugees find all aspects of English learning challenging, with listening and writing posing the most significant difficulties. Speaking, memorizing words, and grammar are also widely perceived as difficult, highlighting the multifaceted nature of language acquisition hurdles for this category of adult learners;

- elderly Ukrainian refugees primarily rely on informal, self-directed, and socially interactive methods to supplement their English language learning.

Ultimately, by recognizing and addressing the unique linguistic and psychosocial needs of older Ukrainian refugees through adaptable adult education strategies, we can foster their genuine integration, independence, and overall well-being within host societies.

The perspectives of further research in this field primarily aim to understand and enhance the communicative adaptation of older Ukrainian refugees through targeted adult education, emphasizing their motivations, barriers, and the efficacy of practical, informal language learning approaches.

Acknowledgement. Grateful acknowledgement is extended to Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) for their invaluable support, and to the elderly Ukrainian refugees whose willingness to participate in this survey provided crucial insights.

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Отримано / Received: 31.03.2025.

Прорецензовано / Revised: 02.05.2025.

Схвалено до друку / Accepted: 11.06.2025.

Опубліковано / Published: 30.06.2025.