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PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS AND SENSITIVE TOPICS IN EFL CLASSROOMS

The purpose of this research was to explore how pre-service English language teachers in Ukraine perceive and address sensitive real-life topics in classroom interaction during school-based teaching practice within a wartime context. Special attention was paid to the development of pedagogical responsibility in would-be teachers.

Methodology: The study involved 65 students in pre-service English teacher training and employed a mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collected in March-April 2026 through a structured questionnaire. The instrument examined pre-service teachers' perceptions of war-related topics, their readiness to intentionally incorporate them into classroom procedures, and the concerns influencing their decisions to address such issues. The responses provided insight into the development of pedagogical responsibility, particularly in relation to awareness of the impact of sensitive topics in the classroom.

Scientific novelty. The data obtained through the study contribute to the limited body of research on pre-service teachers' engagement with sensitive topics in conflict-affected contexts and provide insight into the impact of such topics on their professional development.

Conclusions. Findings indicate that sensitive topics are an inevitable part of classroom discourse in war-affected Ukraine and are often addressed by teachers both reactively and intentionally. While participants reported generally high levels of student engagement when the sensitive topics arise, they also identified challenges related to emotional well-being and lack of experience. The study argues that sensitive topics should not be avoided; instead, teacher education programmes should support pre-service teachers in developing awareness, professional judgement, and strategies necessary to address such issues in a responsible and pedagogically effective way.

Keywords: pre-service teachers; EFL; sensitive topics; pedagogical responsibility; Ukraine.

Problem statement in general terms and its relation to important scientific and practical tasks. The ongoing war in Ukraine has significantly influenced the educational environment, reshaping the conditions, the content, and the dynamics of classroom interaction. In English language classrooms, where discussing real-life situations is viewed as one of the most powerful motivational tools, concerns about emotional well-being of participants impose significant limitations on addressing recent experiences related to safety, war, and war-related stress. This creates a pedagogical dilemma: should such topics be avoided to maintain emotional neutrality, or should they be purposefully integrated as part of meaningful communication?

For pre-service teachers, this challenge is particularly acute. As they enter the profession, they are expected to implement communicative and action-oriented approaches while simultaneously managing emotionally sensitive content. This situation raises questions about their readiness to address such topics and about the development of their pedagogical responsibility in trauma-affected learning context.

Analysis of key research and publications on the issue. Emotional intelligence and emotional competence have become central constructs in contemporary teacher education, reflecting the increasing recognition that effective teaching is not only a cognitive but also an emotional practice.

International research on teacher professional development highlights that emotionally competent teachers are better able to establish supportive classroom environments, manage interactional tension, and respond constructively to learners' emotional needs [4, 6].

In the context of trauma-informed education, emotional competence is particularly important. Studies show that teachers' ability to recognise and regulate emotional responses directly affects classroom safety and student well-being [3]. In Ukraine, emotional competence has become an explicit component of teacher professional standards. The regulatory papers, issued by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine [8, 9] identify emotional and ethical competence as a core element of the professional profile of a teacher of general secondary education.

Empirical studies conducted during the war confirm that Ukrainian teachers operate in emotionally intense environments where both learners and educators experience elevated stress and uncertainty [2, 11]. These conditions make emotional competence a fundamental professional requirement in pre-service teacher training.

Speaking about pre-service training of language teachers, it is essential to remember that language teaching differs from many other disciplines: communication serves as the primary pedagogical tool, while communicative competence represents the ultimate learning objective. This principle is further reinforced in the action-oriented approach, which promotes the integration of classroom communication with real-world contexts through authentic communicative practices [1]. It means that would-be language teachers in Ukraine need to be trained to provide real-life communication in classrooms, affected by war-induced trauma. Recent research indicates that students' experiences, including displacement, loss, and insecurity, frequently enter educational discourse, making emotional regulation and pedagogical sensitivity essential components of teaching practice [7, 10, 13].

In this context, trauma-informed pedagogy has gained relevance as it emphasises emotionally safe learning environments, structured interaction, and responsive teaching that acknowledges the impact of trauma on cognition and participation. Frazier et al. show that Ukrainian teachers view emotional support and predictable classroom routines as key to student well-being during wartime [2], while Sichka et al. demonstrate that trauma-sensitive English language teaching can include emotionally relevant content without reducing effectiveness when supported by social-emotional learning principles [14]. International research also stresses that trauma-informed teaching requires not only awareness of trauma but practical strategies for managing emotional intensity in classroom interaction [4, 6]. However, Gherardi et al. caution that such frameworks must be carefully operationalised, as assumptions about student vulnerability may not reflect actual classroom conditions [3]. In Ukrainian wartime education, this balance is particularly important, as topics such as war, stress and safety are unavoidable in a communicative classroom.

Since communicative language teaching places strong emphasis on the use of authentic, real-life content, such tasks as discussions, problem-solving activities, and reflective speaking exercises are designed to simulate real communicative situations and promote extended language production.

In contexts of social disruption, however, the integration of real-life topics becomes more complex. Ivanov et al. highlight that Ukrainian education during war is characterised by the need to maintain continuity while adapting content to learners' realities [5]. Similarly, Malysh et al. note that teachers must constantly negotiate between pedagogical goals and students' emotional readiness [7]. For pre-service teachers, the ability to identify appropriate moments for discussing sensitive topics is an essential component of emerging pedagogical responsibility.

Pre-service teachers' pedagogical responsibility, as reflected in their decision-making, is shaped by their beliefs, prior educational experiences, teacher education programmes, and early teaching practice. Another essential component of effective teacher education is reflective practice, organized in emotionally supportive learning environments [12].

Despite growing research on emotional competence, communicative language teaching, and trauma-informed pedagogy, limited attention has been given to how pre-service English language teachers perceive and manage sensitive real-life topics in classroom interaction during ongoing armed conflict.

Existing studies in Ukraine primarily focus on systemic educational challenges, student experiences, or in-service teacher perspectives [7, 10, 13], leaving pre-service teacher perspectives underexplored. This gap is particularly significant given that pre-service teachers are entering the profession in conditions of sustained emotional and social disruption.

Moreover, while emotional competence is increasingly recognised in both international research and Ukrainian policy frameworks, its role in preparing pre-service teachers to handle war-related and emotionally sensitive classroom discourse remains insufficiently investigated.

The purpose of the article. The aim of this study is to investigate pre-service teachers' experiences, attitudes, and intentions regarding the inclusion of sensitive real-life topics in English language lessons in Ukraine.

The study seeks to:

- examine how frequently such topics emerge in classroom interaction;
- analyse the extent to which pre-service teachers intentionally include them;
- explore perceived student responses;
- identify factors influencing teachers' decisions on including sensitive topics in their lessons;
- evaluate the development of pedagogical responsibility.

Description of the theoretical-methodological and/or experimental research procedure, specifying the research methods. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data obtained through a structured survey.

The participants were 65 students enrolled in a pre-service English teacher training programme at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University (Ukraine).

The research instruments included an anonymous questionnaire consisting of 15 items organised into thematic sections. The response formats included Likert-scale items, multiple-response questions, and questions with constructed responses (Table 1).

Table 1

**Assessing Pre-Service Teachers' Perception
of Discussing Sensitive Topics in the English Classroom**

Survey Section	Sample Questions	Response format
Pre-service teachers' attitudes and perceptions	In your opinion, how important is it to discuss real-life issues in English language classes?	5-point Likert scale (1-not important at all; 5 - very important)
	How do you feel about discussing sensitive topics?	5-point Likert scale (1-I avoid such topics; 5 -comfortable and confident)
Classroom experience	How often have the following topics emerged during your English lessons? - Russian-Ukrainian war - Safety concerns - War-related stress	5-point Likert scale for each item (1-never; 5 - very often)
	To what extent do the following reasons influence your decision to include the topics of war, safety and war-related stress? - To make lessons relevant to students - To develop critical thinking - To encourage communication - To follow coursebook content	5-point Likert scale for each item (1-not at all; 5 - very strongly)
	What other reasons can influence your decision to discuss sensitive topics in the classroom?	Constructed response
	What types of responses do learners most frequently demonstrate?	Multiple choice with 4 options (emotional, practical, personal, analytical)
Evaluation and future intentions	Do you agree that discussing sensitive real-life topics contributes positively to students' language learning?	5-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree; 5 - strongly agree)
	What are your concerns when discussing the topics of war, safety and war-related stress in the classroom? - Students' emotional well-being - Lack of teaching experience - Classroom management difficulties - Topic inappropriate for the lesson	Multiple response (several options are possible)
	How important are the following conditions for addressing sensitive topics? - Safe classroom environment - Teacher guidance - Age-appropriate materials - Emotional readiness	5-point Likert scale for each item (1-not important; 5 - very important)

Survey data were imported into an Excel spreadsheet where quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Qualitative responses obtained through the survey were examined through thematic grouping.

Presentation of the main research material. The findings demonstrate that the majority of students are aware of the importance of discussing real-life topics in English language classes, with 35% and 60% of participants rating these topics as important or very important, respectively. Questions, focused on the frequency of sensitive topics emergence in the classroom revealed the fact, that sensitive real-life topics are a regular feature of English language classroom interaction. Topics related to safety concerns were reported most frequently, with 77% of respondents indicating that such issues emerge *sometimes* or more often. War-related topics and war-related stress were also reported as recurring, with approximately 53–60% of respondents selecting *sometimes* or higher frequency categories (See Table 2 for details on frequency of sensitive topics emergence in preservice teachers' classrooms).

Table 2

Frequency of Sensitive Topics Emergence

Topic	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
War	12%	34%	35%	14%	5%
Safety	3%	20%	45%	28%	4%
Stress	11%	29%	35%	18%	6%

These results suggest that sensitive topics are not exceptional occurrences but form part of the routine communicative context of language learning in war-affected Ukraine.

Despite the relatively high frequency of topic emergence, responses related to intentional inclusion suggest a more cautious approach. Many participants reported including such topics only *rarely* or *sometimes*, indicating that pre-service teachers are more likely to respond reactively than to plan discussions proactively.

This discrepancy highlights an important distinction between emergent classroom discourse, and deliberate pedagogical integration.

Nevertheless, data presented in the section *Classroom experience* generally reported positive learner engagement when sensitive topics were discussed. Students were described as actively participating and demonstrating a range of responses, including personal (83.1%), emotional (53.8%), practical (38.5%), and analytical (29.2%) contributions. These findings suggest that sensitive topics can facilitate meaningful communication and deeper engagement, rather than hindering interaction.

At the same time, pre-service teachers reported a lack of confidence in discussing sensitive topics in the classroom, with 46.2% of participants selecting the midpoint between avoiding these topics altogether and feeling comfortable and confident, and only 16.9% and 7.7% selecting «quite comfortable» and «comfortable,» respectively. Despite this lack of confidence, a higher proportion of pre-service teachers *rather agreed* or *strongly agreed* that discussing sensitive real-life topics has a positive impact on language learning (27.7% and 13.8%, respectively), while the proportion of those selecting the neutral option was 3% lower than in the previous question.

When asked to select all concerns they considered relevant regarding the inclusion of sensitive topics, the majority of pre-service teachers selected learners' emotional well-being (83.1%), followed by a perceived lack of relevance to lesson aims (50.8%), lack of teaching experience (21.5%), and classroom management difficulties (21.5%). These concerns reflect the complexity of balancing pedagogical goals with emotional responsibility, particularly for pre-service teachers.

The questions on conditions essential for addressing sensitive topics revealed a high priority assigned to learners' emotional readiness, a safe classroom environment, age-appropriate materials, and teacher guidance. Mean scores calculated from the Likert-scale responses to this question demonstrated that emotional readiness (4.71), age-appropriate materials (4.65) and safe classroom environment (4.54) are rated higher than teacher's guidance (4.12). Rating the first three factors as highly important indicates the pre-service teachers' awareness of the role of pedagogical conditions while the relatively low rating of teacher's guidance can suggest their lack of confidence in their ability to manage the discussion on sensitive topics.

Among the factors influencing pre-service teachers' decisions to include sensitive topics in classroom practice, the desire to make lessons relevant to learners' lives was rated as the most important, closely followed by the aim of developing learners' critical thinking and encouraging communication. Mean scores calculated from the Likert-scale responses were 3.08, 3.06, and 3.02, respectively.

The most frequently recurring ideas identified in responses to the open-ended question on additional factors influencing pre-service teachers' decisions to address sensitive topics in the classroom are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Reasons that influence pre-service teachers' decision to discuss sensitive topics in the classroom

Reason	Number of participants who mentioned the reason
Learners' explicit desire to talk about their war-related experience	16
Present-moment situation (electricity outing, air raid alert, etc.)	7
Learners' perceived need for interpersonal closeness and belonging, experienced through discussing shared traumatic experience	4
Learners' request to learn to speak about war-related topic for further discussions with foreigners	2

Responses indicate a generally positive orientation toward future inclusion of sensitive topics, though when answering the question about the intention to include sensitive topics in future teaching, only 23 participants (35.4%) voiced confident or moderately confident decision to integrate them into their classes. Further correlation analysis of data revealed a moderate positive correlation (Spearman's $\rho=0.52$) between pre-service teachers' confidence in discussing sensitive topics and their intention to include such topics in future teaching.

Overall, the survey results demonstrate that:

- pre-service teachers view sensitive topics are a consistent part of classroom discourse;
- despite limited teaching experience, they report evidence suggesting that addressing sensitive topics is associated with meaningful learner engagement;
- pre-service teachers approach sensitive topics cautiously due to emotional and pedagogical concerns;
- a perceived lack of experience may prevent pre-service teachers from initiating a discussion on a sensitive topic.

A key outcome of the study is the identification of a developing sense of pedagogical responsibility among pre-service teachers. Participants recognised the importance of addressing real-life issues while ensuring emotional safety and appropriate classroom management.

Conclusions and prospects for further research. The study confirms that sensitive real-life topics should not be avoided in English language classrooms in war-affected contexts. Instead, they represent an important resource for meaningful communication and learner engagement.

At the same time, their inclusion requires a safe and supportive classroom environment and teacher's readiness to discuss sensitive topics with learners.

The findings suggest that teacher education programmes should place greater emphasis on preparing pre-service teachers to manage sensitive topics responsibly.

Future research may focus on classroom observations of the lessons, designed and presented by the survey participants and longitudinal studies of teacher development.

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ГОТОВНІСТЬ МАЙБУТНІХ УЧИТЕЛІВ ДО РОБОТИ З ЧУТЛИВИМИ ТЕМАМИ НА УРОКАХ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ

Метою цього дослідження було з'ясувати, як майбутні вчителі англійської мови в Україні сприймають та обговорюють з учнями чутливі теми, пов'язані з реаліями сьогодення, в процесі взаємодії на уроці під час педагогічної практики в школі в умовах воєнного часу. Особливу увагу приділено розвитку педагогічної відповідальності майбутніх учителів.

Методологія. У дослідженні взяли участь 65 студентів спеціальності «Мова і література (Англійська)», які опановують професію вчителя як компонент бакалаврської програми. Дослідження проводилося у березні-квітні 2026 року за допомогою структурованого опитувальника за змішаним методом, який поєднував збір кількісних та якісних даних. Запитання дослідження охоплювали сприйняття майбутніми вчителями тем, пов'язаних із війною, їхню готовність цілеспрямовано інтегрувати такі теми в навчальний процес, а також чинники, що впливають на рішення майбутніх вчителів звертатися до цих питань. Отримані відповіді дали змогу простежити розвиток педагогічної відповідальності, зокрема в аспекті усвідомлення впливу чутливих тем на навчальний процес.

Наукова новизна. Отримані результати доповнюють масив досліджень, присвячених навчанню майбутніх учителів працювати із чутливими темами в умовах збройного конфлікту, та дають уявлення про вплив таких тем на їхній професійний розвиток.

Результати свідчать, що чутливі теми є невід'ємною складовою навчального дискурсу в умовах воєнного часу в Україні й часто порушуються вчителями як реактивно, так і цілеспрямовано. Хоча учасники загалом відзначають високий рівень залученості учнів під час обговорення таких тем, вони також вказують на труднощі, пов'язані з емоційним благополуччям та недостатнім досвідом. У дослідженні обґрунтовується, що чутливі теми не слід уникати; натомість програми підготовки вчителів мають підтримувати майбутніх педагогів у розвитку усвідомленості, професійного судження та стратегій, необхідних для відповідального й педагогічно доцільного опрацювання таких питань.

Ключові слова: майбутні вчителі; англійська мова як іноземна; чутливі теми; педагогічна відповідальність; Україна.

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