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The URGE Project's Approach to Supporting Ukrainian Refugee Children in Romania

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the Urge project, a collaborative initiative involving universities, schools, and non-governmental organizations from six partner countries (Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Romania, Spain, and the Netherlands) and funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ framework. The project aims to assist the integration of Ukrainian refugee primary school children into the national education systems of these countries. The paper focuses on the informational and educational strategies and tools that have been implemented to develop refugee children's basic language, communication, and intercultural skills. It also outlines new approaches that utilize digital resources to create a supportive environment, enhancing language learning experiences and ensuring that the children feel welcomed and valued in their new surroundings. These efforts aim to support the socio-cultural integration of Ukrainian primary school children into local communities and enhance the intercultural competence of teachers working with refugee children.

KEYWORDS: Ukrainian refugee children, digital resources, integration, foreign/host language learning

The European context

The war in Ukraine has forced people to abandon their homes, with children among the most vulnerable, bearing both the trauma of displacement and the challenge of adapting to unfamiliar environments. Across Europe, many refugee primary school children struggle to integrate into new education systems while managing loss, separation, and cultural dislocation. Their needs encompass not only language acquisition but also emotional support, intercultural understanding, and opportunities for meaningful peer interaction. Yet, there remains a significant gap in materials and teacher training to address these complex challenges. In response, the URGE project (2024 – 2026), Erasmus+ funded, aims to support the integration of Ukrainian refugee children in six countries: Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Romania, Spain, and the Netherlands. By developing informational and educational tools that foster language, communication, and intercultural skills, the project meets children's learning, social, and emotional needs, strengthens their motivation, and enables positive socio-cultural interactions within their new school communities.

The URGE project

Project outcomes

The project outcomes are based on its collection of the foreign language teaching and learning techniques promoted by previous endeavors on the topic, which have proved their effectiveness in addressing the learning, social, and emotional needs of refugee learners. In addition, the project has developed interactive infographics as an engaging educational tool providing country-specific information for Ukrainian refugee children in the six host countries. These infographics include information on the cultural specifics and languages of the host countries, local education systems, opportunities offered by primary education for Ukrainian children, and recognition of acquired competences. Moreover, the project offers Interactive Learning Tools for Ukrainian children, designed for digital and physical use, aiming to develop basic language, communication, and intercultural skills of primary school children. The Tools incorporate different foreign language learning approaches and digital resources organized around priority topics that address the learning, social, and emotional needs of displaced learners (The URGE project, 2025).

The target group's profile

Ukrainian refugee primary school children often carry the burden of trauma – separation from family, friends, and the safety of their homeland – while simultaneously displaying the developmental traits typical of young learners. They bring with them anxiety, fear, and sadness, yet remain spontaneous, curious, and eager to explore through play, imitation, and discovery. Their short attention spans and vulnerability to boredom make it essential that educators provide varied, engaging activities tied to common learning goals. These children thrive on active involvement, performance, and experiential exploration, where mistakes are seen not as failures but as steps in their development. Because they are coping with disrupted attachments and uncertainty, positive reinforcement and praise are especially critical, offering emotional stability and motivation. Storytelling, role play, and visual aids can help them process trauma while fostering social skills and resilience. For refugee children, foreign language learning is not only about acquiring the knowledge and skills of the host language but also about rebuilding trust, belonging, and hope in an environment where safety and encouragement are consistently reinforced.

Theoretical framework

Plurilingualism and translanguaging in childhood

Encouraging plurilingualism in childhood – understood as a child's integrated repertoire of languages and varieties (the Council of Europe, 2001) – enhances learning and well-being. Meaningful exposure during sensitive periods supports sound and grammar acquisition, strengthens executive functions (including attention, working memory, and flexibility), and enhances metalinguistic awareness, as skills transfer across languages. In school, additive approaches that keep the home language present raise motivation, lower anxiety, and improve attainment, especially for multilingual and refugee learners. Translanguaging is how this stance becomes practice: children draw flexibly on all their languages to make meaning, rather than keeping them in separate "boxes" (García, 2016). Used with Ukrainian refugee young learners, translanguaging lowers the affective filter (anxiety, fear of failure, a concept popularized and standardized by Krashen in 1982) and enhances comprehension by allowing brief L1 (mother tongue) planning, clarification, or note-taking before producing in the host language. In class, this can mean planning in Ukrainian and presenting a short product in the host language, as well as using multilingual word walls and dual-language labels. It also involves providing concise L1 explanations of task instructions, reshaping

Ukrainian notes into host-language captions, and offering bilingual peer support followed by whole-class rehearsal of target chunks. The result is faster acquisition of high-frequency phrases, better retention, and more participation – crucial for recently displaced children who benefit from reduced stress and early "wins." Translanguaging also aligns with Cummins' interdependence hypothesis: growth in L1 supports L2 (the foreign/host language, Romanian, in our case) because core abilities (phonological awareness, vocabulary depth, text structures, inference, study strategies) are shared. Strong Ukrainian literacy and oral development, therefore, accelerate host-language literacy and content learning; suppressing Ukrainian risks weakening this foundation. Translanguaging validates all classroom languages, fostering a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and intercultural competence. Plurilingual pedagogies – story-rich input, formulaic chunks, and translanguaging – nurture empathy and a secure sense of identity, preparing children to participate confidently in diverse communities (Cummins, 1979; Bialystok, 2001; Adesope et al., 2010; Galante, 2022).

The role of fairy tales in children's growth and development

Fairy tales and stories play an important part in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. They serve as educational tools that help children comprehend complex life events and navigate challenges (Kuciapiński, 2014; Ruban et al., 2024) they cannot otherwise investigate. Through storytelling, children explore different viewpoints, develop empathy, and build personal resources - enhancing their resilience and capacity for positive adaptation (Wood et al., 2012; Theron et al., 2017). Research also indicates that fairy tales foster intercultural competence, empathy, and reflection on stereotypes, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of others and reducing prejudice (De Vries et al., 2017). Additionally, storytelling influences family relationships and social connectedness, which are crucial for emotional well-being (Koenig Kellas, 2005).

Most fairy tales center on characters' journeys marked by loss of home and security (Kostecka, 2017) and hardships, such as separation from familiar surroundings, exile, and encounters with danger (Haase, 2000). These narratives symbolize developmental stages – heroes leaving home, facing displacement, and looking for safety – mirroring children's own growth and experiences of change. The fairy-tale landscape often reflects themes of alienation and displacement, with settings like forests, castles, and cages symbolizing threats and danger, but also the possibility of eventual safety and belonging (Crago, 2005; East et al., 2010). Fairy tales present growth as a process of overcoming adversity, with stories often culminating

in positive resolutions that restore hope, trust, and resilience. This consistent pattern of positive endings helps children develop a sense of optimism and trust in the possibility of recovery and renewal.

For Ukrainian children affected by war, displacement, and trauma, fairy tales serve as a powerful metaphorical and therapeutic resource. Many children experience physical and psychological dislocation, perceiving their familiar environment as threatened or transformed - similar to the hostile landscapes in fairy tales (Haase, 2000). The symbolic spaces of separation and alienation present in fairy tales can resonate with their own experiences of displacement, offering a language to interpret trauma and loss. For example, the themes of exile and safe return in fairy tales like "Hansel and Gretel" mirror the children's journeys through displacement and the hope of returning home - recast into a reimagined, hopeful space (Haase, 2000). Contemporary Ukrainian authors harness these narrative strategies, employing therapeutic storytelling to validate children's experiences, foster resilience, and provide hope through symbolic plots, imagery, and positive resolutions (Efimova, 2024). The power of fairy tales to "aid individuals in overcoming personal difficulties, enhancing their emotional well-being, and fostering developmental growth" should be exploited to mitigate despair and facilitate emotional healing during times of crisis (Ruban et al., 2024: 55).

Fairy tales function as therapeutic instruments - bibliotherapy, healing with books - that support children in externalizing fears, processing trauma, and imagining recovery (De Vries et al., 2017). The structured narrative process - identification, catharsis, and insight - enables children to empathize with characters, draw parallels with their experiences, and reframe their challenges in a hopeful context. Research shows that storytelling reduces anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms, while fostering hope, gratitude, and self-acceptance (Gonçalves et al., 2017; Milaré et al., 2021). Fairy tales and stories enhance resilience by portraying experiences of overcoming adversity in a positive light, illustrating that growth and recovery are possible even after trauma (Wheatley & Turner, 2020). Furthermore, stories provide a safe space for children to externalize fears, access resilience, and imagine a reconstituted sense of home amid destruction. They help children map their experiences of displacement onto the symbolic geography of fairy tales - spaces of alienation, danger, and eventual safety - thus offering a psychological framework for understanding and coping with their realities (Haase, 2000).

In times of crisis, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, these processes become especially vital. UNICEF (2024) states that Ukrainian children face heightened fear, anxiety, and trauma; fairy tales, particularly picture books, address these

struggles by combining textual and visual strategies that guide emotional expression and healing. Studies of emotions in children's literature highlight the role of the interaction between children and stories, as fairy tales and stories "can move a reader in a different way" (Coats, Papazian, 2023: 7). By offering new ways of structuring personal experience, they can turn into a "force for positive transformations" in the lives of children experiencing despair and trauma (Reynolds, 2007: 113; VisikoKnox-Johnson, 2016).

Fairy tales, with their symbolic landscapes, archetypal journeys, and optimistic resolutions, play a multifaceted role in children's development. They serve as educational tools, emotional supports, and therapeutic instruments – especially crucial for Ukrainian children facing the trauma of war and displacement. Through these stories, children can find hope, trust, and comfort (Ramamurthy, 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

Infographics

An infographic is a visual representation of information or data that integrates graphics, photos, and text to convey complicated information clearly and concisely. Infographics function as a visual cognitive approach, organizing and structuring material to enhance their understanding and appeal to the audience. Several fundamental elements characterize infographics as a visual thinking technique. Infographics use visual elements - such as icons, charts, graphs, and illustrations – to simplify complex information, allowing viewers to quickly understand key ideas. They arrange content systematically, frequently employing layouts that direct the viewer through the information in a coherent sequence, facilitating the comprehension of links between concepts. By integrating visually appealing features, infographics attract attention and enhance interest in the subject, hence facilitating retention and recall of the supplied information. Infographics (such as pie charts or bar graphs) display quantitative data visually, facilitating the identification of patterns and connections that may be less apparent in raw data formats. They can convey a narrative or process through visual illustrations, aiding in the contextualization of information for the viewer and enhancing comprehension. Furthermore, the use of colour, font, and imagery in infographics can elicit emotional reactions that enhance engagement. Infographics merge aesthetic appeal with instructive content, effectively conveying difficult ideas while enhancing the audience's learning experience, making it more engaging and memorable (Matrix & Hodson, 2014; Bicen & Beheshti, 2017; Cortoni et al., 2023). While infographics can be a powerful tool for visual thinking and communication,

several issues may arise in their design and interpretation. Infographics may prioritize visual appeal over accuracy and clarity, leading to misleading or incomplete information. Infographics may selectively present information that confirms preconceived notions or ideas while ignoring contradictory evidence. Viewers may misinterpret the information presented due to a lack of understanding or design limitations (Matrix & Hodson, 2014; Bicen & Beheshti, 2017; Cortoni et al., 2023).

When encountering infographics, learners tend to interpret them through social and cognitive biases shaped by their visual perception. Moreover, data visualizations can contain errors that further influence understanding. When an individual interprets an infographic for communication, they employ interpretative patterns that encompass grouping, organizing, and linking to formulate a value judgment based on their observations. The recipient's attentiveness during the intake of the artifact may influence these patterns. These tendencies may result in diverse interpretations of the same evidence, depending upon the individual's prior beliefs and knowledge set. Therefore, data visualization should be designed with an understanding of these biases to improve clarity and efficacy in communication. Moreover, educators must prompt students to examine their own biases and assumptions while analyzing infographics, thereby cultivating a more sophisticated comprehension of information. Integrating many sources and formats can facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the subject. To mitigate these biases, teachers can help children develop critical thinking skills by encouraging them to evaluate infographics critically, question assumptions, and consider alternative perspectives. "Critical thinking is essential for human development and the only defense against illusion, deception, superstition, and self-ignorance of ourselves and the world around us" (Cortoni et al., 2023: 552).

The URGE project uses interactive infographics as engaging educational tools to support Ukrainian refugee children across six host countries. These infographics deliver detailed, country-specific information customized for refugee children and their families. To improve engagement and interactive learning, the infographics incorporate educational videos, interactive quizzes, digital breakout activities, and QR codes that connect to supplementary resources. This dynamic methodology promotes user engagement, rendering the material more accessible and fascinating. The partners developed 30 infographics, five for each partner country, which provide culturally and linguistically meaningful digital learning resources. These resources support Ukrainian children as they adapt to school, equip parents with essential information to guide their children's education, offer teachers valuable tools like supplementary materials and language courses, and foster

cross-cultural understanding through engaging, relevant content. The infographics cater to diverse audiences, including children and parents for independent learning, educators in classrooms and integration programmes, and stakeholders like NGOs and schools engaged in refugee assistance. The interactive infographics are designed to facilitate a smooth, informed, and culturally sensitive integration process for Ukrainian refugees in their new host nations.

Teaching children

Foreign language learning – learning the host language – plays a dual role for Ukrainian refugee children. It is the pathway to full participation in school and community, and, when taught with care, it becomes a medium for recovery, belonging, and hope. Teaching the host language to Ukrainian primary school children works best when it is additive, low-stress, and story-rich – and when it deliberately takes advantage of the full repertoire many children bring: Ukrainian, the host language, and sometimes a little English. The translanguaging approach used in our project treats these languages as complementary tools for meaning-making and prioritizes clear, low-load communication first. The aim is rapid functional communication in the host language without erasing Ukrainian, while using any existing English as a helpful bridge when it reduces cognitive load. Teachers are encouraged to start with safety and clarity using predictable routines, visual schedules, calm pacing, and opt-in speaking. Comprehensible input comes before form, through short, high-frequency chunks embedded in everyday routines ("May I… please?", "Here you are," "Help, please," "I need a break," plus host-language equivalents at greetings, transitions, tidy-up, and home time). Gestures, pictures, puppets, and Total Physical Response allow children to understand without constant translation, while predictability lowers anxiety and speeds learning. Ukrainian is kept visible and valuable via dual-language labels and a multilingual word wall (Ukrainian–host language, and, where helpful, English). Children are invited to plan and draft in Ukrainian, then reshape their products into the host language with teacher support, and to use mixed-language partner talk for planning followed by short host-language performances or captions. Bilingual mini-books and pictures with QR audio in Ukrainian and the host language extend practice to the home. English, when present, is used strategically as a scaffold rather than a target. It supports abstract concepts, shared international vocabulary, and classroom instructions ("circle, match, underline"). Teachers highlight true and false cognates and build small Ukrainian–host language–English glossaries. As children's confidence in the host language grows, English prompts are gradually faded out. Because stories play a

central role in this approach, they are carefully selected to provide a safe, familiar background. Teachers are encouraged to use gentle picture books and fairy-tale motifs, including Ukrainian folklore, with clear helpers, safe spaces, and hopeful resolutions. These texts become the basis for high-impact, translanguaging-friendly activities. Examples include role-play, readers' theatre, sequencing picture cards, and "read-and-draw". These activities turn rich input into low-risk, supported output. At the same time, stories carry much of the social-emotional work of the classroom: they provide natural contexts for feelings check-ins ("I feel…") and self-advocacy language ("I need a break," "Help, please") in the host language. Children rehearse these phrases through puppets, games, and simple dialogues. This practice helps them name emotions and ask for support in ways that feel both safe and meaningful. This procedure respects trauma-aware teaching, reduces cognitive load, and uses every language available to move children swiftly into host-language participation. At the same time, it protects identity and relationships by keeping the Ukrainian language active and inviting families into the learning loop. Where English is present, it serves as a helpful stepping-stone, not a detour. The result is faster, more functional communication in the host language, stronger reading and speaking skills, healthier peer connections, and increased confidence—all without loss of the home language (Wright, 1995; Adesope et al., 2010; García & Seltzer, 2016; MacSwan, 2017; De Vries et al., 2017; Duarte, 2018).

Digital games and stories intertwine to make host language learning fun and relaxing for refugee children in the "Learning by playing" project outcome. The learning environment is a digital story, with a friendly fox as the main character. The fox guides the children through a deep enigmatic forest, where they meet characters from Ukrainian folklore and culture who help them feel at home and find their way. Throughout their journey, the children face a series of challenges presented by the folklore characters they encounter. To overcome each obstacle, they must respond to thought-provoking questions posed by these characters, turning every challenge into an engaging opportunity for learning and discovery. The most difficult questions come from Baba Yaga. The questions are interactive learning exercises meant to develop the children's basic language, communication, and intercultural skills. They are organized into categories: interactive vocabulary development, basic conversation practice, grammar learning activities, integrating cultural context, and emotional and social learning. These digital exercises are designed to holistically support Ukrainian children's integration into their new environment by fostering cultural, emotional, and social development alongside language skills. Through interactive vocabulary games, conversation practice, and grammar activities, the children can build basic language abilities in engaging

ways while learning about local customs and traditions through cultural scavenger hunts and storytelling. Emotion recognition games and social skills role-plays help the children identify and express their feelings appropriately, promoting emotional intelligence and social competence. By incorporating culturally relevant content, bilingual interactions, and gamified reinforcement, these tools encourage the children to connect with their new surroundings confidently and comfortably, facilitating smoother cultural adaptation, emotional resilience, and social integration in their host communities.

The engaging game in the form of a story uses infographics and short videos, which contain typical elements and facts about Romania and the other host countries, to help the children become familiar with common cultural practices in the host country, avoid cultural misunderstandings, feel more confident and welcome in everyday life, learn the local language, make friends, and join games and activities with other children. These digital, story-based resources can be accessed at home with parents and other relatives whenever and as many times as they want, contributing to strengthening the family relationships and also to the child's integration into the new country. Together, these methods stimulate faster and more practical use of the host language, improved reading and speaking skills, better relationships with classmates, and growing confidence while preserving the home language.

Teachers' feedback

We presented the project to important regional and national stakeholders and decision-makers who can play an important role in the success of our endeavors in Romania. We explained our goals, target audience, strategy, and expected results and asked them to preview the tools designed so far (videos, Interactive Learning Tools – exercises and activities focusing on linguistic and cultural issues). We informed them of the significance of their comments for enhancing the tools developed and provided them with the evaluation questionnaire to complete. The method was effective, resulting in a substantial number of respondents.

This phase involved 10 educators (inspectors, principals, and teachers) from seven institutions in Iaşi and Bucharest. The educators were asked to express their perspectives on various areas of the guidelines (Figure 1), indicate which element they considered most beneficial, and highlight the most intriguing features and strengths of the project.

Please tick one of the numbers below where 1 = Poor and 10 = Excellent

Relevance	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
Accessibility and attractiveness	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
Coherence	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
Clarity	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
Innovativeness	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
Usability	□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

Figure 1. Evaluation of the interactive mats and guidelines

Evaluated against the project criteria such as relevance, innovativeness, accessibility, usability, and impact, the stakeholders' responses regarding the effectiveness of videos and digital exercises created to support the educational, social, and emotional needs of refugee children reveal a strong endorsement of the project's value. The stakeholders' insights provide clear directions for strengthening future development while affirming the resources' potential to transform learning experiences for refugee children.

The educators consistently emphasized the importance of tailored support and praised the capacity of the project to integrate technology as an inclusive tool. They believed that digital resources could accommodate different learning styles and linguistic backgrounds, helping to create a welcoming classroom environment. The teachers also highlighted how the exercises can act as bridges for social integration, encouraging collaboration and intercultural dialogue among peers. This positive feedback underscores the role of the project in fostering inclusive teaching practices that respond directly to the needs of refugee children. The stakeholders valued the digital exercises that the project proposed for their ability to turn the pupils into active participants in the learning process. The teachers reported that the hands-on and exploratory activities sparked curiosity, sustained motivation, and had the potential to make lessons more engaging. Importantly, the emphasis on creativity was seen as a powerful means of encouraging refugee children to express themselves and build confidence in unfamiliar educational contexts. This recognition points to the long-term potential of the exercises in supporting both cognitive development and emotional resilience. Another key theme in the feedback was the capacity of the materials to enhance inclusivity and

strengthen social bonds. The educators observed that group work and collaborative tasks reduced feelings of isolation and helped the refugee children to form positive relationships with classmates. By supporting socio-cultural interaction and valuing diversity, the exercises contributed to building cohesive school communities where every child felt recognized and empowered. The stakeholders praised this outcome as central to refugee children's successful integration.

The numerical ratings provided further evidence of strong approval. With scores ranging from 8.4 to 9.3 and an overall average of 8.7, the project clearly resonates with its intended audience. Innovativeness received the highest score of 9.3, reflecting appreciation for the novel integration of technology into refugee children's education. Accessibility and attractiveness followed closely at 9.1, highlighting the user-friendly design and engaging content, while usability scored 9.0, confirming the practical value of the resources. These high ratings demonstrated that the project not only met but also exceeded expectations.

Despite the absence of a formal piloting phase, the teachers expressed a strong willingness to adopt and adapt the materials within their classrooms. Their enthusiasm signals a collective belief in the impact that the resources may have on refugee children's learning and socio-emotional well-being. This proactive readiness suggests that a future pilot would likely yield rich insights and reinforce the scalability of the project. The stakeholders' feedback affirms that the project successfully promotes inclusive, engaging, and culturally sensitive learning environments for refugee children. Looking ahead, the following steps are recommended:

- Introduce a pilot phase to capture more detailed evidence of practical impact.
- Offer targeted training and continuous support to help teachers optimize technology integration.
- Refine and expand the resources based on ongoing user feedback to ensure relevance, usability, and cultural responsiveness.

By building on these positive evaluations, the project is well positioned to further enhance refugee children's learning experiences, strengthen their social integration, and support their emotional well-being across diverse European contexts.

Future developments of the project

Future developments of the project will focus on finalizing the creation of infographics and videos that are engaging, culturally sensitive, and tailored to the diverse needs of refugee children. These multimedia resources will be integrated into the story with the friendly fox, designed to resonate with the children's lived experiences, fostering a sense of familiarity, comfort, and belonging. Once completed, a pilot phase will evaluate the effectiveness of these integrated materials in supporting refugee children's adaptation to new environments. The findings will inform further refinements, ensuring that the resources not only enhance language learning but also help children build confidence, develop meaningful social connections, and navigate their new cultural and educational settings with greater ease.

Conclusion

The project demonstrates a significant positive impact on both teachers and children by effectively combining storytelling with digital exercises and interactive activities. This innovative integration goes beyond enhancing digital literacy and creative expression; it also nurtures emotional well-being, engagement, and a sense of belonging among young learners. By embedding learning within context-rich, story-based challenges, educators are able to stimulate critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity while fostering inclusive classroom environments where every child feels valued. Equally important, the methodologies developed provide teachers with adaptable tools that can be tailored to diverse linguistic, cultural, and emotional needs. This flexibility is particularly crucial for refugee children, who often face the dual challenge of integrating into new educational systems while coping with the effects of trauma and displacement. Through supportive, story-driven learning, the project equips teachers to strengthen both academic growth and socio-emotional development, creating a pathway for children to build confidence, form social connections, and navigate new cultural contexts with resilience.

Overall, this integrated strategy lays a strong and sustainable foundation for nurturing well-rounded individuals. By bridging learning, creativity, and emotional support, it prepares children, especially those in vulnerable situations, not only to succeed in their immediate educational environments but also to carry essential life skills of adaptability, collaboration, and resilience into their futures.

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