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Psychological aspects of experiencing war stress by students when learning a foreign language

OLHA KRESAN, SVITLANA SMOLIANINOVA, TETIANA KRESAN. **Psychological aspects of experiencing war stress by students when learning a foreign language.** *The article deals with the psychological aspects of experiencing war stress by the students when learning a foreign language. Teaching students in Ukraine nowadays is associated with a high degree of stress. This especially applies to learning a foreign language, which already involves a certain level of stress, as it requires performing a significant number of interactive tasks, constant communication and involves foreign language acquisition. In order to research this issue, the authors analyzed the main approaches to the study of stress in modern psychology as well as physiological and mental state of students while learning a foreign language for specific purposes. The article outlines the didactic and psychological features of foreign language learning*

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and its principles. During practical foreign language classes with students, we conducted an empirical study using the method of included longitudinal observation, chosen in order to avoid psychological traumatization and retraumatization, as well as providing emotional support in educational environment that is familiar to them. As a result of the study, three groups of students have been distinguished according to the way the stress symptoms are revealed: manifestations of minor, moderate and severe stress. The authors analyzed characteristics of their cognitive activity while learning a foreign language and motivation to study. The article presents the author's model of a person's psychological reactions to stress which proves that stressors can affect the human body and mental health in two ways, causing both emotional exhaustion and personal growth, leading to the enrichment of life experience and helping to find meanings in life.

Key words: *stress, learning a foreign language, personal growth, emotional exhaustion, emotional support.*

1. Analysis of recent research and publications

The issue of teaching students under conditions of stress and stressful situations has been a subject of study by Ukrainian psychologists H.Dubchak, O.Kokun, V.Korolchuk, M.Korolchuk, A.Kulazhenko, and others who studied general and individual features of professional stress, as well as stress in the learning process [6; 7; 9].

A significant number of research works are devoted to the study of stress during exams and knowledge testing (D.Anpilova, O.Donets, V.Semichenko, T.Tsyganchuk, etc.). Psychologists O.Heynyk, S.Kharchenko studied the features of adaptive stress of students before and after admission to higher education institutions (etc.) [6; 14]. Among the recent publications is the work by N.Savelyuk who studied the evidence and aspects of stress experienced by students after the beginning of military activity in Ukraine and empirically proves that all the students who were studied (N=65) had signs of stress, which are mostly expressed in such symptoms as increased fatigue, physical pains in various parts of the body, decreased concentration and attention, and increased anxiety [12].

In foreign psychology, the issue of stress in learning process and its impact on the student performance have been studied by various researchers, such as S. Vogel and L. Schwab. In the work "Learning and memory under stress: implications for the classroom" the authors analyze the impact of stress of different level on memory and acquisition of new

information. It was empirically proved that under stress conditions students' cognitive sphere functions more slowly, and most cognitive processes are unable to work properly, resulting in the decline in understanding new information, causing problems with knowledge acquisition, and also leading to poor academic performance [4]. In our study, we use the term *war stress* [5] to indicate the source of stress and the specifics of its progress.

The issue of foreign language learning and students' stress has been studied by J. Ayres, T. Hopf, W. Th. Littlewood, Z. Dörnyei, O. M. Lozova, etc. They point out that learning a foreign language itself creates a stressful situation for students, especially for non-philological students, who do not specialize in foreign languages [2; 3; 11 et al]. The cause of such stress is the necessity to establish new connections and patterns in order to express one's opinion, which is very different from speaking in one's native language [1; 11]. However, the stress of learning a foreign language doubled by the additional stress of war, caused by life-threatening and traumatic events, can lead to serious consequences for students' mental health.

Therefore, despite a significant number of research works on stress, there are no thorough studies of the psychological aspects of education under the war stress due to the lack of relevant previous experience in the country. Now that there is a need for such a study, we are going to research the psychological aspects of learning a foreign language by university students under the war stress.

The term *stress* was introduced by the American scientist Walter Bradford Cannon 1932. However, further thorough research of the phenomenon of stress and its physiological and psychological aspects was carried out by the Canadian physiologist Hans Selye, who developed the theory of stress and defined this phenomenon as "a non-specific response of the body to any demand of change" [13]. The author proposed two types of stress according to its impact on the body and personality:

- 1) *Distress*, which has a negative impact on the person's physical body and mind and causes him harm.
- 2) *Eustress*, which implies a positive effect and leads to increased energy and productivity, makes one capable of overcoming obstacles.

The classification of stress stages, developed by H. Selye, includes the following:

- *Anxiety stage*. Associated with physiological changes in the body and the release of stress hormones. It can cause such changes of

behaviour as anxiety, excessive control, and full concentration on stressors.

- *Stage of resistance* (stability). It is characterized by further changes in the hormonal system, an increase in blood pressure, acceleration of blood circulation, etc. However, at this stage, the body starts to counteract stress, activating the mental and muscular activity, which helps to overcome the stressful situation. If the impact of stressors stops at this stage, the individual copes with stress, if not, then the next stage begins.
- *Exhaustion stage*. It is characterized by the exhaustion of physiological and psychological resources during the reaction to stress. At this stage, one could observe signs of anxiety, apathy, physical and emotional exhaustion. If the influence of stressors does not stop, this stage can lead to the death of a person [13].

Robert Lazarus was an American psychologist who carried out numerous experimental studies of stress and found that the body and the individual seek to cope with stress using certain strategies. In his work *Psychological Stress and Coping Process*, he introduces the concept of *coping* and defines it as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person”. The author understands coping as a dynamic process in which cognitive and behavioral efforts of the individual, aimed at reducing the impact of stress, are of primary importance [10]. To overcome stress, a person consciously uses coping strategies – ways to overcome difficult situations, including: *planful problem-solving, confrontive coping, accepting responsibility, self-controlling, positive reappraisal, seeking social support, distancing, avoidance* [10]. These strategies help eliminate the negative impact of stressors and are used by individuals in difficult life situations.

2. Discussion and results

It is worth noting that learning a foreign language has its own **characteristic didactic and psychological features**, which contribute to effective proficiency in a foreign language. They are as follows:

- *communicative approach* and *communicatively oriented learning* (W. Th. Littlewood, J. Ayres, T. Hopf, O. M. Lozova, etc.), which involves communication in a foreign language, using foreign words, grammatical structures, etc. in the process of real communication during classes.

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- The second feature is *engagement in speaking activities* during classes, which is a condition for successful acquisition of foreign language competences.

This aspect requires using interactive tasks, constant involvement of all students in class work, as well as constant change of types of activities and a high pace of work.

- The third characteristic of learning a foreign language is the *emotional atmosphere*, which plays an important role in learning a foreign language. It is about maintaining positive emotional state of the students and aiming the tasks and interactions during the class at achieving positive emotions.
- *Focus on students' own life experience* and its involvement in learning a foreign language. The use of one's own life experience is effective in the process of building communication in class, and is also important in the development of productive foreign language activities, which include speaking and writing (as opposed to non-productive ones, which include reading and listening).

However, in the conditions of military operations and the high degree of stress associated with this, these features cannot be fully implemented in classes, which causes a number of difficulties.

In the period from March to December 2022 the authors researched the aspects and manifestations of stress in students studying a foreign language as a result of military operations in Ukraine. The research was carried out by teachers using the method of included longitudinal observation, conducted during practical foreign language classes at the university. 40 students of the 2nd – 4th years of the NAOMA Academy (Kyiv) were under observation. The method of included observation was chosen in order to avoid traumatization and retraumatization of the students during the study and to prevent deterioration of their emotional state. Due to the relatively small number of the respondents, this research is considered to be a pilot one.

The study showed that the general stress of the war in society affects the emotional state and life of each person. The external parameters that were evaluated during the included observation were as followings:

- Attendance of classes by students.
- Utterances on general and specific topics (their content and form).
- Appearance of the students under observation, their general mood.
- Engagement in class activities, involvement in work, etc.

Based on the results of the observation, we can conclude that all the students had manifestations of stress, but according to the degree of its expression, they can be divided into three categories, on the basis of the classification of H. Selye:

- 1) those who experienced relatively mild stress, or according to H. Selye, had the first stage of stress.
- 2) Students experiencing a medium stress situation.
- 3) Students who were under the influence of severe stress, which led to significant difficulties and violations.

In the process of learning a foreign language, the degree of experiencing stress by students was manifested in the following characteristics.

The *first group* of students under observation are those who experienced relatively mild stress, or, according to the theory of H. Selye, were at the stage of anxiety, which leads to the activation of adaptive, i.e. physiological reserves of the body, which is trying to adapt to new conditions. Increased anxiety affects the activity of cognitive processes during classes, physiological reactions of the body work in such a way that the brain is able to perform only mechanical types of work, which decreases the ability to be creative and find non-standard solutions, makes tasks for creative thinking too difficult and too complex for implementing. When learning a foreign language, this complicates work in class, as a result of which the principle of communicative approach and engagement cannot be fully realized.

The *second group* consists of students who have stress of medium severity, or, according to the definition of G. Selye, are at the second stage – the stage of resistance.

The more intense the second stage of stress is, the more difficult it is for students to learn the material during foreign language classes. Analytical and comparative abilities are also impaired. The brain at this stage of stress has too much difficulty activating previously learned material and does not have the ability to associate it with new material.

The *third group* of students under observation are those who are at the third stage of stress, according to H. Selye, at the stage of exhaustion. While working in class, students who have a certain degree of stress cannot learn the material and work effectively in a group. In addition, they may develop chronic diseases and show signs of apathy and depression. Thus, exposure to constant stress causes deterioration of cognitive activity and weakens the activity of the cortex of the large hemispheres of the brain. Such students mostly did not attend foreign language classes or, when

they were present, could not work and be active, because full participation in class is impossible for a student in such an emotional state. Moreover, the state of stress does not allow to acquire knowledge or form skills on satisfactory level.

Since the reaction of the body and mind to stress can be different, the consequences of stress for a person can also vary, depending on the degree of stress, individual characteristics of its experience, as well as personal activity in overcoming it. Among the students we studied, we observed both positive and negative dynamics of stress and its consequences. Therefore, according to H.Selye's stages of stress, we conveniently classified all the students from the three groups into two groups, according to their own activity in overcoming stress and the psychological consequences of war stress for their lives. These are, first of all, those who have positive consequences of stress, in particular, signs of active coping with it and personal growth. And, secondly, those who could not cope with the manifestations of stress, and therefore have signs of emotional exhaustion and manifestations of depression.

The types of the individual's response to stress, as well as its consequences, which we determined during the included longitudinal observation, are shown in Figure 1.

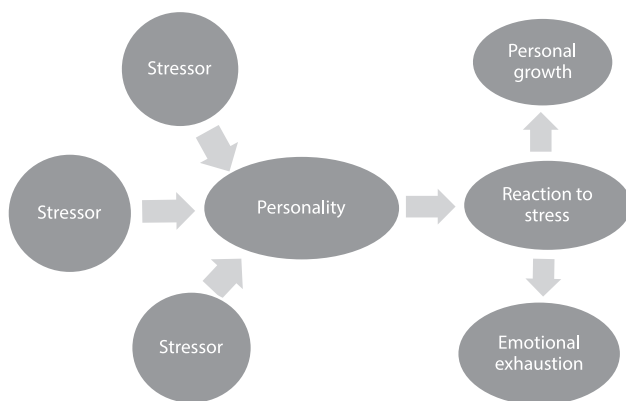


Fig. 1. A model of psychological reactions of personality to stress

As we can see from Fig. 1, the impact of stressors on a person can lead to a number of stress symptoms and various reactions of the body, such as increased anxiety, physical pain, lack of concentration and weakening of other cognitive processes leading to emotional exhaustion and loss of

meaning in life. However, thanks to personal efforts and motivational factors, stress can become a powerful source of personal growth.

The concept of *posttraumatic growth* is actively used in psychology to illustrate positive changes in an individual as a result of experiencing stress. These changes involve having new life experiences and creating new meanings, the emergence of new resources, personal growth and changes of the life values. Post-traumatic growth was studied by such scientists as S. Dekel, T. Ein-Dor, Z. Solomon, P. A. Linley, S. Joseph, etc., and is of great theoretical and empirical interest now in connection with the war in Ukraine. Based on our observation, we can say that all students experience constant stress, but some of them have mobilized their life resources and got the new understanding of their life experience, which indicates that they have productively experienced a stressful life event [8].

To avoid the negative consequences of stress and achieve personal growth (Fig. 1), to cope with stress in classes with students, it is suggested to implement interactive tasks, communication in small groups, communicative tasks aimed at expressing one's thoughts and feelings. The teacher can also express emotional support, which is based on the principles of the student-centered education, being open to experiences, unconditional positive regard (K. Rogers), take into account individual differences and the unique previous experience of each individual. Psychological methods of emotional support and recommendations for teachers will be discussed in the following publications.

3. Conclusions

The state of stress experienced by students, teachers and all citizens in general during the war is one of the most difficult trials in human life. During the study of a foreign language, prolonged stress exposure has deleterious effects on cognitive activity and leads to the weakening of the activity of the cortex of the large hemispheres of the brain, which negatively affects the acquisition of speaking skills and the students' engagement during classes.

The study of the aspects of foreign language learning by university students under war stress conditions, conducted during foreign language classes using the method of included longitudinal observation, showed that all students have manifestations of stress of a slight, medium or severe degree, which is reflected in their academic performance and general condition. However, some of them overcome stress with the help of various coping strategies, make efforts in the learning process,

while others do not. Thus, the consequences of stress for them are either emotional exhaustion and lack of motivation for learning and life, or personal (post-traumatic) growth. The results of the impact of stress on students' activities during classes are summarized in the author's model of psychological reactions of an individual to stress, which clearly demonstrates the consequences of experiencing stress and its impact on the psychological health of an individual.

Prospects for further research are to conduct a more detailed empirical study of the impact of war stress on the learning process in general and foreign language learning in particular; and to develop a psychological assistance program to reduce stress and anxiety for students and teachers.

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Abstracts

ОЛЬГА КРЕСАН, СВІТЛАНА СМОЛ'ЯНИНОВА, ТЕТ'ЯНА КРЕСАН. **Психологічні особливості переживання стресу війни студентами у процесі вивчення іноземної мови.** У статті розглядаються психологічні особливості переживання студентами стресу війни під час вивчення іноземної мови. Навчання студентів в Україні у сучасних реаліях пов'язане з високим ступенем стресу. Особливо це стосується вивчення іноземної мови, що вже передбачає певний рівень стресу, оскільки потребує виконання значної кількості інтерактивних завдань, постійної комунікації та оволодіння іншомовними компетенціями. З метою дослідження цього питання було проаналізовано основні підходи до вивчення стресу в сучасній психології, а також особливості фізіологічного та психічного стану студентів під час вивчення іноземної мови студентами нефілологічних спеціальностей, як нефахової дисципліни. У статті наведено дидактичні та психологічні особливості вивчення іноземної мови та принципи, на яких воно базується. Під час практичних занять з іноземної мови зі студентами було проведено емпіричне дослідження з використанням методу включеного лонгітюдного спостереження, що був обраний з метою уникнення психологічної травматизації та ретравматизації особистості, а також для надання емоційної підтримки у звичних для студентів умовах освітньої взаємодії. У результаті дослідження за способом виявлення симптомів стресу виділено три групи студентів: прояви незначного, середнього та сильного стресу. Здійснено характеристику їх когнітивної діяльності в процесі вивчення іноземної мови. У статті наведено авторську модель психологічних реакцій людини на стрес, яка доводить, що стресори можуть впливати на організм і психіку людини або спричиняючи емоційне виснаження, або особистісне зростання, що веде до збагачення життєвого досвіду та появу нових сенсів.

Ключові слова: стрес, вивчення іноземної мови, особистісне зростання, емоційне виснаження, емоційна підтримка.

OLHA KRESAN, SVITLANA SMOLIANINOVA, TETIANA KRESAN. **Psychologiczne aspekty doświadczenia stresu wojennego przez uczniów podczas nauki języka obcego.** *Artykuł*

dotyczy psychologicznych aspektów doświadczania przez uczniów stresu wojennego podczas nauki języka obcego. Nauczanie studentów na Ukrainie wiąże się obecnie z dużym stopniem stresu. Dotyczy to zwłaszcza nauki języka obcego, która już wiąże się z pewnym stresem, gdyż wymaga wykonywania znacznej liczby zadań interaktywnych, ciągłej komunikacji i wiąże się z przyswajaniem języka obcego. W celu zbadania tej problematyki autorzy przeanalizowali główne podejścia do badania stresu we współczesnej psychologii oraz stanu fizjologicznego i psychicznego studentów podczas nauki języka obcego w celach specjalistycznych. W artykule zarysowano dydaktyczne i psychologiczne cechy nauki języków obcych oraz jej zasady. Podczas praktycznych zajęć z języka obcego ze studentami przeprowadziliśmy badanie empiryczne, stosując metodę włączonej obserwacji podłużnej, wybraną w celu uniknięcia psychicznej traumy i retraumatyzacji oraz zapewnienia wsparcia emocjonalnego w znanym im środowisku edukacyjnym. W wyniku przeprowadzonych badań wyodrębniono trzy grupy studentów ze względu na sposób ujawniania się objawów stresu: przejawy stresu niewielkiego, umiarkowanego i silnego. Autorzy przeanalizowali charakterystykę ich aktywności poznawczej podczas nauki języka obcego. W artykule przedstawiono autorski model psychologicznych reakcji człowieka na stres, który dowodzi, że stresory mogą dwojako oddziaływać na organizm i zdrowie psychiczne człowieka, powodując zarówno wyczerpanie emocjonalne, jak i rozwój osobisty, prowadzący do wzbogacenia doświadczeń życiowych i pojawiania się nowych sensów.

Słowa kluczowe: stres, nauka języka obcego, rozwój osobisty, wyczerpanie emocjonalne, wsparcie emocjonalne.