

SWITLO

Maryna Zyhор’s story: “Through SWITLO, I found what I’d been missing for ten years at school: real support, and a space to speak and share without fear of judgment.”

Maryna Zyhор is a senior teacher at a specialised school with an advanced English programme in Mukachevo. She has taught English there for more than a decade. Like many educators in smaller towns, she once felt that the best professional development opportunities were reserved for colleagues in Kyiv and other major cities. Recently, that has begun to change.

Maryna’s journey with British Council programmes began with basic-level training for New Ukrainian School English teachers. In November 2022, she travelled to Warsaw for Teaching and Learning in Difficult Times. Although Zakarpattia was relatively calm then, many displaced families had arrived. Teachers were working with children who had experienced trauma – children who fell silent or avoided contact – and they did not always know how to respond. The course became a catalyst for a profound change. A year later, she joined SWITLO (Skills and Well-being in Teacher Learning Opportunities).

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Teachers in big cities always had more chances to grow professionally. For us, it felt almost out of reach. COVID-19 and remote learning opened new doors. My first British Council course felt like a breath of fresh air

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“What I love about SWITLO is that a facilitator brings together a group of like-minded peers. It’s not lectures – it’s exchange: sharing experiences and ideas. You realise we face the same challenges, and each of us can offer a unique solution. That’s what drew me in. We have around a hundred English teachers in our hromada, but we didn’t have a real sense of community – and we needed it.”

Back in Mukachevo, Maryna acted on a clear insight: support is not an abstract concept, but a real need that a community can meet. With support from the local methodologist, she brought together 12 English teachers from different schools across the Mukachevo hromada (a local community, an administrative unit in Ukraine). Although her own school did not oppose the idea, none of her closest colleagues joined at first.

She suspects that for some participants, the promise of a certificate – useful for appraisal – was the initial motivation. But after the second meeting, focused on trauma and its impact on the learning environment, something shifted. Participants began to open up, share experiences, and support one another.

Over eight sessions, Maryna saw a noticeable change in attitudes to teaching and assessment. Teachers began listening more carefully – and understanding their pupils better. They moved away from comparison and towards recognising each learner’s progress. They came to see that learning comes more easily, and outcomes improve, in a calm classroom where a child can safely express feelings, speak freely, and feel the teacher’s support.

“We all want to see our students progress. SWITLO taught us not to put them under pressure. They need time. Of course we’d love every child to excel at everything – listening, writing, reading, speaking – but that’s not always realistic. A student might speak beautifully but struggle to express ideas in writing; or read well but find listening difficult. That’s completely normal. Our participants are starting to see it differently. We’re tuning in to our students with more care.”

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I was struck by how openly colleagues spoke about their emotions, fears, and uncertainty around working with trauma. Until then, many had stayed silent – worried about making mistakes, worried about being judged. For the first time, people felt they weren’t alone: that others understood and stood beside them. Everyone’s story was different, but the biggest surprise was this: teachers are often hurt most by other teachers. We can wound one another. It sounds strange, but it’s true

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Across the eight meetings, the group also tested new approaches in their own classrooms – from energetic warm-ups to thoughtful conversations about difficult topics – and then shared what happened.

SWITLO also shifted Maryna's own understanding of teaching. She discovered new methods and tools – and, crucially, a new confidence.

“I used to find it hard to share anything personal with my students – whether I have a child, how old they are, whether we have a pet. In one session, a colleague said she always uses examples from her own life, turning each new tense into a small story about herself. I tried it – and I was amazed at how it opened students up, how it brought us closer. You have to meet children where they are. After SWITLO, we even filmed a TikTok together. We agreed that if the group scored an average of 9.5 or higher on a grammar test, I'd do it with them. They scored 10. I never thought they'd reach that.”

Maryna has also begun changing the learning environment at classroom level. She set up a table with kinetic sand – a place students can go when emotions run high and they need to calm down. One student even brought his favourite toy there “because it helps”. For Maryna, that is a clear sign of trust.

“I used to be a very strict teacher – perfect discipline, no exceptions. Through SWITLO, I've become gentler: less criticism, less judgment – more listening. If students want to revisit something or slow down, I'm comfortable with that now. I understand they need time, and I'm better at hearing what they need. They don't need polished slides – they need a real conversation with their teacher.”

SWITLO became both a professional turning point and a personal one. With her new confidence, Maryna applied on behalf of her school to the UK-UA School Partnerships programme and was accepted into the first cohort. She also initiated delivery



Today's students learn through doing – through being active, and through expressing their feelings and thoughts. Colleagues say that once they made lessons more interactive, students gave better feedback and remembered new material more easily. They're less afraid of mistakes now. They speak up more, debate more, and are more willing to try.

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of the ENCOURSE professional development course in Mukachevo – securing support from the local methodologist, arranging a venue, and persuading colleagues to join.

Maryna continues to lead her community. Even during school holidays, members meet – sometimes simply over coffee, without presentations. Plans for autumn include new themes: AI in education, reading engagement, and assessment. She encourages colleagues to complete SWITLO facilitator training and to launch communities of their own. A new group may even form at Maryna’s school – the headteacher has already suggested it.

“I feel a strong pull to keep going – and I have the energy for it. What I’d been missing for ten years is here: honest support and a room where you can speak and share without fear. It means the world. SWITLO gave me my first experience of true acceptance – and now I’m ready to open up further and keep moving forward.”



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[More about the programme.](#)