

## SWITLO

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**Maksym Yakymchuk’s story:  
“There’s real strength in  
realising you’re not doing  
this alone – that there are  
colleagues just as devoted to  
the craft, to English, and to  
the young people we teach.”**

**Maksym Yakymchuk** is a young English and German teacher at Kniahynyniv Lyceum in Volyn Oblast. He has dreamed of teaching since childhood. After graduating from a linguistic lyceum, he studied Applied Linguistics at the local university and, in 2023, returned to his alma mater as a teacher. Today, he not only teaches – he also leads the foreign languages methodological commission and, in 2024, launched a professional teacher community through SWITLO (Skills and Well-being in Teacher Learning Opportunities).

Maksym first heard about SWITLO in spring 2024. He had already taken British Council training linked to the New Ukrainian School curriculum for Years 7-9 and was impressed by the trainers’ professionalism.

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**My first degree wasn’t in pedagogy – it was in applied linguistics, which only partly covers teaching methodology. I was lucky: I had a brilliant schoolteacher who gave me so much. So when I started at the lyceum, I wasn’t afraid of working with students. But I didn’t yet have the practical ‘keys’ that SWITLO gives**

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*“When I heard about this new project, I didn’t hesitate. During the full-scale invasion, I needed something that would give me strength. Above all, I was looking for peers – people to share experience with – and for advice, techniques, and tools to support children through the war.”*

Another strong motivation was keeping his English sharp.

*“Teachers need practice. Even in a school with advanced English, you can plateau around B2 if you don’t have chances to use higher-level language,”* he explains.

After the training, Maksym introduced SWITLO to colleagues and suggested creating a Teacher Activity Group. The group brought together ten English teachers and two German teachers who are also proficient in English, and the school leadership supported the idea wholeheartedly.

Each session became a lively exchange of practice: how to work with trauma, adapt materials for mixed-ability classes, motivate students, and build a supportive classroom climate.

*“We learned from one another and looked for ways through our shared challenges. It strengthened our sense of being a team.”*

The topic of trauma resonated most deeply. One colleague had lost her husband to the war and felt, painfully, how hard it can be to speak with students whose parents have been killed or are serving on the front line.

*“We were trying to find ways to talk without causing harm,”* Maksym says. *“For example, we suggested replacing tasks about your own family with examples from books, films, anime, or cartoons – shifting the focus to ‘another’ family instead.”*

Over time, Maksym arrived at a simple conclusion: almost every teacher meets students who come to class carrying an invisible backpack – and you never know what’s inside it.

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**People wanted to grow – and to speak English. Our meetings aren’t formal briefings; they’re real conversations about what matters to us. The British Council materials give us a starting point, and then we choose the themes we actually need**

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*“Our job is to organise learning and create an environment where they can study and, through interaction, gain what they need. The teacher is no longer just the person at the board, pointer in hand, explaining the grammar.”*

Gender equality was another challenging theme. Some senior colleagues were sceptical about giving it space, arguing that modern textbooks already address stereotypes. Maksym grounded the discussion in everyday school life.

*“I run an Instagram account, and one of your students follows me. I see she lists her pronouns. This matters to young people – and if we want a tolerant society, we have to reflect that. It’s not only asking ‘What’s your name?’ but also ‘What are your pronouns?’ That’s the reality now.”* The response, he says, was first surprise – and then reflection.

Assessment, cheating, and the use of AI also sparked animated debate.

Teachers in the community were eager to test practical tools. Warm-ups and game-based activities – Adverb Detective to “word tennis” – were especially popular.

*“Now I hear students say that what we discussed and practised in the community is being used in their lessons. It’s working – for colleagues and for the children.”*

Maksym has noticed changes in his own teaching, too. He now pays much closer attention to students’ psychological and emotional state – especially in the mornings after overnight strikes. He looks for ways to ease tension and offer support, using activities from the programme to help the class decompress. He also gives students more ownership.

*“I tell them the outcome I want to see – how they get there is up to them. And in the process, they don’t only improve their English and their results; they build wider skills they’ll carry into life.”*

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**Students can copy from online sources or use AI. Together, we looked for ways to spot plagiarism while still motivating students to produce their own work.**

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One discovery has been particularly encouraging: even very experienced colleagues – one community member is 71 – are open to new ideas.

*“Teachers tried the approaches we discussed and came back saying: the students like it. They made choices based on learners’ interests. When a teacher is on the same wavelength as the class, connection forms faster – and grows stronger.”*

For Maksym, SWITLO is more than new methods or a professional network; it is real professional development.

The community already has plans for next year: student motivation, burnout prevention, CLIL, using drama in lessons, and more. Despite the extra workload, Maksym feels energised.

*“Colleagues’ positive feedback keeps me going. You can’t put a price on this kind of experience. We have the tools now, and we know how to recognise problems and find solutions. So even after the SWITLO programme ends, we’ll be able to keep going independently.”*



**Lately, CPD can feel like a formality – papers, reports, numbers. But in communities like this, development happens in practice. It’s not abstract theory written far from the classroom. These are real situations and advice from experienced practitioners that we can test immediately. SWITLO also means meeting teachers from different regions, connecting with colleagues across the oblast, exchanging experience, and drawing energy from a circle of like-minded people. It’s invaluable to feel you’re not alone. There are others who care about this profession just as deeply – who love English, and children, as much as you do**

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[More about the programme.](#)