

B-ELSA - Olha Herhel  
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School - Shamblehurst Primary



This blog explores how Bi-lingual ELSA (B-ELSA) support has worked at Shamblehurst Primary school in Hampshire. It brings together the perspectives of highly-experienced school-based ELSA Sarah, and EMTAS B-ELSA Olha. They collaborated to provide ELSA support to children from Ukraine. After an introductory section outlining why children from Ukraine might need ELSA support, the blog continues in the style of an interview, with questions followed by responses from these two practitioners.

### **Why B-ELSA support is particularly important for children from Ukraine**

The need for this sort of support arises because of the array of challenging experiences many Ukrainian children will have had, related to their displacement from country of origin. For each Ukrainian child who has come to the UK as a refugee from war, their journey will be unique and may include things such as:

- sudden departure from Ukraine when the war started
- loss of their home in Ukraine
- loss of belongings
- separation from family members, who remain in Ukraine
- separation from friends
- leaving their pets behind
- not knowing for how long they will be in the UK
- adapting to living in someone else's house with their rules and expectations (if with a host family in the UK)
- needing to adapt to life in a new language and culture
- loss of voice

- loss of choice
- loss of power and control over key aspects of their daily lives.

The above examples all contribute to toxic stress, and come on top of other, more common situational challenges that any child may experience, such as divorce or changes in their family's financial circumstances. Toxic stress can manifest itself in physiological symptoms such as tummy aches or head aches, and in behaviours such as withdrawal, regression to an earlier developmental stage or exerting control through what appear to be acts of defiance or refusal, this strongly linked to the child having lost their sense of self actualisation.

The EMTAS B-ELSA role was developed as a way of offering support with their emotional literacy to children from Ukraine, many of whom have an attendant language barrier to contend with on top of all the other worries and stresses they carry round with them daily. The remainder of this blog draws on the experiences of Olha and Sarah who have successfully worked together to plan and deliver ELSA sessions to children from Ukraine.

### **How did you identify that your Ukrainian children needed ELSA support?**

Sarah Well, we noticed that there were things happening for the children at school that caused us to become concerned about them. Teachers were key in identifying that there may be a need in addition to learning English. This was discussed with our SENDCo and people on our Senior Leadership Team. Our Head Teacher played a role too and has been very supportive of the collaborative way of working that comes with B-ELSA involvement.

### **What have been the challenges in getting B-ELSA support to work?**

Olha In general, whilst I have dedicated slots in my calendar for this work, some schools have said they can't release their ELSA to work with me, so that's been a problem. Another issue I've had has been matching up calendars – mine and the school ELSA's - to achieve consistency with the days and times of my visits. But in this school, it's been much easier because the Head Teacher has been so supportive.

Sarah To be perfectly honest, before I worked with Olha I did think in schools we are so busy so if she's coming, it's two adults to one child. I didn't get it to start with - I thought 'why don't you just do the session on your own?' But I totally get it now.

Olha Yes, same here - on a personal level, when I first started B-ELSA work, I wasn't convinced I needed to be there at all as some children from Ukraine didn't seem to need me for the language support. I've changed my mind about that having had the experience of working with people like Sarah, and seeing how beneficial it is for the children.

Sarah I think it was crucial you were here. You can give the children a real connection to home, because you give them opportunities to speak in first language. Each week, the children have looked to you for support to

express particular things they've wanted to say; they've really benefited from that. Also the collaborative approach means when you stop coming, the child still has someone they know and can trust in school, someone who understands and is there for them.

### **How have you gone about collaboratively planning and delivering ELSA sessions?**

**Sarah** I've been really fortunate in that my school has been so open to B-ELSA support. I've been given two hours a week for our two Ukrainian children, which is an absolute gift; in my regular ELSA work I don't usually get the luxury of planning time. Working with Olha, whilst I have suggested some possible activities for sessions, I've also valued her opinion and input. With the extra time, we've been able to plan sessions together, and we've shared our ideas.

**Olha** Yes, so 15 mins ahead of the session with the child, we've met to recap on the previous session, and share and consider feedback from teachers about what happened for the child during the rest of the week between visits. It's helped us tailor the sessions so we get them right for each child.

### **How have you figured out appropriate targets for the children you've worked with?**

**Sarah** One child had some friendship issues so we've done some work on that. They joined Year 5 and had to negotiate their place amongst friendships that were long-established within the peer group. For them, it's been the social aspects that have been more immediately challenging, yet vital as they need to build a new support network for themselves and to gain a sense of belonging here in school.

**Olha** Yes, and it's been really helpful that Sarah knows the other children in the class. She's brought that knowledge to the sessions – I wouldn't have been able to do that bit on my own. For this child, we've also worked on boundaries, the need to respect others' feelings, what we can do for ourselves when we're feeling upset. So lots of work on emotional literacy.

**Sarah** For another child, we decided we'd work on social skills as they'd been having difficulties following instructions in class. We introduced a second child and we played some games together. We talked about the rules of those games. The Ukrainian child said they wanted to make a booklet so we came up with the idea of making a book of rules – things we need to remember when we're playing with friends. Each week we played a different game and we talked about the rules.

**Olha** Yes, they knew we were working on that book, which was their idea. At the end, they were so proud of their book of rules and they took it to share with their class. I believe this child was more focused and engaged because we followed that project with them, their own idea.

### **How did you draw on the child's first language in your sessions?**

Olha I've collected resources in Ukrainian, Russian and English through this role. Some have come from my ELSA training; I especially like the ones from 'Bear us in Mind' – which is a charity set up to support refugee children, including those from Ukraine.

Sarah We wanted to make sure the children understood the feelings words we were using. We used cards to talk about that. The children definitely needed Olha to be able to do this effectively. Also, after seeing some of the resources in Ukrainian that Olha brought with her, I started using translation tools myself, to create more.

For me, the language options Olha's opened up for the children is the beauty of it – we'll come in and have a chat about each child and go in my ELSA cupboard and choose something suitable. For example the feelings cards – we picked a few cards and we asked what's happening in the picture. If we could add a speech bubble to the picture, what would they be saying/thinking? Because Olha's been there, the children have been able to use whichever language they like to express their thoughts and ideas. I think this has been a real strength of it.

### **What has been the hardest part of working in this way?**

Sarah To be honest, at the beginning I was concerned about my waiting list children. I have lots of children with lots of needs. Prioritising the Ukrainian children did make me feel a bit bad. But a child at the top of my list was the one we chose to join some of the B-ELSA-supported sessions, which was great, really fortunate that it worked out that way.

Also, the targets from the teachers needed a bit of work to get them right for the children.

Olha We agreed on that – it's been really common in my experience in this role. Teachers sometimes think we have a magic wand and can solve anything and everything.

Sarah Yes, when we had our Remembrance Day, one child suddenly started talking about everything they'd been through and the teachers and the other children were shocked to hear it. I think when something like that happens, people can go into panic mode.

Olha I think this is sometimes where it doesn't work so well in other schools – people lose confidence. They sit back and they seem to want me to do everything, which isn't how it's meant to work.

### **What's been the most useful thing to have come out of your collaboration?**

Sarah The legacy – through the work we've done together, the children have accessed the ELSA sessions so they've benefited from that. Plus now they

know me really well, and they understand I'm always here for them, even if Olha's visits have ended for the time being.

**How do you achieve a sense of closure at the end of a period of ELSA support?**

Sarah Closure was really important for the children. In the end, we decided we'd give each child a card, so I modified one I had. In it, we put that Olha's saying goodbye but the child can still come and talk to me.

Olha Yes, a card like this is a resource we're now developing at EMTAS. The new cards will be printed with space to add something personal, special to each child. All the EMTAS B-ELSAs will be able to give them to the children they've worked with.

The above conversation outlines some of the challenges associated with accessing B-ELSA support for children from Ukraine and some of the benefits – for the children, for their peers and for the adults around them. It illustrates how one school has added B-ELSA support to their work with Ukrainian children and their families, developing a healing environment in which the children can begin to recover from the trauma they've experienced. To find out more about working with refugee children and to access various free resources, including 'Bear us in Mind', mentioned by Olha, see [Course: Asylum Seeker & Refugee Support \(hants.gov.uk\)](https://www.hants.gov.uk/courses/asylum-seeker-refugee-support)