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Service-Provider Virtual Exchange as a Viable Alternative to Face-to-Face Speaking Practice: Data From Second- and Third-Year Russian Learners

LIUDMILA KLIMANOVA, VALENTINA VINOKUROVA

1. Introduction
Building a working fluency in a second language (L2) begins with learning to understand and communicate ideas in authentic communicative situations. With this goal in mind, language instruction in L2 speaking must provide opportunities for learners to practice (1) using language in a range of situations and contexts likely to be encountered in the target culture; (2) carrying out a range of interpersonal tasks; and (3) expressing personal meaning as early as possible (Omaggio Hadley 2001). The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many of these established classroom practices in language departments, leaving language learners with limited opportunities for practicing interpersonal speaking skills in the L2 (Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova 2020). Unsurprisingly, in the context of emergency remote teaching during the pandemic, many language instructors identified the need to provide learners with ample opportunities to practice communication as their biggest challenge.

While common in other disciplines and fairly new in foreign language instruction (O’Dowd 2018), service-provider virtual exchange (SPVE or SPVEs) platforms may be one possible solution to this challenge. SPVEs were gaining popularity in world language programs in universities and high schools even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Various for-profit companies, such as Conversifi, Boomalang, TalkAbroad, iTalki, and LinguaMeeting proposed a way of enriching students’ language learning experience by offering paid videoconferencing sessions with a native-speaking (NS) coach at the students’ convenience. After the transition to online teaching during the pandemic, SPVEs were re-envisioned and re-purposed as an alternative to some of the classroom speaking practice that was no longer possible due to remote teaching.

The difference between SPVEs and reciprocal (learner-to-learner) virtual exchanges is that NS coaches are trained and supervised by a service provider (Echevarría 2019). Although often the same age as
their non-native-speaking interlocutors, SPVE tutors have an economic incentive to work with learners because the company pays them for their services. Additionally, instructors using SPVE avoid the challenges of planning class-to-class partnerships. Finally, SPVE companies provide access to stable Internet platforms, trained tutors, and technical support. Comparing SPVEs to traditional virtual exchanges, Tecedor and Vasseur (2020) summarize the benefits of SPVEs as follows: “(1) SPVEs do not require high levels of logistical and technical involvement on the part of the instructor; (2) they eliminate the interinstitutional curricular imbalances; (3) they allow students to focus exclusively on the development of their L2 (as they are not required to speak their L1 to their interlocutor); and (4) they do not require training students on how to provide appropriate, sensitive feedback to their interlocutor” (5).

In addition to organizational benefits, SPVE has potential for enhancing language skills. Research shows that regular videoconferencing with NS peers - a key format of SPVE - may improve speaking ability (Saito and Akiyama 2017) and foster intercultural competence (Tecedor and Vasseur 2020). The research on SPVEs, however, is scarce and, to our knowledge, there is no research on the use of SPVEs in Russian language programs, particularly, as an online alternative to classroom speaking practice. To address this gap, the present study set out to investigate the learning opportunities that SPVEs can offer to Russian learners in the wake of the transition to emergency remote course delivery. In particular, we use a mixed-methods approach to analyze the structural and interactional features of SPVE sessions and triangulate these findings with the data on learners’ beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions regarding the use of SPVE as a learning activity. This investigation is guided by the following research questions:

(1) How are SPVE sessions structured in terms of student and tutor speaking time, turn-taking, and participant roles?
(2) How do students and tutors negotiate meaning in instances of miscommunication in SPVE sessions?
(3) How did Russian 2nd- and 3rd-year learners perceive SPVEs as an instrument for developing speaking proficiency in the time of emergency remote teaching during the COVID pandemic, and what attitudes and belief systems had an impact on their judgement?

2. Theoretical underpinnings
To understand how SPVE sessions may be beneficial for developing L2
speaking skills, let us turn to acquisition theories. In this section, we will consider the theoretical considerations underlying the acquisition of L2 speaking and draw on existing research on SPVEs to identify the areas of L2 ability that were found to be most affected by synchronous voice interactions with native speakers.

2.1. Acquisition of L2 speaking and L2 oral proficiency
As it consists of acts of communication, L2 speaking ability involves the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning (Savignon 1998). In language teaching and assessment, this ability is closely connected to the notion of oral proficiency, the ability to speak a language in unrehearsed situations. Oral proficiency is described by a set of benchmarks or learning targets identified for each level of language ability, including the length and type of produced oral text, communicative functions, a range and depth of vocabulary, and the degree of accuracy that a speaker can maintain in spontaneous conversation (American Councils for the Teaching of Foreign Languages). These components of oral proficiency constitute instructional targets for language instructors.

From the interactionist perspective (Gass and Mackey, 2007), teaching speaking begins with providing learners with “comprehensible input” (Krashen 1985), or linguistic data at or slightly above their level of understanding. This way, students can understand linguistic elements with the help of contextual and interactional cues, leading to “intake” (Long 1983), and produce context-appropriate and meaningful utterances, or “output” (Swain 1985). Input needs to be both comprehensible and meaningful for form–meaning connections to happen (Lee and VanPatten 2003, 27). To become comprehensible, input can be modified through the use of strategies for negotiating meaning (e.g., requests for repetition, clarification requests, recasts, confirmation checks, or code-switching) to facilitate intake. In other words, speakers adjust their linguistic output to make themselves comprehensible and hearers negotiate the flow and quality of input to facilitate meaningful interaction. This process was termed negotiation of meaning (NoM) and found to be instrumental in developing communicative competence in the L2 (Varonis and Gass 1985, VanPatten 2004).

These principles of language processing in interaction and NoM were applied and tested in computer-mediated contexts (Chapelle 1997). More recent findings suggest that input processing and NoM occur in computer-mediated communication to the same degree as in in-person communication, resulting in the improvement of syntactic, pragmatic, and
intercultural competencies and potentially building greater confidence in using the L2 in other formats of communication (see Chapelle 2005 for a meta-analysis).

2.2. Negotiation of meaning as evidence of oral proficiency development in videoconferencing

Despite the lack of research, it can be proposed that SPVEs have many of the same affordances that face-to-face classroom practice and traditional virtual exchanges do for developing language proficiency. As such, such exchanges present opportunities for negotiating meaning and form (Saito and Akiyama 2017, 47), which may lead to increases in oral proficiency (Champakaew and Pencingkarn 2014). Saito and Akiyama (2017), for instance, propose that videoconferencing allows speakers to learn through trigger-feedback-uptake sequences, where one speaker’s problematic utterance can trigger feedback from the hearer through a negotiation strategy and lead to the uptake of this feedback by the speaker (54).

Recent studies of NoM in virtual exchange have focused on identifying specific strategies (Clavel-Arroittia 2019, Van Der Zwaard and Bannink 2020), exploring the effectiveness of such strategies (Bower and Kawaguchi 2011, Cordero and Leralta 2020), comparing strategies used in text/chat- and video-based exchanges (Van Der Zwaard and Bannink 2014, Van Der Zwaard and Bannink 2016), and analyzing the use of multimodal affordances of videoconferencing for negotiating meaning (Satar 2016; Lee, Hampel, and Kukulska-Hulme 2019). Their overall findings suggest that in videoconferencing, students rely on voice, text, image, gesture, and facial expression to ensure mutual comprehension. However, Van der Zwaard and Bannink (2014) note that the video component can be face-threatening, as learners may find themselves torn between the unwillingness to admit their inability to understand their native-speaking partners and the need to engage in NoM to complete their learning task (140). Threats to face seem to guide the preference for specific strategies for negotiating meaning, with learners opting for less direct ways of demonstrating or resolving misunderstandings (Cordero and Leralta 2020). These findings are relevant in learner-to-learner exchanges; however, their validity needs to be examined in the context of SPVEs.

2.3. (Service-provider) virtual exchange

Virtual exchange is typically defined as a pedagogical instrument “connecting language learners in pedagogically structured interaction and collaboration” (Dooly and O’Dowd 2018, 14). In the field of L2
teaching, such exchanges involve two groups of students, where each group consists of native speakers of the target language of the other group. Usually, students spend half of their exchange time speaking in L1, and half speaking in L2. Various studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of virtual exchanges for improving speaking skills (Kinginger 1998; Satar and Özdener 2008; Lin 2015; Akiyama and Saito 2016; Lenkaitis 2020), and producing affective gains (Satar and Özdener 2008; Jauregi et al. 2012; Klimanova and Vinokurova 2020).

Given the differences between the “traditional” virtual exchange and SPVE, these findings, however, are not directly transferable to the SPVE context and more research is needed to examine the effects of SPVE videoconferencing on L2 development. However, due to the recent appearance of SPVEs on the market, only a handful of empirical investigations have examined their utility. Of the few studies that have been published on SPVEs to date, Marull and Kumar’s study (2020) focused on task design and the implementation of such exchanges in a Spanish language course. Tecedor and Vasseur (2020) discussed how task design for SPVE sessions can facilitate specifically the development of intercultural competence. Finally, Sama and Wu (2019) investigated the efficacy of SPVEs in developing oral proficiency and fostering self-confidence. The results of these studies suggest that SPVEs can be effective for developing oral proficiency and that learner experiences with SPVEs tend to be positive, with students reporting perceived gains in language skills, intercultural competence, and confidence to speak their L2 (Sama and Wu 2019; Marull and Kumar 2020; Tecedor and Vasseur 2020). Still, more research is needed to make definitive conclusions about the efficacy of SPVEs for language learning.

From the teaching perspective, Echevarría (2019) found that SPVEs are much easier to implement for the instructor than traditional intercultural virtual exchanges and that they effectively solve the issue of unreliable partners. At the same time, SPVEs are transactional, while telecollaboration is purely collaborative. Echevarría (2019) also conceded that because of SPVE tutor training, these sessions may resemble classroom talk rather than natural conversation (176). Tutors are typically instructed to speak slowly, repeat, rephrase, and simplify their speech. Still, while tutors’ language may thus not be fully natural to offer an authentic conversation with a native speaker, SPVE “remains conducive to language acquisition and thus retains a high level of language learning potential – especially at the Intermediate-level of proficiency – by affording learners optimal conditions and freedom from the time pressure of a normally-
paced conversation so that they may concentrate on the language that they must process and produce” (176). This format allows students to build self-esteem precisely because of tutors’ ability to adjust their language.

2.4. Learners’ attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions

The efficacy of innovative class activities, such as SPVEs, is often dependent on how learners perceive them as instruments of learning. Foreign language teachers and learners have been found to have diverse ideas about what effective language teaching is (Brown 2009). Previous studies show that learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs (APB) have a significant impact on how learners engage in L2 communicative activities (Yashima 2009). While all three relate to L2 learners’ experience with language use, each signals a unique set of observable and non-observable evidence that manifests itself in reactions towards a particular learning context. More specifically, attitudes are reflected in learners’ behavior based on their understanding of an ideal language learning situation. Perceptions are how learners make sense of themselves in and react to a learning situation. Finally, learner beliefs constitute a deeply rooted understanding of oneself as an L2 learner (see Wesely 2012 for a detailed discussion of these constructs). Attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs affect learners’ motivation and their L2 willingness to communicate (Kubanyiova and Yue 2019) and L2 willingness to engage (Dörnyei 2009, Sert 2015), and may cause anxiety toward L2 use. This anxiety can make language learners unreceptive to comprehensible input, raising their “affective filter” (Krashen 1985) and inhibiting language progress (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986, 30).

When it comes to SPVEs, the involvement of native speakers and unfamiliar learning contexts combined with low proficiency in the target language may exacerbate learners’ anxiety and hinder their processing of input. Drawing on L2 learners’ attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs may add rich qualitative data to the understanding of SPVE as a medium for L2 speaking development, particularly in unprecedented educational situations, such as the COVID-19 emergency transition to remote teaching in Spring 2020, which was the context of this research study.

3. The study

3.1. Participants and context

The present study reports on the experiences of two groups of Russian learners from a public university in the United States. The first group consisted of two sections of an intermediate Russian language course (n=35) (second year of instruction, first semester), and the second group
included Russian learners in an advanced Russian course (n=17) (third year of instruction, first semester). The regular section of the intermediate course met four times a week for 50 minutes via Zoom, and the hybrid section met twice a week for 50 minutes. The advanced course met twice a week for 75 minutes, also via Zoom.

The Zoom teaching modality was implemented as an alternative to face-to-face instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, both courses followed a curriculum standardized for the second and third year of Russian language instruction and based on the ACTFL proficiency benchmarks for Intermediate and Advanced Level learners (ACTFL 2012). Both courses emphasized speaking proficiency as one of the primary learning objectives. This orientation was reflected in the course schedule, which included two to three oral examinations and weekly conversation practice with course instructors.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the program to transition to remote teaching mid-semester in the spring of 2020, and continue with remote modality in the fall of 2020, conversation practice was replaced with bi-weekly videoconferencing sessions with a Russian (NS) tutor administered by LinguaMeeting, an SPVE platform based in the United States. SPVE packages were included in the list of required course materials, and were purchased by students at the university bookstore or via the LinguaMeeting online platform. To offset the overall cost of course materials in each course, the language textbook in the third year was replaced by a free electronic copy provided by the University Library via the course management system. In the second year, students were asked to purchase a cheaper version of the textbook package. Each SPVE package ($35) offered six 30-minute speaking sessions with NS tutors which were scheduled evenly over the period of 15 weeks (one semester). Learners met with native Russian speaking tutors in small groups (1-3 students per group) for 30 minutes. Sessions with LinguaMeeting tutors took place outside of class meeting times and were scheduled by students at their convenience.

The two tutors employed by LinguaMeeting for these sections were Russian students at a private college in Moscow, Russia. During the exchange, one tutor was residing in Mexico City for a semester abroad, and the other was based in Moscow. Both tutors were in their early 20s. Following the training session with LinguaMeeting staff, both tutors were encouraged to converse solely in Russian during SPVE sessions and resort to English only when communication broke down and repetition and rephrasing were not effective. For each session, course instructors prepared
a list of questions and discussion prompts, which were shared with tutors and students in advance. Students were not required to prepare for SPVE sessions, but they were able to consult questions and prompts if needed (see Appendix A for a sample prompt). Prompts were based on the themes and the vocabulary that were covered in class in the two weeks preceding each session, but tutors could modify questions as they saw fit. While learners could choose tutors and change meeting times, most students met with the same tutor for all six sessions, which contributed to building relationships between tutors and learners.

3.2. Method and data collection
This study used multiple data sources to investigate the nature of SPVEs as an alternative to face-to-face speaking practice in college-level Russian language courses. First, we examined the interactional structure of SPVE sessions and overlay it on the construct of L2 speaking proficiency. Our analysis of interactional structure focuses on student and tutor speaking time, the type of discourse produced (e.g., individual words, sentences, strings of sentences, simple paragraphs, or extended discourse), and communicative functions (e.g., asking and answering questions, reporting a current event, describing a place or object, or presenting an argument).

The second line of inquiry focused on identifying instances of negotiation of meaning and examining students’ and tutors’ prevalent strategies. We conducted an exploratory analysis of data to test and refine Renner’s (2017) categorization of strategies for negotiation of meaning. This preliminary analysis called for the adoption of four of Renner’s (2017) categories: Clarification Requests, Confirmation Checks, Requests for Repetition, and Requests for Help. One more of her categories - Comprehension Checks - was refined based on the data and a new category - Confirmation Offers - was introduced to respond to the patterns found in our data. These categories were operationalized as follows:

1. Clarification Requests: moves by which a speaker stated their non-understanding and sought assistance through questions or statements such as “I don’t understand.”
2. Confirmation Checks: moves by which a hearer ensured that they understood the speaker (for instance, by repeating the speaker’s utterance with a rising intonation).
3. Requests for Repetition: the request to repeat an utterance.
4. Requests for Help: moves by which a speaker requested help from the hearer to formulate their utterance (for instance, requesting translation of a vocabulary item).
(5) Comprehension or Accuracy Checks: moves by which a speaker attempted to determine whether the hearer had understood them (for instance, use of rising intonation in one’s original utterances to elicit a reaction from the hearer).

(6) Confirmation Offers: moves initiated to prevent a misunderstanding before it occurs (for instance, a speaker’s code-switching into English to translate a part of their utterance before any misunderstanding had been indicated by the hearer).

Once these categories had been established, two focal participants were selected to exemplify different patterns of interaction (one participant primarily worked one-on-one with the tutor, while the other worked in a group with two other students) and different learner profiles. Three recorded sessions from various points in the semester (sessions 1, 3, and 6) were analyzed for each participant. We counted the number of NoM sequences, noted whether the negotiation strategy involved a code-switch, and coded each NoM sequence based on the categories operationalized above.

For the third line of inquiry, we examined learners’ attitudes towards SPVEs, including perceived improvement over time and efficacy for language development. Data on learner perceptions were collected via a post-course survey and individual interviews with selected learners from both language levels (Table 1).

Table 1. Student participation in the research instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>HS\L2</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th># Sessions</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>HS*</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gretchen</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>L2**</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>L2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>L2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>L2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>L2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Heritage Speaker (Russian spoken at home); **Russian learner whose L1 is not English.

The survey contained a series of questions and open-ended prompts addressing (1) learners’ attitudes and perceptions; (2) challenges associated with SPVE sessions; and (3) logistical issues. Follow-up semi-structured
interviews targeted individual accounts of SPVE experiences of students from both levels. Six students, four second-year and two third-year Russian learners, were recruited to participate in one-on-one interviews. The multiple sources of data allowed for triangulation, which helped enhance the validity of the findings (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). Other measures taken to confirm validity included searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases, comparing, and contrasting coding categories, obtaining rich data, and using simple descriptive statistics (Maxwell 2005).

4. Results
This section reports on three independent analytical queries and is organized by research question. These three sets of results are then triangulated in the discussion section in the analysis, where the findings from CMC data are integrated with the findings from the qualitative data to outline the pedagogical implications for Russian language instructors (King and Mackey 2016).

4.1. Structure of SPVE sessions and L2 speaking development
Research Question 1. How are SPVE sessions structured in terms of student and tutor speaking time and the proportion of Russian and English use to support L2 speaking development?

Our SPVE sessions typically began with a brief greeting and the introduction of the session’s topic. Tutors used PowerPoint to structure the session: their slides contained questions and prompts as well as their answers, written out on the slides. After the tutor read a question and modeled the answer, they would call on each student to answer the question in their own words. Thus, students were given equal opportunities to participate.

As mentioned earlier, one to three students could sign up for each session. The instructors expected speaking time to be equally distributed among all participants. For instance, in 30-minute sessions with two students and one tutor, the instructors expected that each participant would speak for 10 minutes. In reality, speaking time was typically split approximately in half between the tutor and the students, no matter how many students were present. Based on the recordings, in a session with one tutor and one student, each would get to speak for about 15 minutes. In a session with two or three students and a tutor, the tutor would still speak for 15 minutes, and the other 15 minutes would be split equally among the students. This distribution of speaking time was likely because the tutor was in charge of structuring the turn-taking procedure (calling on
students) as well as acknowledging and evaluating responses (providing corrections, clarifications, approval, affection, and relating to students’ answers). The tutor’s leading role in sustaining the conversation allowed students to process linguistic input and formulate their answers, but also restricted all interactions to the initiation-response-evaluation sequence and thus resembled classroom talk rather than natural conversation (Echevarría 2019, 176).

The length of students’ responses varied from ellipticals to short paragraphs (of up to eight sentences), depending on the topic and the type of question posed by the tutor. As may be expected, students produced more language on familiar topics, and their utterances were longer when the question was designed to elicit a narrative rather than a one-sentence answer (e.g., “Describe the house you grew up in” vs. “When will you graduate from the university?”). Even though (drawing on the ACTFL proficiency descriptors for Intermediate and Advanced Levels) we were tempted to look for the development of a paragraph or at least for consistent production of a string of sentences, it is important to remember that these tutoring sessions were framed as informal conversations with native speakers. Students were not coached to produce paragraphs and they were evaluated on their attendance records rather than the quality of the language produced in LinguaMeetings. For this reason, instead of focusing on evaluating students’ oral proficiency, the next section focuses on the opportunities that the LinguaMeeting platform presents for developing strategies for avoiding and repairing miscommunication.

4.2. Code-switching, negotiation of meaning, and interactional sequences in SPVEs

**Research Question 2.** How did students and tutors negotiate for meaning in instances of miscommunication in SPVE sessions?

This section reports on the instances of NoM in the tutoring sessions. The recorded sessions of two focal participants (Frank and Michael, 3rd year) were coded using the categories of NoM developed from Renner (2017). These students were selected because of the striking differences in their experiences with negotiating meaning. The contrast between these two students provides a more accurate portrayal of the LinguaMeeting experience. The following findings report the proportion of Russian-English use for negotiating meaning and describe the strategies used by Frank, Michael, and their tutors.
Figure 1 reports the number of NoM sequences in the three LinguaMeeting sessions analyzed for Frank and his tutor and the proportion of Russian and English use in the initiation of such sequences. For most of his sessions, Frank and his tutor worked in a one-on-one format, with a second student joining in only for Session 6. This format seems to have enabled – or even made necessary – frequent negotiation of meaning. Both Frank and his tutor preferred to use Russian to arrive at a mutual understanding, although both occasionally used English as well.

The specific strategies for negotiating meaning that were used by Frank and his tutor are reported in Figure 2.

Frank’s most frequently utilized strategy was Comprehension/Accuracy Checks. This strategy is proactive in that it ensures comprehension before the hearer indicates an issue. Frank typically used rising intonation to elicit feedback from the tutor and to confirm that his utterances were correct and understandable. For instance, speaking about his date of birth, Frank said: “Я родился семнадцати? марта?” (I was born of the seventeen? Of March?) and paused, allowing the tutor to provide feedback. Frank’s second most-used strategy was Requests for Help. This strategy is similarly proactive, allowing him to seek help in formulating his answer. For instance, speaking about one of his university majors, Frank asked “Как по-русски machine learning?” (“How do you say ’machine learning’ in Russian?”), explicitly requesting the tutor’s help in formulating an understandable utterance. Frank’s third most-relied on strategy was Clarification Requests which took place without code-switching into English, using phrases such as “Что?” (“What?”) or “Я не понимаю” (“I don’t understand”).
Frank’s tutor relied on a variety of strategies to clarify either her own or Frank’s words. In all three sessions, the tutor used Comprehension Checks to ensure that Frank could follow her speech. For example, whenever her utterance appeared too complex, she would follow it up with a Comprehension Check as follows: “Мы изучаем очень глубоко все детали, которые нужны для формирования успешного бизнеса. Ты понимаешь?” (“We study in depth all the details that are necessary to establish a successful business. Do you understand?”).

The following excerpt provides examples of two other strategies commonly used by Frank’s tutor - Confirmation Checks and Clarification Requests:

Tutor: Считаешь ли ты обязательным высшее образование, и нужно ли оно?

*Do you think higher education is something everyone must have and is it necessary?*

Frank: Если человека нет высший образование, его uh его uh как это warped?

*If a person doesn’t have higher education, his uh his uh what is warped?*

Tutor: Warped?

Frank: Я не знаю… Он не может видеть мир как… классный? Maybe?

*I don’t know… He can’t see the world as… cool? Maybe?*
Tutor: Uhhh so, I’m trying to understand you, you were saying that if a person doesn’t have a degree, he won’t see the world like other people see?”
Frank: Да.
Yes
Tutor: Мхм, я с тобой согласна.
Mhm, I agree with you.

As demonstrated in this example, in sessions with Frank, Clarification Requests could extend not only to negotiating Frank’s use of Russian, but also his use of English. Note how the tutor repeats the word “warped” with a rising intonation to elicit a clarification from Frank. The tutor’s use of Confirmation Checks also often involved a switch into English. For instance, in the example above, after Frank explains why higher education is necessary, the tutor uses English to confirm whether she had understood his point and, having confirmed it, switches back to Russian to express her agreement.

It can be argued that Frank and his tutor’s use of NoM strategies and code-switching were motivated by Frank’s proficiency level and his confidence in speaking Russian. Given that the student had difficulty formulating sentences and retrieving key vocabulary items (as evidenced by the high frequency of Requests for Help), the tutor had to rely on more explicit ways of ensuring understanding, such as switching directly into English.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 3. Negotiation of meaning and code-switching (Michael)
Now let us compare Frank’s experience to the experience that Michael had in his sessions. The overall use of negotiation of meaning in Michael’s sessions is presented in Figure 3. Note the difference in scale between Frank’s and Michael’s graphs (the overall number of NoMs for Frank = 73; for Michael = 4).

Unlike Frank, Michael always worked in a group with two other students from his course. While it may be easy to assume that this format provided fewer opportunities for negotiating meaning (as it was necessary to provide time for all three students to respond to each question), a glance at Michael’s recorded sessions proves otherwise: Michael’s partners did engage in many NoM sequences. Michael’s answers, on the other hand, were well-formulated and typically fully answered the prompt. For example, consider the following excerpt:

Tutor: Считаешь ли ты обязательным высшее образование, и нужно ли оно?
Do you think higher education is something everyone must have and is it necessary?

Michael: Я знаю, что есть карьеры, на котором- которых тебе нужно получить степень бакалавра, но я ещё думаю, что это важно, потому что высшее образование - это не только образование, это стать лучшим человеком.
I know that there are careers where you need to get a bachelor’s degree, but I also think that it is important, because higher education is not just education, it is becoming a better person.

Tutor: Хорошее замечание, спасибо!
Good note, thank you!

It is noteworthy that Michael spoke with confidence, at a natural pace. He was not lacking vocabulary, he had control of the “который” (“that”) clause: he did not need Requests for Help and did not use Comprehension Checks, which conveys his confidence in his command of the Russian language. Given that his answer was clear, the tutor, too, did not need to negotiate meaning and was able to acknowledge Michael’s contribution and move on.

Although, as has been pointed out above, Michael did not systematically engage in NoM, Figure 4 presents the strategies that were used by him and his tutor for comparison with Frank’s experiences of NoM.
Figure 4. Strategies for negotiation of meaning (Michael)
CR = clarification request; CC = confirmation check; RR = request for repetition; RH = request for help; ComAC = comprehension/accuracy check; ComC = comprehension check; CO = comprehension offer

As noted above, Michael engaged in NoM very rarely. As such, there is not much to say about his use of various strategies, except that he used four different strategies in the four times that he did need to negotiate meaning. It can be extrapolated (tentatively) that Michael did not have a preference for one single strategy and instead relied on context to decide how to negotiate meaning. In addition, note that like Michael, the tutor uses NoM strategies very rarely, which suggests that Michael was able to make himself understood. The lack of instances of NoM in Michael’s case thus points to a high level of comprehension between him and his tutor.

The vastly different NoM profiles of these two learners from the same level point to a certain flexibility of SPVEs. In these sessions, students and tutors have plentiful opportunities for negotiating meaning, and they align with each other and adjust their participation and negotiation of meaning to each other’s conversational styles and needs. In Frank’s case, successful communication involved such work: Frank and his tutor actively supplemented gaps in his knowledge and made sure that they could understand one another. In Michael’s case, negotiation of meaning was not necessary, and it was instead supplemented with follow-up questions, which extended the conversation. Furthermore, the fact that tutors were proficient in English allowed them to use this language as a resource.
to accommodate less proficient students and focus on the task at hand whenever negotiating meaning in Russian became difficult or inefficient.

4.3. Students’ attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs (APB) about SPVEs

Research Question 3. How did Russian 2nd- and 3rd-year learners perceive SPVEs as an instrument for developing speaking proficiency in the time of emergency remote teaching during the COVID pandemic, and what attitudes and belief systems had an impact on their judgement?

For this section, we triangulated the data obtained from the post-semester survey and the interviews with focal students to examine student perceptions of LinguaMeeting as an instrument for developing oral production skills.

Of the entire group (n=52), 12 students from the intermediate sections and 16 students from the advanced section participated in the post-semester survey (55%). Students were asked a series of questions addressing APB, challenges associated with SPVE sessions, and logistical issues related to scheduling, length, and frequency of sessions. Open-ended responses were coded by theme, and percentages were calculated based on the frequency with which each topic was discussed in open-ended responses. Follow-up interviews targeted students’ individual accounts of SPVE sessions and were structured around the themes identified in the survey data. Transcripts were coded using the concept coding approach and iterative and recursive content analysis (Saldaña 2021), drawing the definitions of the key concepts from current literature. First, the researchers read the transcripts independently to identify participants’ APB and emerging themes. Then, they compared codes and coding categories, and selected six recurring themes for further analysis. The following coding categories have emerged from the analysis of the qualitative datasets: (1) learners’ self-reported learning outcomes and perceived impact; (2) continuity in the learning experience; (3) tutor identity; (4) affective factors and foreign language anxiety associated with SPVEs; (5) students’ general beliefs about foreign language learning; and (6) logistical issues interfering with the development of oral proficiency. These themes are described in greater detail in the following sections.

4.3.1. Learners’ self-evaluation and perceived impact

The first set of questions addressed self-reported learning outcomes from participating in SPVEs. Among the most improved skills, learners in both groups noted “conversation skills,” “listening comprehension skills,” and
“pronunciation and intonation.” The least improved area was the “range and depth of Russian vocabulary” (Table 2). In response to the open-ended question regarding one skill that showed the most significant improvement, learners almost unanimously named spontaneity in conversation and improved listening comprehension. Spontaneity was cited as the most valuable in connection to the ability to create with language (ACTFL Intermediate Level): to think on one’s feet, use language with greater automaticity, and express ideas using familiar language. According to the participants: “[The most affected language skill was] coming up with what to say automatically, compared to most assignments, which I have a lot of time to think about generally” and “the ability to think on my feet and figure out ways to say what I want, even if I don't know the particular words for it.”

Table 2. Survey question: How did your participation in LinguaMeeting contribute to your Russian learning? Rate your skills in terms of improvement over time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Skill</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Somewhat improved</th>
<th>Improved</th>
<th>Significantly Improved</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening comprehension skills</td>
<td>10.71% 3</td>
<td>28.57% 8</td>
<td>57.14% 16</td>
<td>3.57% 1</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range &amp; depth of vocabulary</td>
<td>14.29% 4</td>
<td>46.43% 13</td>
<td>35.71% 10</td>
<td>3.57% 1</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of grammar in spontaneous</td>
<td>14.29% 4</td>
<td>28.57% 8</td>
<td>50.00% 14</td>
<td>7.14% 2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation and intonation</td>
<td>10.71% 3</td>
<td>28.57% 8</td>
<td>53.57% 15</td>
<td>7.14% 2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation skills</td>
<td>17.86% 5</td>
<td>14.29% 4</td>
<td>64.29% 18</td>
<td>3.57% 1</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learners were also asked to evaluate the impact of LinguaMeeting sessions on their motivation to study Russian and engage with Russian people and culture on the scale from “no change” to “significantly improved.” The responses to this question varied highly across two levels, with the impact on attitudes toward Russia and Russian people being rated somewhat lower than other benefits (Table 3). Among positive factors, many students noted an “increased confidence when speaking Russian to strangers” and “confidence speaking in Russian in Zoom class,” followed by “increased motivation to continue with Russian study” in future semesters.
Table 3. Survey question: How did your participation in LinguaMeeting contribute to your motivation to study Russian? Rate your skills and knowledge in terms of improvement over time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact category</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Somewhat improved</th>
<th>Improved</th>
<th>Significantly Improved</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge about Russia and Russian people</td>
<td>28.57% 8</td>
<td>28.57% 8</td>
<td>25.00% 7</td>
<td>17.86% 5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitudes toward Russia and its people</td>
<td>42.86% 12</td>
<td>17.86% 13</td>
<td>25.00% 7</td>
<td>14.29% 4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to continue Russian study</td>
<td>25.00% 7</td>
<td>25.00% 7</td>
<td>25.00% 7</td>
<td>25.00% 7</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to study abroad in Russia</td>
<td>35.71% 10</td>
<td>25.00% 7</td>
<td>17.86% 5</td>
<td>21.43% 6</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence when speaking Russian to strangers</td>
<td>21.43% 6</td>
<td>39.29% 11</td>
<td>32.14% 9</td>
<td>7.14% 2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence when speaking Russian in class</td>
<td>25.00% 7</td>
<td>35.71% 10</td>
<td>32.14% 9</td>
<td>7.14% 2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.2. Continuity in the learning experience

This section of the survey explored learners’ perceptions of their progression in the L2 speaking development from grammar instruction and controlled production in class to semi-authentic conversations with NS tutors in SPVE sessions. Participants described how classwork prepared them for SPVE conversations and what specific components of classwork were particularly instrumental for scaffolding SPVE sessions.

Overall, 85% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that classwork prepared them adequately for SPVE sessions. However, when compared across two language levels, learners in the 3rd-year group showed greater variability in responses, as shown by the larger standard deviation
in this group (M=2.43; SD=.73) compared to (M=2.00; SD =.0) in the regular 2nd-year section and (M=1.67; SD=.47) in the hybrid 2nd-year section. This variability can be explained by the complexity of prompts (e.g., describe a place; tell a story; present a simple argument) presented to 3rd-year learners during SPVE sessions. Participants in the 2nd-year group almost unanimously named grammar, vocabulary, and communicative activities covered in class meetings as their support systems for successful engagement in SPVEs. As one participant wrote: “it always seemed as though I had just gone over the topics in class and so I was well prepared for the meeting.” At the same time, students whose SPVE session was scheduled on the first week of the bi-weekly SPVE cycle felt disadvantaged because they typically began to learn the new material in the same week that their session was held. A similar sentiment was expressed by several 3rd-year learners. Since speaking prompts in the 3rd-year group extended to broader social and cultural issues requiring a solid grasp of more formal vocabulary and syntax (e.g., relative clauses, conditional sentences), thematic vocabulary was listed as the main predictor of productive communication in SPVEs – “I felt like I had a decent vocabulary from class and was able to express ideas using this vocabulary during the LinguaMeetings.” Unlike 2nd-year learners, 3rd-year learners did not consider grammar a necessary component of class preparation for SPVEs.

4.3.3. Tutor identity

Although tutor identity was not singled out in the survey as a separate impact factor, more than half of survey respondents (62%) noted that communicating with NS tutors was the most enjoyable component of SPVEs. Tutor identity was linked to (a) engagement in naturally occurring conversation; (b) low stress explained by the young age of tutors and their no-judgment approach; (c) communication “in Russian only”; (d) acquisition of informal vocabulary; and (e) first-hand experience with Russia “right now.” Tutor identity was often described in connection to the naturalness of conversation and authentic language use in “a controlled environment” but was also linked to increased foreign language anxiety.
Table 4. Perceptions of interaction in SPVE linked to tutor identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding categorization</th>
<th>Examples from coded survey data (open-ended responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) engagement in naturally occurring conversation</td>
<td>“The conversations felt pretty natural, which was beneficial, I think.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) low stress explained by young age of tutors</td>
<td>“Being able to speak with a native speaker in a low stress but still high expectation environment”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) communication in Russian only</td>
<td>“The most enjoyable and rewarding part of the LinguaMeeting experience was being able to communicate with native speaker and have them understand me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) acquisition of informal vocabulary and natural language use</td>
<td>“It was interesting to speak to a native speaker who used conversational slang.” “It was nice to learn new vocabulary from native speakers and to get to practice using it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) a first-hand experience with Russia “right now”</td>
<td>“Being able to find similarities in taste and interest with a native Russian speaker of my age.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.4. Affective factors and foreign language anxiety associated with SPVEs

Reports of L2 anxiety were linked to (1) the number of learners in each session; (2) the identity of tutors; and (3) anticipated awkwardness caused by the possibility of a communication breakdown. Several learners in both levels noted the presence of Russian heritage speakers in LinguaMeeting sessions as inhibiting their willingness to communicate [L2WTC] (Kubanyiova and Yue 2019). As one learner noted, “I usually had a lot of anxiety going into the [SPVE] meetings because I was always with heritage speakers - during the sessions, I would get very confused because they would speak to the instructor using vocabulary I did not know, which she [tutor] would then expect from me.” Carol from the 2nd-year group, who did not connect with the personality of her tutor, was particularly stressed and described her whole experience as “nerve-racking” because she felt uncomfortable engaging in conversations with a stranger who was also a native speaker of a language she could not speak confidently. Jeremy from Carol’s section
used the same attribute – “nerve-racking” – to convey the angst that preceded each of his SPVE sessions.

The fact that Carol’s sessions were one-on-one with the tutor made her even more anxious: “It was just me and the tutor which added some extra stress on me because I was definitely not getting what she was saying most of the time.” The learners from the 3rd-year group who had one-on-one sessions with SPVE tutors, however, reported that they felt less stressed in one-on-one sessions compared to the meetings where they were joined by one or two other students from their class. Michael (3rd-year), for example, noted:

I had two [sessions] where I had other people, and that was a little more stressful but not too bad… I had to respond to what they [the tutors] were saying and at the same time respond to the other person and it was a little more stressful, I guess, I don’t know how exactly… I think it was just being judged, but sort of like having someone else in the class watching me struggle with speaking Russian.

As post-semester interviews took place at the beginning of the second semester of SPVE, all six interviewees reported increased self-confidence and ease with which they could now communicate with native speaking tutors, noting a sense of pride and achievement, and demonstrating evidence of strengthened ability to create with language (ACTFL Intermediate Level) and deal with complications in a communicative situation (ACTFL Advanced Level). For example, consider the following excerpt from Frank’s interview:

I was impressed by my ability to say something, explain something, and I missed the word, and I was able to find my way around it and was able to understand what I was trying to say, or I was able to fully flesh out what I was trying to say.

4.3.5. Students’ beliefs about foreign language learning
To gauge deeply-rooted beliefs and attitudes toward SVPE and language learning in general, the data from the survey responses were used as a springboard for in-depth questioning about individual learning experiences. Interviewees were first asked to describe their favorite or preferred in-class activity. Then, they were asked whether they believed if SPVE alone would be sufficient to learn to speak a foreign language. Finally, participants’ general beliefs about foreign language learning were elicited through a series of questions on effective strategies for L2 learning.

One of the striking findings in this line of inquiry was the fact that participants’ desired competency in Russian was not one they wanted to
practice during class activities. All but one focal participant named grammar activities and drills as their preferred learning activity in class and speaking or writing fluency as their desired learning outcome (Table 5).

Table 5. Learners’ attitudes and beliefs about learning to speak Russian (L2) via SPVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Julie (2)</th>
<th>Gretchen (2)</th>
<th>Carol (2)</th>
<th>Jeremy (2)</th>
<th>Frank (3)</th>
<th>Michael (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>desired skill</td>
<td>Speaking fluency</td>
<td>speaking fluency</td>
<td>conversation listening</td>
<td>writing reading</td>
<td>writing reading</td>
<td>speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preferred class activity</td>
<td>whole group activities</td>
<td>grammar activities</td>
<td>grammar, test study guides</td>
<td>grammar exercises</td>
<td>grammar drills</td>
<td>grammar activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPVE as a tool to learn L2</td>
<td>casual, good as additional help, but cannot replace classroom instruction</td>
<td>effective way to practice speaking &amp; vocabulary</td>
<td>a way to connect with other L2 speakers during the pandemic</td>
<td>not as good as speaking practice with the instructor; not the same as speaking to someone in real life</td>
<td>“involved learning” learning how to “get this point across”</td>
<td>effective for learning to participate in a natural conversation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of the interviews also revealed that Russian learners had disparate beliefs and attitudes towards SPVE as (1) a course component; (2) a temporary alternative to out-of-class conversation practice sessions with the instructor; and (3) a language learning activity. All six focal students stated that SPVE sessions helped them improve speaking, reading, and comprehension skills, and indicated that SPVE was a much-needed component of their Russian course during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the artificiality of the SPVE conversation structure, the lack of thematic depth, and the predictability of conversations were cited as factors making SPVE sessions less desirable for speaking practice. Jeremy (2nd year), for example, stated that in-person conversation practice sessions with his course instructor felt more authentic:

The problem I have with LinguaMeeting is the format of it, where they [tutors] usually go through slides, and then they ask you a question, and you give your response; they give their response, they ask some questions you know. And then, like they cut off that topic and move to the next topic. The conversation does not really flow in a natural way and it doesn’t really teach you to have a full conversation... It seems like it just teaches
you to come up with your response, and then it just stops before it really progresses. Whereas in the conversation practices that we have done in the classes with our professors, usually they have one or two prompts that they spend the entire time on. Personally, I think that’s more effective.

Extending the discussion of SPVE to a more general conversation about language learning, Gretchen noted that the conversation in SPVE sessions felt forced because she did not have a personal connection with the tutor: to her, conversation partners should have common interests or a shared affinity, which is not usually the case with SPVE. Michael noted that language cannot be learned entirely through conversation: “[Conversation] is a good way to practice it but I think grammar exercises and vocab exercises and stuff are the fundamentals that you can practice through LinguaMeeting and conversation.” A similar belief was expressed by Carol who stated that, with all the benefits SPVE can bring to the learning process, grammar was more important for learning to speak along with listening to Russian music and news podcasts. For Carol, LinguaMeeting resembled having a private tutor who helps you with your language study. However, Carol was disappointed that her tutor did not know how to explain Russian grammar and vocabulary, which discouraged her from asking questions during her sessions. Frank echoed some of these sentiments stating that learning a language by conversing and immersing in it was helpful but only when one enters this “immersive” context fully prepared in terms of grammar, particularly, the case system.

A distinct set of beliefs was shared by Julie, the only heritage learner in the interview group, who appreciated an opportunity to learn to speak from a native speaker: “In the past, where I learned from a nonnative speaker and I would pronounce certain words differently, my mom would start laughing like “No, that’s not how you say it,” so I definitely like native speakers, that is just my preference” and also “if I’m exposed to a group of people who speak [the] language, it’s just so much easier for me to learn, so I feel like if you surround yourself by people who speak that language it’ll be easier to learn [it].”

4.3.6. Individual learning styles and logistical issues associated with SVPEs

Several questions on the survey targeted various logistical details linked to learners’ experiences with SPVE sessions. Students were asked about their preferred frequency and length of SPVEs, and their experience with the SPVE platform.

The length of SPVE sessions is connected to the concept of “time-on-task,” or the amount of physical time a L2 learner engages with the target
Increasing a learner’s contact time with the foreign language is believed to contribute significantly to oral proficiency learning outcomes (Omaggio Hadley 2001; Rifkin 2003). According to 73% of the participants, 30-minute biweekly sessions in groups of 2-3 students were an adequate arrangement for Fall 2020. However, students’ responses varied when they were asked whether they wished to continue with the same set-up in the following semester (Table 6). About a half of the respondents felt that one-on-one meetings can be more beneficial than small group sessions, while other students wanted to continue with group sessions on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis. This variability in learners’ responses may be explained by their sense of agency and the belief systems underlying their individual learning styles and objectives. Their first experience with SPVE informed their understanding of their individual best learning routine, and motivated them to re-evaluate their participation in light of what they felt made SPVE sessions effective for their own learning.

Table 6. What is your preference for your LinguaMeeting schedule next semester? Choose one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Length and Format of SPVE sessions</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30-minute group meeting (with 2 other students) every week</td>
<td>19.23% 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-minute group meeting (with 2 other students) every other week (bi-weekly)</td>
<td>26.92% 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-minute individual meeting with a tutor every week</td>
<td>15.38% 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-minute individual meeting with a tutor every other week (bi-weekly)</td>
<td>26.92% 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-minute group meeting with a tutor 2-3 times a semester</td>
<td>7.69% 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-minute individual meeting with a tutor 2-3 times a semester</td>
<td>3.85% 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were also asked about pricing and the amount they were willing to pay for SPVEs in future semesters. 36% of the participants were fully satisfied with the rate of $5 for one small-group session, while 40% indicated that they were willing to pay a larger fee to have individual sessions with a tutor. Finally, 24% of the respondents stated that they preferred to have an alternative (non-SPVE) weekly speaking practice. While this variation may be due to socio-economic variables, individual
learning styles, beliefs, and experienced anxiety may have contributed to these diverse preferences.

5. Discussion
Given the lack of research on L2 speaking development in SPVE, this study took an unconventional approach by examining both the interactional features of SPVE sessions and L2 learners’ perceptions of these features as conditions for language learning. This approach was grounded in two frameworks: one that explains language learning through interaction and negotiation of meaning and one that draws on the notion of discourse features and communicative functions, such as ask and answer questions, narrate a story, etc. as targets for oral proficiency development (ACTFL 2012). Combining these two distinct epistemological lenses allowed the researchers to triangulate the analysis of SPVE conversations and the analysis of learner perspectives to zero in on the efficacy of SPVEs and develop a comprehensive understanding of SPVEs as a platform for teaching L2 speaking.

The analysis of the structure of SPVE sessions revealed several trends. First, while speaking time was equally split among students in each session, tutors’ speaking time alone constituted half of the session. These findings can be explained by Tecedor and Vasseur’s (2020) characterization of SPVE compared to traditional virtual exchanges: “NSs in SPVE are paid and exchanges do not operate under the same principles of reciprocity and collaboration” (5). Indeed, tutors and students in our sessions were in a hierarchical relationship: tutors assumed the role of session moderators, and students’ role was to simply participate in the conversation.

The predominant pattern of communication was thus “initiation \rightarrow response \rightarrow evaluation” and it was influenced both by the hierarchy of participants’ roles in SPVE sessions and by the prompts prepared by course instructors. By sending tutors the lists of questions and asking them to share their answers, instructors unwittingly contributed to the artificial nature of SPVE conversations: tutors thought that to be effective in their role, they had to complete all of the prompts that they had received. This, in turn, meant that they avoided follow-up questions to save time. From the students’ point of view, the fact that they had to switch from question to question without developing a naturally-flowing conversation contributed to the perceived artificiality of SPVE conversations.

From the instructors’ point of view, on the other hand, this design of prompts was intended to provide a scaffold for a continuous conversation as well as to train the level-specific types of language that
learners are expected to perform (ACTFL 2012). Instructors realized that students and tutors may need time to connect as human beings and may never find shared interests; for this reason, specific prompts and questions were meant to keep the conversation going without awkward pauses. Thus, while free-flowing conversations on a certain topic may feel more authentic, without a structure, conversations could peter out quickly. The design of the prompts additionally had significance in reaching some of the benchmarks of oral proficiency: while prompts in the second year were designed primarily to elicit responses consisting of sentences and strings of sentences, and occasionally simple paragraphs; prompts in the third year encouraged learners to offer extended responses from several sentences to full paragraphs and extended discourse. Communicative functions ranged from answering a short question to producing a narrative and to making and defending an argument. Still, despite the multiple considerations that went into designing these prompts, our data analysis demonstrated flaws in their design. For this reason, we recommend that instructors consider various speech acts when designing prompts for SPVE sessions. For example, sessions can be structured not only as informal conversations, but also as interviews (where students interview their tutors) or debates. For more meaningful integration of SPVE sessions into the curriculum, instructors can ask students to report the results of their interviews in class or to write them up as short papers. Furthermore, when providing instructions to tutors, instructors can highlight the importance of developing topics rather than covering all of the prompts.

Despite these imperfections of prompts, the triangulation of NoM and interview data pointed to both linguistic and affective gains as a result of the LinguaMeeting experience (also see Sama and Wu, 2019). While our detailed analysis of NoM focused on two students with vastly diverse experiences, interview data suggest that no matter how much (or little) students negotiated meaning, those NoM sequences greatly contributed to the development of their L2 speaking skills which then fostered confidence in using Russian. For students, like Frank, who struggled to express themselves, these struggles were highly productive for improving speaking skills. Frank notes:

I think I’ve felt more comfortable using “который” clauses and being able to describe words with more words. [...] Cause you have to use that to get around words you don’t know. I think there was definitely a shift between the first and the last one [LinguaMeeting session] in comfort and confidence, especially I’d get more comfortable speaking.
Thus, instead of feeling upset at the fact that he had to struggle to express himself and to negotiate meaning frequently, Frank eventually felt more confident in his ability to do so. His interview responses suggest that he has learned strategies for resolving misunderstandings and expressing his opinions on topics that were beyond his range of vocabulary. This experience resulted in perceived linguistic and affective gains.

Students like Michael, on the other hand, who rarely had difficulty expressing themselves and felt fairly confident about their speaking ability, experienced greater affective (as opposed to linguistic) gains. For Michael, for instance, misunderstandings – on the rare occasion that they arose – always “got smoothed out instantly,” after a single clarification question. Expectedly, when asked about his biggest area of improvement in terms of his command of the Russian language, Michael answered: “I was definitely more confident. And I could express more intricate ideas, like, beyond just answering a question with just a noun. I feel like I could elaborate more. I think it’s just the confidence from that.” Thus, while Michael did indirectly report noticing linguistic gains, he was more aware of and focused on the affective gains from his LinguaMeeting experience. Like Sama and Wu’s (2019), our findings suggest that while linguistic gains in SPVE settings may vary from student to student, affective gains are almost unavoidable.

Finally, the qualitative analysis of survey results and interviews allowed us to trace the origin of learners’ communicative strategies to their belief systems and attitudes toward SPVE as a mandatory course component. Our findings confirm Brown’s (2009) conclusion that teachers and students often have disparate notions of effective learning, and the intersection of the two sets of beliefs has long-term ramifications for the effectiveness of instruction. In the present study, Russian learners instinctively equated fluency with the acquisition of grammatical structures, which is evidenced in their penchant for discrete-point grammar instruction in the classroom. They did not show a strong belief in SPVE as the bridge to L2 oral proficiency due to its artificiality and scriptedness. Researchers and teaching practitioners thus need to look more closely at Russian learners’ previous experiences with L2 learning, particularly at the pedagogies and assessment instruments in the first year of Russian language instruction, which may establish a deep-seated belief about grammar instruction being the only necessary condition for L2 speaking development.

L2 anxiety caused by SPVE was another important factor for understanding its impact on learners’ self-confidence. While the fact that tutors were native speakers added to the feeling of apprehension (see also Lee 2004), the main source of anxiety reported by the learners came
from seeing SPVE sessions as a space where their L2 speaking skills were tested in front of (often more capable) peers and an NS stranger. Although anxiety was not measured in this study, learners’ reports echoed Satar and Özdener’s (2008) findings that videoconferencing can trigger strong anxiety in less proficient students. The high variation in the preferences for individual or group sessions with an SPVE tutor point to the diverse origins of L2 anxiety among participants: L2 anxiety is an individual phenomenon and it needs to be treated as such when designing SPVE activities. In particular, greater flexibility and choice in the structure and length of sessions may help accommodate individual insecurities and learning styles. Additionally, hierarchical relationships between students and SPVE tutors may have further contributed to anxiety among Russian learners because they were always positioned as respondents and interviewees, and never as moderators or interviewers. Building a more productive space for collaborative work may help strengthen student-tutor connections and equalize tutor and learner roles in SPVEs.

Finally, our findings show that heritage speakers may present a source of anxiety for regular L2 learners in SPVE, and they need to be grouped together for individual small group SPVE sessions. While placing heritage speakers in a special language section may deem impossible in some programs, SPVE may become a place where heritage speakers and their unique learning needs can be accommodated.

6. Conclusion
The current study examined the structural features of SPVE sessions managed by a for-profit provider, LinguaMeeting, and implemented in the 2nd- and 3rd-year Russian courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. SVPE was implemented as an out-of-class activity to replace in-person conversation practice. In addition to interactional data, this study explored students’ belief systems and traced their perceptions and attitudes towards SPVE to their interactional moves and their willingness to communicate in the target language.

It is important to acknowledge that this study has limitations that restrict the generalizability and interpretability of its findings. The principal limitation lies in the exploratory nature of this research. The effects of the pandemic and the rapid transition to remote instruction may have forced Russian learners in this study to consider SPVE as a temporary solution to the sudden lack of opportunities to practice conversation skills and to overlook the benefits of SPVE outside of the pandemic. Examining students’ learning gains from SPVE over a longer period and measuring
their progress with a series of proficiency tests and L2 anxiety instruments may provide more concrete evidence for the impact of SPVE on L2 speaking development. Furthermore, a more thorough quantitative analysis of the interactional dynamics of SPVE may allow researchers to trace learners’ speaking development over time, particularly in L2 oral proficiency descriptors (e.g., the length of utterance, communicative functions, etc.), potentially with a larger number of participants from various levels of Russian instruction. In addition, a conversation-analytic approach could shed light on the artificiality of conversation that was perceived by our participants. Due to limited space, this study reports only a fraction of data on students’ use of English in SPVE, which in itself is an intriguing topic to explore in the era of the multilingual turn in applied linguistics.

More research is needed to understand how translanguage in SPVE may create an ecology where multiple languages are validated and used to navigate meaning-making. Finally, as a paid service, SPVE may add to the overall cost of course materials, and ultimately restrict access to Russian instruction for some underprivileged groups of students. Providing greater flexibility in the choice of packages or offering an alternative assignment to SPVE may be a way to address socio-economic disparities among students in a single section. Overall, SPVE shows great potential for teaching L2 speaking, and may become a new norm in foreign language instruction beyond the pandemic.

Appendix

Sample SPVE prompt

LinguaMeeting – Session 3
Instructions for Tutors (RUSS 300)

Topic – Свободное время, образ жизни

Общие вопросы для обсуждения:

здоровый образ жизни?

Hypotheticals: Куда бы вы хотели поехать на отдых? Если бы у вас были деньги и время, в какую страну вы бы хотели поехать? (practice subjective with БЫ) Что вас привлекает в этой стране? Или в этом месте?

Есть ли у вас какое-нибудь хобби? Чем бы вы хотели заниматься, если бы могли выбрать новое хобби или увлечение? Почему вы хотели бы этим заниматься?

Past tense narration: Расскажите подробно (в деталях) о вашей последней поездке – по работе или в отпуск (на отдых) до пандемии.
Куда вы ездили? Вы ездили в эту поездку с друзьями или с родителями?
Когда (в какое время года) была эта поездка?
Какие интересные места вы посетили?
Что вы делали в этой поездке? (ходили в походы, посещали музеи и исторические места, ходили в ночные клубы, танцевали, ели экзотическую еду в ресторанах, загорали на пляже, занимались рыбалкой или охотой?
Что вам больше всего понравилось в этой поездке?


References


