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# Connection and Tension in First-Year Online Russian

## A Glimpse into Learners' Experiences

### Abstract 1

This article explores the relationship between students' motivation and the online language learning environment of a first-year elementary Russian class. This small-scale exploratory, qualitative study was conducted in an online synchronous setting. Its primary goal is to address the following questions: 1. What are some of the affordances and challenges of learning beginning Russian online? 2. How are students motivated during and as a result of the online language learning process? The participants in this study are students who attended beginning L2 Russian classes over the course of an academic year. Data points for this study include the students' language-learning journals and artifacts as well as conversations about their language learning experiences. Students shared their motivations and future goals for studying Russian, and their overall experiences of learning Russian in a synchronous online setting. Students stated which activities they found most effective and motivating for their learning and reported conflicting feelings about learning Russian in an online setting: while the online setting is perceived as being more "convenient," there are more distractions and fewer opportunities for social interaction.

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Keywords: elementary Russian, online language learning, motivation, tensions, learners' perspectives

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### Abstract 2

Эта статья исследует соотношение между мотивацией учащихся и онлайн-средой на примере студентов первого курса, изучавших русский язык как иностранный. Данное небольшое исследование было проведено в синхронной онлайн-среде. Главная цель исследования заключается в решении следующих вопросов: 1. Какие возможности и проблемы онлайн-обучения русскому языку существуют на начальном уровне? 2. Как развивается мотивация студентов в ходе и в результате обучения русскому онлайн? Участниками исследования являются студенты, посещавшие занятия по русскому языку в течение одного учебного года. Данные этого исследования включают в себя дневник изучения языка и образцы работ студентов, а также их рассуждения о полученном опыте. Студенты поделились своим опытом изучения русского языка в синхронной онлайн-среде. Участники указали, какие задания они считают наиболее эффективными и мотивирующими, а также рассказали о противоречивых чувствах в связи с изучением русского языка онлайн: несмотря на то что онлайн-обучение является более «удобным», в нем существует больше отвлекающих факторов и меньше возможностей для социального взаимодействия.

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Keywords: начальный уровень русского языка, онлайн-среда изучения языка, мотивация, напряженность, перспективы учащихся

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## 1. Introduction

Motivation has received a considerable amount of attention in the field of language learning and teaching (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995; Lasagabaster et al., 2014; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021), but few studies have examined the relationship between learner motivation and online language learning environments. The primary goals of the present study are to explore how students experienced learning first-year Russian in an online setting and to learn what activities were motivating for them during the language learning process. In order to address these questions, this article first outlines relevant studies on second language (L2) motivation (Section 2) and online learning, then presents the methodology (Section 3) and the results of a small-scale qualitative study (Section 4). The article concludes with implications for future iterations of online classes and for future research (Section 5).

## 2. Background

Simply put, motivation may be defined as a willingness to achieve something or the reason behind someone behaving in a particular way. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) identify motivation as “direction and magnitude for human behaviour,” which is responsible for “*why* people decide to do something; *how long* they are willing to sustain the activity; *how hard* they are going to pursue it” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021, p. 4; italics in original).

Research into L2 motivation has undergone several historical “stages” in the evolution of our understanding of how it is defined and how it manifests during language learning (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015):

- the social psychological period, stemming from work done by Robert Gardner and colleagues (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972; Gardner, 1985);
- the cognitive-situated period, influenced by research in educational psychology, and represented in works by Deci and Ryan (1985), Crookes and Schmidt (1991), and Noels (2001);
- the process-oriented period, which relates to how motivation surfaces through interactions between learners and contexts (Dörnyei, 2000; Ushioda, 2009; Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013; Dörnyei et al., 2015).

Many earlier studies on motivation and individual differences as a whole have “focused primarily on describing, measuring, and classifying language learner motivation (integrative, instrumental, intrinsic, extrinsic), and examining its relationship with achievement or behavioral outcomes” (Ushioda, 2008, pp. 29-30). In the earlier two historical stages mentioned previously, quantitative research was predominant. However, recent explorations into the dynamic nature of motivation allow for more qualitative approaches (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021, p. 56).

While many studies explore L2 motivation, relatively few studies specifically address the interplay between motivation and online language learning. However, with the recent global pandemic, this is an area that may receive further attention. Some recent studies suggest that the nature of the online learning context (synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid) and the instructor may play a role. For instance, in a mixed-methods study, Ushida (2006) found that although

students initially had high levels of anxiety towards online language learning, the teacher was instrumental in establishing a class environment that positively affected students' attitudes and motivation levels. In another mixed-method study that examined student and instructor satisfaction with online language learning, Murday et al. (2008, p. 137) found that a hybrid format was rated more positively among the students and had more "advantages over purely online (i.e., distance) courses in terms of interaction between students and instructors." In a more recent qualitative case study that specifically addressed learners' attitudes and motivations towards learning a language online (Meşe & Sevilen, 2021), the authors found that students had negative perceptions towards the online language learning process because of a lack of social interaction between classmates and teachers, and the difficulty to maintain self-discipline throughout the course.

To add to the body of literature on motivation and online language learning, the present study aims (as proposed in Dörnyei, 2009) to explore the dynamic relationship between the language learner and the learning environment through the analysis of qualitative data related to what (de)motivates learners within a synchronous, online language learning context. The approach in the present study is aligned with Ushioda's (2009) person-in-context relational view of motivation, in which she argues for the following:

[A] focus on real persons, rather than on learners as theoretical abstractions; a focus on the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling, human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives, and intentions; a focus on the interaction between this self-reflective intentional agent, and the fluid and complex systems of social relations, activities, experiences, and multiple micro- and macro-contexts in which the person is embedded, moves, and is inherently part of. (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220)

The present study, therefore, aims to place the students' voices in the forefront by addressing the following questions:

- (1) From the students' perspectives, what are some of the affordances and challenges of learning beginning Russian online?
- (2) How are students motivated during and as a result of the online language learning process?

### 3. Methodology

As this is a qualitative study, its aim is not to make generalizable claims. Rather, the goal of this study is to gain deeper insight into a particular teaching context (first-year online Russian courses in the United States) through the analysis of descriptive data. This section outlines the context of the study, the participants, data points, and the method of analysis.

### 3.1 Setting and Participants

The context for this study is a first-year elementary Russian class of nine students, which was taught in a synchronous online format. The group met for a total of three hours a week and did one to two hours of asynchronous preparatory work, such as reading a text or watching videos, by the beginning of each week. Additionally, several class periods throughout the semester were dedicated to small group or one-on-one meetings with the instructor. The primary technological tools used throughout the course were Zoom and Google Slides, and students submitted their assignments through Google Docs.

Out of the nine total students in the course, four volunteered to participate in this study (Zhenya, Liza, Faith, and Mr. Washington – pseudonyms all chosen by the students), who attended the classes over the course of the academic year. Their ages ranged from 15 to 29 years, and their chosen fields of study were varied (social work, information technology, homeland security, and undecided). All of them speak English as their first language, and three of the four had some prior language learning experience, such as one or two years of Spanish or German in high school. After one year of studying Russian, three out of the four students self-evaluated their language abilities in a written language learning questionnaire as being able to hold basic conversations and read and write simple texts in Russian.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected over the course of the spring 2021 academic semester and are outlined in Table 1 below.

| Data collection   |   |
|---|---|
| Data Type   | Description   |
| Students' language learning journal                     | Students' language learning journal   |
| Student artifacts                                       | Student projects <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Digital presentations on different themes ("My House / My Dream House", "My Hometown", chosen current events topic, etc.). Written and/or oral presentations.</li> <li>Tasks that involve "helping" Cheburashka, a beloved Russian cartoon character (creating a back-to-school shopping list, helping him buy appropriate gifts for different situations, etc.). Reading and writing tasks.</li> </ol> |
| Language learning questionnaire based on Dörnyei (2010) | A Likert-scale questionnaire given to students after the school year had ended, asking them to rate a variety of statements related to why they study Russian, their attitudes towards Russian, how they imagine themselves using Russian in the future, a self-evaluation of their abilities in Russian.   |

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Debriefing interviews | 25 to 40 minute conversations after the school year had ended, prompting participants to reflect on their overall learning experience. |
|-----------------------|--|

Table 1: Data collection

After the end of the academic school year, I used the language learning questionnaire as a starting point for our final debriefing conversations, during which I asked the students to reflect on the following questions:

- Why Russian? Why did you choose to study Russian over any other language?
- What kept you coming to class during a very difficult and unusual year?
- How did you find the experience of learning Russian online? What were some of the activities that were effective for your learning? What would you change about your learning experience from this year? What kinds of activities did you do/are you doing outside of class?
- How would you evaluate your language learning progress this year? What helped you to manage your language learning?
- What are your future plans for learning Russian? What kinds of goals do you have?
- What kind of advice would you give to a language learner who is in the same language learning situation as you?

Several of these questions were similar to the weekly journal prompts because as their teacher I wanted to gain a sense of whether/how their attitudes and beliefs shifted over time. Additionally, because these debriefing sessions occurred one-two months after the academic year ended, I wanted to learn what aspects of their learning experience were most memorable.

The data analysis followed the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), which is a systematic and flexible approach to collecting and analyzing qualitative data. This analytic framework seeks to gain new theoretical insights grounded in participants' voices and actions. My initial coding of the learning journals, artifacts, and interviews generated a list of codes, which were then categorized into themes related to the research questions. During the analysis, the coding progressed from staying close to the students' words, to connecting the emerging categories to theoretical understandings. In the case of this study, the goal was to gain deeper insight into the connections between motivation and the online learning environment.

#### 4. Results

In this section, the results are presented in two parts: first, I will introduce some of the results from the initial coding, specifically, the students' reflections on their language learning experiences. In the second part, I will share two of the dominant categories that emerged and that are related to motivation and online language learning: the themes of "connecting" and "feeling tension."

## 4.1 Language Learning Reflections

The students shared a variety of reflections on why they chose to study Russian, their future plans and goals related to Russian, how they experienced language learning in an online setting, and activities they found useful inside and outside the classroom.

### 4.1.1 Why Russian?

There were various reasons why the students chose to study Russian, and each of the participants identified more than one reason why Russian was appealing to them. For instance, Zhenya sees Russian as potentially useful for future career and travel opportunities while also saying, “it is a very cool sounding language.” Besides having a family friend from Russia, Liza finds Russian to be a “very interesting” language grammatically, and also shared she wanted to take Russian because one of her friends was studying Russian: “I wanted to be taking a language that someone else I knew was taking so I can converse with them, and no one else would know what I was saying.” Faith would like to visit Russia someday and has several close family members who speak Russian: “My mom did want me to [learn Russian], but she wasn’t forcing me ... Because our grandparents speak Russian, she thought it would be easier for us to converse.” Faith, who also recently married a Russian speaker, hopes to teach Russian to her future children. Mr. Washington was interested in learning Russian because “it’s fun” and so “different culturally,” and although he does not see Russian as being particularly beneficial in his current job, he states: “It could direct me, it could give me new opportunities to steer my career in a certain way – any skill you learn is going to add value to any career.”

### 4.1.2 The Online Learning Experience

The students were very open in sharing how they experienced learning Russian online. Throughout the academic year (2020/2021), despite the uncertainty and difficulties brought about by the pandemic, attendance in my first-year Russian class was exceptional. I was curious as to why. Liza and Mr. Washington cited their commitment that once they sign up for a class, they will do their best to show up. As Mr. Washington further reflected, he also shared, “I was enjoying it, I guess it was probably my favorite part of the day, especially after working, it [Russian class] was nice, calm, and relaxed and it’s a very different environment [from work].” For Zhenya, showing up to class meant improving his proficiency: “I want to learn Russian. I want to get good at it, I don’t want to speak a language and not be good at [it].” As for Faith, attending class brought a sense of stability because “with everything being so chaotic, you need something stable, school provided that stability, you can always kind of depend on it.”

Relating to online learning in general, three of the students shared the convenience factor as an affordance of learning a language online. Particularly for Mr. Washington, who has a full-time job, the convenience in scheduling is a big strength of online learning: “One of the best things about it was scheduling and convenience, I probably would have missed more classes [if they were face to face]”. Liza, who is a high school student, stated that “even if scheduling was bad”, she could still attend class because she “would pretty much always have a device”. Faith, who had never taken an online language class before, also highlighted the convenience of online

learning: “So it was a new experience, I thought it was very fun. All I needed was a stable Internet connection, and you know, I was there and we were learning.”

Despite some of the conveniences, two students in particular mentioned some challenges that they faced in an online learning environment. Although Zhenya appreciated the classes because of what he learned, he shared: “I would rather it be in person. I'm not sure how it would be better, but... It could be because I lose focus so I'm staring at one point for so long, like staring at a screen for a couple hours I lose focus at some point.” Mr. Washington also preferred face-to-face learning compared to online learning: “I would like being in person, I would say it probably would have been better for learning. I feel like the human mind, especially for something like this, triggers something when there's a person talking to you in your face. Like a little bit of panic and it's like all systems go, you gotta focus.” In both Zhenya's and Mr. Washington's reflections, the concept of “focus” comes to the foreground. Zhenya further shared the increased possibility of distractions during online language learning (“roommates running around doing stupid stuff”), and that being physically located in a classroom makes it “much easier to focus”. Mr. Washington highlighted another challenge related to online language learning: “[With online learning] we kind of have the safety of being in our own little comfortable [space], I think it took a lot of the experience out of it, the group struggle type thing, it was more of an independent journey which is good in some ways”. When I asked him to elaborate, he noted that he felt a lack of “camaraderie” in online settings, that there was no time before or after class to connect with classmates: “Every time we went to a [face-to-face] class all the good students get there 5-10 minutes early. And you always talk about how this is hard; you build some camaraderie and everyone's in it together and there's more room to socialize and commiserate. [But] when it's the computer it's just, all right, time to log on, oh Здравствуйте.”

#### 4.1.3 Preferred Activities

As a way to inform future designs of my online elementary Russian courses, I asked students which activities they found most effective (and most motivating) for their learning. I was curious not only about the activities that we did during class time, but also any activities that the students chose to do outside of class.

Three of the students highlighted that group work during class was beneficial for their learning. Faith specifically cited information gaps as being helpful: “When we were in groups and we had to figure out different stuff – I think that helps because on your own you can't really come up with a lot of stuff and then you have someone else who knows something and they put it in, I think it helps more with the learning experience.” Zhenya found that meeting in both small groups and individually with me was beneficial because “basically you're on the spot, you [really] gotta think about what you're doing.”

Three of the students mentioned class projects as effective, especially those that involved “helping” Cheburashka, a beloved Russian cartoon character, complete different tasks, such as creating a back-to-school shopping list or choosing an appropriate gift for different occasions. For Faith, doing the Cheburashka activities was enjoyable because “[Cheburashka] is cute and adorable, and so it was easier to help him 'cuz he needs help with school supplies. I thought that was just so adorable.” Zhenya also thought the Cheburashka activities were “fun” because “it's at a very beginner level, it's for kids and I like that.”

A final in-class activity that two of the students found helpful was “problem sets”, or as Liza explains: “The activities where you take an English sentence, and you have to translate it into Russian using all the correct cases and conjugations.” Mr. Washington wrote in his language learning journal why he finds these particular activities useful: “I do find value in types of problems the book presents. For me I’ve always found it helpful to get repetitions in, even if I don’t necessarily enjoy it. [They] reinforce the particular vocab and grammar lessons we are learning without getting as involved as in [the class] projects.”

Besides these in-class activities, students shared how they practiced Russian outside of class. A popular way to practice seemed to be supplementing our class with an app like Duolingo. Zhenya explains why he uses Duolingo: “Taking class in conjunction with Duolingo is very helpful [because we get] explanations of the conjugations and cases in class. I see class as incredible for learning things and Duolingo as incredible for practicing things if that makes sense. I learned a lot from class and I practice with Duolingo ‘cuz I don’t really know that many Russian speakers to practice with.” Besides apps, each student found ways to practice Russian above and beyond what we did in class, such as watching YouTube videos, listening to Russian music, reading Russian children’s books, and writing in Russian in their personal diary.

## 4.2 Motivation and Online Learning

Through my conversations with the students and examining the transcripts, journal entries, and artifacts, two underlying themes emerged: “connecting” and “feeling tension.” The following sections will explain these themes in more detail.

### 4.2.1 Connecting

The theme of “connecting” surfaced on several different levels – connecting with the instructor, connecting with other classmates, connecting with native speakers of Russian, and connecting to the Russian language and culture.

As mentioned above, three of the students found individual meetings with me as helpful. Faith particularly noted that “being one on one with [the instructor], even though it was through a screen, we were able to learn.” These meetings were also very beneficial for me as the instructor because they allowed me to connect with and get to know each student individually.

Mr. Washington referred to the lack of “camaraderie” in online language learning but still mentioned that he was able to find a sense of connection through the group work we did in class. Liza also shared in her journal that she would call her friend who is also learning Russian “to practice speaking and use the grammatical rules in simple sentences,” which she found “quite helpful.”

Three of the participants, at some point during the semester, showed their excitement in how they could connect in some way with native speakers of Russian. For example, Mr. Washington shared a story of how he eavesdropped on a conversation of a Russian-speaking couple at an airport, and was able to understand the gist of the conversation. Zhenya wrote in his journal: “Доброе утро! Last night I met a girl at [a bar] who speaks Russian! Она живёт в Москве. It was really exciting to be able to practice in person!” Besides native speakers of Russian, all of the students expressed enthusiasm when they connected with the Russian language and culture.



Liza's parents' friends from Russia loaned her several children's books in Russian, by means of which she practiced reading throughout the semester. Faith is looking forward to getting more involved with Russian at the community level, as she has several Russian-speaking family members. Mr. Washington shared in his journal how he was beginning to understand some videos that he watched: "Я смотрел новый ютуб видео. А понимал это! Native speakers are still rather hard to understand, but I progressively understand more and more! In this recent video, I understood almost a full conversation!"

#### 4.2.2 Feeling Tension

Although the sense of connection came through many of our conversations, the concept of "tension" also surfaced quite strongly. These tensions are mostly related to the general nature of online learning but also to language learning. Some of the tensions also emerged when the students shared what advice they would give to students beginning to study Russian online.

One of the tensions related to the general nature of online learning involves the convenience in scheduling on the one hand and the difficulty to remain focused on the other; the convenience in being in one's own space, in contrast to the limited social interaction. Regarding learning activities, what is useful versus what is enjoyable is another tension, as expressed by Mr. Washington when he saw the benefit of grammar exercises because he found it "helpful to get repetitions in" but it was not necessarily an enjoyable activity for him. Mr. Washington observed another tension related to the class projects that were part of the course: "I feel like I learned a lot, but then I also forgot a lot. It was a lot of temporary learning." This tension seems to be connected to the concept of practice – I felt that during the semester, three hours a week was a limited amount of time for each student to practice their productive skills. The students found that they needed to supplement class time with additional practice outside of class, like using apps or watching videos on YouTube.

When I prompted the students to offer a piece of advice that they would give to a language learner who was in a similar language-learning situation, they described the language learning process as a "struggle," "overwhelming," "difficult," and "hard work". However, despite the overwhelming and challenging nature of learning a language, they each shared encouraging thoughts or possible strategies that they think would be useful:

**Mr. Washington:** Study hard, get together and form that camaraderie. Other than that, just do the work. So that's one of the hardest life lessons to learn is that you just gotta do the work, it's not a magic trick. If you're struggling, do more work, if you're struggling put more time into it – the struggle is real. No good advice, just keep struggling, keep going.

**Liza:** Definitely memorize the cases because my impression is that the cases are a base of the grammar of Russian and so, if you don't memorize the first cases you learn by the end of the class, you're going to be struggling with using the endings properly.

**Faith:** Learning the language is difficult, but you have to want to learn it. If you're doing it just for extra credit or "just because" you're not going to get anything out of the class, I think you need to want it.

**Zhenya:** It can be easy to feel overwhelmed, but if you take it step by step it's not that overwhelming. At first, it's like wow – everything is in Cyrillic, it's a totally different language and different cases and yeah, it's a lot, it is, but if you take it one piece at a time it's really not a lot.

Some of the results from this study are consistent with those of previous studies that explored the connection between motivation and the online language learning environment. For example, Meşe and Sevilen (2021) found that students had overall negative perceptions of the online language learning process because of a lack of social interaction and difficulty maintaining self-discipline. The present study's results are partially consistent with this finding, as two of the students did mention the lack of social interaction as a challenge for online language learning. However, they did mention some positive aspects of online language learning, such as the ease of scheduling and the convenience factor. Moreover, the other two participants in the present study did not share anything particularly negative about the online learning experience. These two participants said that they thought learning online worked reasonably well, and as long as they had a stable Internet connection, everything worked fine for them, and they felt that they learned. Two other previous studies (Ushioda, 2006; Murday et al., 2008) mentioned the role of the teacher in establishing a class environment that could affect attitudes and motivation levels. Throughout their interviews, students mentioned their Russian class as being “fun”, “open,” “inviting” and enjoyed the “calm” and “relaxed” atmosphere, so this could also be instrumental in how the students perceived online language learning as not completely negative. It is possible that besides the convenience factor, the students on some level felt comfortable in the virtual classroom.

## 5. Concluding Thoughts and Implications

Through conducting this small-scale exploratory study, I learned more about how the students in my class perceived and experienced online language learning during the past academic year. In this section, I will outline some implications for the online language classroom and for future research.

### 5.1 Classroom implications

By understanding how the students perceived and experienced online language learning during the past academic year, I intend to apply what I have learned to future iterations of my first-year Russian class. Conducting this study was a reminder that my students come to the classroom with a variety of lived experiences and motivations for studying Russian, consistent with Ushioda's (2009) statement quoted earlier in the article. Additionally, all of the students found certain activities to be particularly helpful. Even though there were certain activities that they all seemed to prefer (for example, the Cheburashka projects), not all of them had the same preferences. This tells me as the instructor that to acknowledge students' preferences and varied backgrounds, it is important to ensure that there is a variety of activities that the students can participate in. Although this is not necessarily a new finding, learning my students' specific interests

and backgrounds is unique each year and informs my instructional decisions regarding assignments and projects.

An additional classroom implication relates to the fact that students had conflicting feelings about online language learning. On the one hand, it was very convenient for scheduling, and students were in their own space. However, on the other hand, two of the students, in particular, shared that they would have preferred to meet in person, because from their perspective, meeting in person helps them focus better and being physically located in a classroom allows for a greater likelihood of a shared focus. This tension is somewhat difficult for me to reconcile as an instructor but I think one way to manage it is to continue having small group meetings and one-on-one meetings. Three of the students, in particular, mentioned that although they felt a lack of social interaction, the small group meetings, group work, and individual meetings with me helped them feel more of a sense of connection. Additionally, incorporating more group work as part of the class and designing tasks (such as information gaps) in such a way that each group member has to contribute may offer students a more profound sense of connection. Overall, creating a sense of connection in a virtual classroom has been one of my biggest challenges of online teaching, and I will continue to look for and try new strategies.

To summarize, for instructors of Russian who are teaching a first-year language class, I offer the following **suggestions** based on what I have learned thus far from the results of this study:

- (1) Where relevant and practical, incorporate task-based approaches to instruction (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Long, 2015). When asked about the most effective activities for their learning, the participants in this study consistently highlighted information gaps and the Cheburashka tasks, which are grounded in task-based language teaching (TBLT).<sup>15</sup>
- (2) There are several possible strategies for creating a sense of connection in an online classroom.
  - a.) Find out what interests the students. One way to determine this is to distribute a survey or questionnaire as a low-stakes assignment at the beginning of the semester. I have learned, however, that a single survey at the beginning of the course, while useful, is not enough for me to remember each student's background and interests. I find that if students keep a language learning diary, I am able to get to know my students better and engage in (written) dialogue with them throughout the semester or year. Dialogue journals such as this have been found to be interactive, as they allow learners to reflect on and observe their language learning process and develop learner agency (Darhower, 2004).
  - b.) While learning what interests the students, encourage them to bring their backgrounds and curiosities into the classroom. In my classroom, this took the form of mini-projects throughout the year, which had open-ended topics (e.g., My Dream Home, a chosen

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<sup>15</sup> Additionally, for instructors who would like to take a deeper look at task-based approaches specific to Russian classrooms, Nuss and Whitehead Martelle's edited volume (forthcoming) offers examples from a variety of teaching contexts and suggests the great potential for implementing TBLT in Russian classrooms because of its connections to the concepts of learner-centeredness, authenticity, cultural awareness, and motivation.

current events topic) that allowed students to be creative and explore their interests further.

- c.) When possible, hold small group or individual sessions with the students. For larger classes, occasional sessions in smaller groups allow the students to practice in a more focused way and experience more individualized instruction. My class was smaller (nine students), so I incorporated a combination of small group and individual sessions in addition to whole group meetings throughout the year. Although these small group/individual sessions were more demanding of my time than our regular class period, I consistently received positive feedback from the students that they found these meetings to be useful for their learning. They appreciated the individual attention and the opportunity for one-on-one practice.
- (3) Before I conducted this study, the final piece of advice I would have given would have been: Encourage students to practice the language outside of the classroom and offer suggestions on how to do so. After engaging in this inquiry, I will add: Encourage the students to share how they practice the language with each other. The fact that each of the participants in this study actively sought ways to practice Russian outside of the classroom was an unexpected finding. Every student who participated in this study used different apps, downloaded Russian music, watched Russian videos, or read children’s books in Russian. Additionally, each of the students enthusiastically shared their strategies for remembering vocabulary or grammar rules, such as cheat sheets or flashcards. Something new that I just incorporated as a result of this finding is that I now have a shared Google Docs in our class folder for anyone to offer a resource (link to a website, information about an app, a YouTube channel, etc.) with the rest of the class and explain why it is useful for them.

## 5.2 Future Research

Although engaging in this inquiry yielded new insight into my teaching context and the students’ experiences, the small-scale exploratory nature of this study can only address certain questions. For instance, while the findings from this inquiry may be transferable (that is, another instructor of first-year Russian in an online setting may identify with or relate to the context described in this study), these findings are not generalizable. They will not necessarily apply to other settings, such as a face-to-face immersive advanced-level Russian class. Therefore, future studies that address similar questions on a larger scale would need to include more participants, proficiency levels, different languages, and/or instruction settings (face-to-face, online, intensive, immersion, etc.).

Another avenue of future research stems from one of Mr. Washington’s observations: “I feel like I learned a lot, but then I also forgot a lot. It was a lot of temporary learning”. This comment prompts the following question: What is the relationship between motivation, working memory, and the online language-learning environment? Bringing these concepts into conversation with each other might offer more insight into the learning processes of the language student. Additionally, Mr. Washington’s statement encourages me to initiate a teacher action research study with future students on how they perceive their language learning processes.

Finally, after conducting this particular study, more questions on language learning tensions are emerging. In relation to motivation, I am observing that tensions can hold learners back, but they can also propel learners forward, and a potential direction for future research would be to investigate when tensions can lead to one situation or another for a particular learner. Moreover, the language-learning environment, in this case, the synchronous online setting, can set the conditions for all of the tensions, connections, and learning possibilities for any student at any given time. Exploring this complex interaction in more detail would enable researcher-practitioners to better understand what motivates their students.

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