

Form-focused Communicative Practice via CMC: What Language Learners Say

CARLA MESKILL

University of Albany, State University of New York

NATASHA ANTHONY

Hudson Valley Community College

ABSTRACT

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is being used widely to support and extend foreign language instruction. Language learners are practicing the target language by communicating with their instructors, peers, and native speakers at a distance. This study examines high-beginning and low-intermediate learners of Russian and their uses of, and reactions to, a required CMC component of their Russian language classes whereby instructor-initiated tasks and orchestration constituted the central structure. CMC transcript, interview, and questionnaire data indicate that students were generally enthusiastic about the CMC tasks and activities and report having learned the target language through their engagement in communicative practice with instructor-guided focus on form. The study illustrates specific types of CMC instructional uses and strategies that guide motivated, form-focused communicative practice, an activity to which these learners responded positively in terms of both reported progress and demonstrated progress in learning the Russian language.

KEYWORDS

CMC, Russian, CALL, Form Focus, Instructional Strategies

CMC AS A TOOL FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Where computer-mediated communication (CMC) has fast become an integral part of daily life, be it for business, entertainment, or instruction, contemporary foreign language learners are consequently coming to language learning well versed in using CMC for these various purposes. Indeed, most are quite accustomed to engaging in this written social activity and possess solid knowledge and skills to do so in their native language. Any sense of 'prerequisite' to CMC communication in the language the student is in the process of learning, therefore, is fast becoming irrelevant. It is a rare learner in the twenty-first century who is not experienced with and adept at using telecommunications for multiple purposes.

Specific features make asynchronous CMC particularly attractive to the teaching and learning of a target language: first, the fact that CMC consists of "written speech" (Murray, 1991) means that target language forms are visually immediate; they can be reviewed, studied, reflected on, and edited (Kern, Ware & Warschauer, 2004). Consequently, both instructors and students can respond in thoughtful ways that can include highlighting or otherwise calling attention to those forms (Meskill & Anthony, 2004, 2005). Learners have the opportunity not only to see the language being used to communicate, but to look at it as many times and for as long as they need without disruption. This is in sharp contrast to the live foreign language

classroom where the fast-paced nature of oral practice precludes the luxury of time for review and reflection. In addition to being able to see the written speech of CMC, learners can make use of any number of resources to comprehend what they read and to compose their responses. They can use as much time as they need to construct their own messages using target language dictionaries, native speaker consultants, and any other forms of supporting information. These features—seeing the target language, having the time and opportunity to reflect, use resources, compose, and edit responses—also mean that foreign language instructors have optimal opportunities to draw learner attention to particular aspects of their output without disrupting the flow of conversation. From the instructor's point of view, there are more opportunities to see the kinds of errors learners are making and more time to carefully construct responses that are simultaneously communicative and remedial. Likewise, learners can enjoy authentic communication in the target language while taking risks and soliciting guided, yet conversational responses. This study set out to assess US learners' reported and demonstrated learning progress in response to engaging in CMC activities as part of their learning of Russian.

The effectiveness of text-based CMC, both synchronous and asynchronous, as a tool for teaching foreign/second languages has been widely examined (Beauvois, 1998; Darhower, 2002; Lee, 2001, 2002a; Salaberry, 2000; Smith 2003, 2004; Sotillo, 2000; Stepp-Greany, 2002; Tudini, 2003). Studies that have investigated the online discourse of language learners suggest that providing supportive environments for meaningful, authentic interactions in instructional uses of CMC can decrease learner anxiety (Roed, 2003) and promote an increase in language production (Blake, 2000; Blake & Zyzik, 2003; Warschauer, 1996). Additionally, using CMC for practicing the target language promotes a decrease in instructor utterances in favor of active student participation (Hudson & Bruckman, 2002; Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). Telecommunications also represent an environment that is favorable to shier students who typically defer to more talkative, outgoing students in live classroom contexts (Beauvois, 1998; Meskill, 2002; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). Moreover, instructional uses of CMC can elicit lexically and syntactically more complex language as compared to oral classroom production (Fitze, 2006; González-Bueno, 1998; Warschauer, 1996) which in turn fosters negotiation of meaning and thereby improves learners' oral, as well as written skills (Abrams, 2003; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Smith, 2003; Pellettieri, 2000). Finally, participation in online discussions has been shown to foster a sense of community among learners (Lee, 2004).

Further, there is clear alignment of the affordances of CMC with contemporary trends in second language acquisition theory and research. First, current emphasis on the importance of engaging learners in meaningful communicative activity as a key to successful language acquisition (Ellis, 2005; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Savignon, 1991) can be realized by using CMC in language instruction. The medium is, after all, a social one with most contemporary learners possessing the sociolinguistic foundations to communicate with ease in CMC environments and indeed doing so for social, pleasurable reasons in the native language. When communicating in a new language with CMC, the time and affective constraints of classroom communicative activity, while playing an important role in that particular genre of instructional activity, are absent; learners have the time to comprehend and to write thoughtful, well composed target language responses. This feature of CMC aligns nicely with current research that illustrates how students' active negotiation of meaning constitutes the locus of their acquisition (Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998). Second, with instructional CMC there are fertile opportunities for implementing powerful instructional strategies. Instructors can easily detect, isolate, and, in turn, respond productively and even creatively to learner errors, an aspect of instruction critical to the acquisition process (Swain, 1985; van Lier, 2000). Finally, the fact that instructors are able to carefully fashion form-focused responses within conversations that are otherwise not about language, but about interesting topics, makes CMC an ideal venue for form-focused communicative exchanges.

A central impetus for the present study is to focus on learners' perspectives when it comes to participating in CMC for high-beginning and low-intermediate Russian learning. Earlier versions of this work focused on specific instructor strategies (Meskill & Anthony, 2004, 2005) and whether and how students attend to such instructional strategies.

Each language presents its own special set of challenges for learners, and Russian is no exception. The high frequency of inflection, for example, makes this a particularly difficult language for speakers of English. Because of such challenges, Russian has been traditionally taught via grammar-based approaches that preclude communicative practice at the initial stages. Communicative approaches are needed in Russian instruction to increase interest and, ultimately, participation in language programs. In light of these challenges for Russian teaching and the features of CMC that support form-focused communicative practice in the target language, the current study undertook the assessment of students' responses to engaging in instructor-mediated CMC as an assigned component of their Russian classes. We wished to determine learners' perceived and demonstrated progress in learning the language.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do students perceive the progress of their Russian language learning via CMC?
2. How is this progress evidenced in CMC?
3. How do students respond to the teacher's instructional strategies in online learning activities?

CONTEXT

Participants in this study included 22 students in five Russian courses. For the purpose of this study, the course titles were changed as follows:

1. Elementary Hybrid I (6 students; 5 males, 1 female; age 18-22)
2. Elementary Hybrid II (6 students; 5 males, 1 female; age 18-22)
3. Intermediate Hybrid (6 students; 5 males, 1 female; age 19-23)
(Face-to-face [f2f] courses at a small liberal arts college in the state of New York)
4. Elementary Online I (2 students, both females; age 18-22)
5. Elementary Online II (2 students, both males; age 29-54)
(Fully online courses at a large technical college in the state of Georgia)

All classes were taught or cotaught by one of the authors during the period 2002-2005. All participating students were very proficient in email communication. All had unlimited access to computers on campus and/or had their own personal computers. Most of the elementary level students could not type Cyrillic prior to enrolling in their Russian classes but learned how to type Cyrillic using a map of a Russian keyboard and keyboard stickers with the Cyrillic alphabet.

The textbook for the f2f courses was *Live from Moscow (Stage One, Volume 1 and Stage Two)*. Students in the online course did not have a textbook but used the materials developed specifically for the course by a team of Russian instructors and instructional technologists. They were required to work individually on the online course materials and assignments and to participate in synchronous virtual sessions or audio conferences with their classmates

and the instructors. All synchronous virtual sessions were conducted via *OpenCampus*, the audio conferencing software by Wimba. This allows instructors and students to talk to one another in real time using headsets and microphones while featuring video, application sharing, polling, a white board, and chat. Each student in the f2f classes received 3 hours and 15 minutes of in-class instruction and 45 minutes of laboratory practice each week. Students in the online classes, according to their own estimates, spent about 5-8 hours a week studying materials on their own and 1 hour a week for oral practice during virtual sessions.

Each of the Russian classes participated in required asynchronous text-based discussion forums as a component of their homework assignments. The forums were conducted through two different distance learning platforms: *Blackboard* and *WebCT Vista*. Participation in text-based online discussions was obligatory for all the classes and figured into the final grade as outlined on each course syllabus. Russian was the exclusive language of online communication. Students were asked to post three to seven messages per week in response to specified tasks (see sample tasks in Appendix A). Most of the discussion topics for all the classes were provided by the instructor, but some of the discussion topics were initiated by students and will be discussed at a later point. Neither the number, the length of sentences, nor the number of required words was specified. Table 1 lists the discussion topics in the five classes.

Table 1
Discussion Topics

Course	Topics
Elementary Hybrid I	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. College Life (T) 2. Russian Culture (T) 3. Russian Economy and Politics (T) 4. Friendship (T) 5. Stereotypes (T) 6. War in Iraq (T) 7. Your Own Forum (T)
Elementary Hybrid II	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Famous Russians (T) 2. Game "Alphabet" (S) 3. Virtual Pub (T) 4. Mysterious American Soul (T) 5. Spring Break (T) 6. What are you going to do in the summer? (S) 7. Game "War of Animals" (S)
Intermediate Hybrid	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On the Boat (T) 2. Wheel of Fortune (T) 3. Survivor (T)
Elementary Online I	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Let Me Introduce Myself (T) 2. Stereotypes about Russia and Stereotypes about America (T) 3. Theater and TV (T)
Elementary Online II	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where You Live and Where You Want to Live (T) 2. There is a Fly in My Soup (T) 3. You Look Nice (T) 4. Sports and Hobbies (T) 5. Weather and Seasons (S)

T = forums initiated by the instructor; S = forums initiated by students.

To investigate students' attitudes towards online activities and their perceived learning, the following methods were used: a postcourse scale questionnaire in Elementary Hybrid II and Intermediate Hybrid (see questionnaire Appendix B), postcourse interviews in Intermediate Hybrid (see interview questions in Appendix C), post-course interviews in Elementary Online I and Elementary Online II (see interview questions in Appendix D), and written free-form evaluations in Elementary Hybrid I. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the types of data collected.

Table 2
Types of Data

	Postcourse questionnaires (5-point scale)	Postcourse interview A	Postcourse interview B	Written free-form evaluations
Elementary Hybrid I				X
Elementary Hybrid II	X			
Intermediate Hybrid	X	X		
Elementary Online I			X	
Elementary Online II			X	

Table 3
Types of Data by Research Question

	Postcourse questionnaires (5-point scale)	Postcourse interview A	Postcourse interview B	Written free-form evaluations
Students' perceived progress	X	X	X	X
Students' perception of instructional strategies	X	X	X	

DISCUSSION

Students' Perceived Progress

Productive communication practice has long been a key feature for foreign language classrooms with learner comprehension and production in real conversation being optimal evidence of student learning (Ellis, 1990, 2005; Long, 1996). However, communication in real time can be challenging for learners, especially for beginning learners of Russian. Most learners need more time to transition from controlled practice to less controlled conversation activities. CMC can serve to support students as they move gradually from one level of proficiency to the next while developing confidence and fluency along the way. Additionally, class time very often does not allow all students to engage equally with those who are more outgoing and who tend to monopolize airtime. As one of the students from the Elementary Hybrid I class stated in his written evaluation, "[Online discussions] are helpful for honing the skills that are needed to gain mastery of a language and encourages interaction between students in the given language that is not always possible because of the constraints of class time."

Students in the Elementary Hybrid II and the Intermediate Hybrid classes completed a postcourse questionnaire which sought to elicit a broad range of reactions to the CMC activities (see Table 4).

Table 4
Results of Questionnaires in Two F2F Classes

Statement	Responses				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I learned a lot from this activity.	1	2	3	5	1
2. This activity was very helpful for practicing my writing skills.			3	9	
3. This activity was very useful for practicing my reading skills.		1	3	7	1
4. I wish the instructor participated more.	1		9	1	1
5. I wish my classmates were more motivated to participate.		1	7	4	
6. I liked the discussion topics .		2		9	1
7. I was satisfied with the error correction system in this course.		1	4	6	1
8. I enjoyed this activity. It was fun.	1		1	9	1
9. I invested too much time in this activity.	1	8	2	1	
10. I experienced technical difficulties (access to computers, Cyrillic, etc.).	3	6	3		

As shown by the figures in Table 4, all students in the two f2f classes, except for two, reported having enjoyed the discussion topics. The one student who did not respond favorably to these topics stated that the language required by new topics tended to be too complicated and that the topics should be restricted so that students' working vocabulary and structures are sufficient for discussion. Conversely, the other 10 students who engaged in these topics responded positively to the challenge of comprehending and using new forms and the opportunity to discuss personal matters in Russian outside the classroom. Ten out of 12 students also indicated that they found this activity pleasurable. One of the students from the Elementary Hybrid II class wrote in his written informal evaluation, "It was fun! [Online discussions] should definitely be in next semester as well!"

Responses to items one and two indicate that most students felt their learning benefited from the online interactions. One of the Elementary Hybrid I students wrote in his evaluation, "I think Blackboard is a great tool for us to use to practice our day-to-day conversation." The words "meaningful" and "personal" were used many times by students in their interviews.

Ten out of 12 students reported improvement in their reading skills as a result of this activity, and 9 out of 12 felt that participation in online discussions improved their writing skills. One of the interviewed students from the Intermediate Hybrid class noticed that the CMC environment helped his writing by giving him more time to formulate his thoughts. He stated,

In class, the sentences are short and punctual. They are focused on specific thematic and grammar aspects, whereas online the conversations tended to be more open-ended. Communication online was more meaningful. Students could express freely their opinions, beliefs, and feelings. It was good practice in expressing thoughts on different levels. Besides, the syntactic constructions in face-to-face conversations tended to be simplified. Online there was an opportunity to create complex compound sentences with variations of tenses.

Another student interview revealed that in places where the student had tried to limit his messages to the words that he already knew, he nevertheless used dictionaries extensively to try to find the right words. He also reported remembering these words better because they had been used productively in meaningful contexts. However, not all students felt this way. Only half of the students felt that they learned a lot from this activity with the word "learning" referring chiefly to grammar and vocabulary.

Some students reported frequent references to dictionaries as unfavorable and time consuming. One of the Elementary Hybrid II students even posted the following message to the discussion board: Я ничего не понимаю в Блэкборде, потому что у меня нет времени искать каждое слово что я не знаю и переводить. Мы должны писать слова что мы знаем или никто не будет понимать новые слова. 'I don't understand anything in Blackboard because I don't have time to look up every word that I don't understand and translate. We have to write words that we know or no one will understand new words.' It is interesting to note, however, that the student expressed his discontent in the target language, using the target language to express his personal feelings. Also, an interview with a student in the Intermediate Hybrid class revealed that he did not see any difference between CMC assignments and any other written assignments in terms of language learning because he did not feel the need to communicate with others in order to learn the language.

Several students pointed out the immersion feature of CMC. One of the Elementary Hybrid I students wrote in his evaluation, "Blackboard allowed us to write and think in Russian outside of class." One of the interviewed students in the Elementary Online I also mentioned that online discussions allowed her to immerse herself in the language.

Many students acknowledged the cumulative effect of online text-based discussions in their learning as well. One of the interviewed students in the Intermediate Hybrid class said,

These discussions give us more practice. What we have learned in class last semester and this semester goes there. We can put all our knowledge and skills together. I remember last term we learned the verb "to carry". I used it in my messages. I used a lot of vocabulary and grammatical constructions that we have learned over the year in my postings.

Another student, from the Elementary Online I class, also commented on the value of online discussion as cumulative activity, saying that "It was definitely helpful by taking all the information that we have learned and putting it together in one sentence." In all, the students in the classes were generally positive concerning the online components of their courses. They reported enjoying opportunities to make active, productive use of the forms they were learning while engaging in conversation about topics in which they had interest. In short, these language learners viewed this form of activity as positively contributing to their Russian language learning.

Students' Demonstrated Progress

In addition to engaging in conversation-like exchanges, learners were afforded opportunities to productively use grammatical constructions in online exchanges learned in class-based activities, for example, the accusative case after transitive verbs (e.g., to love, to watch, etc.), the use of the genitive case in the constructions "denying possession," у меня нет машины 'I don't have a car,' and the meaningful use of formulaic expressions such as по-моему ... 'I think ...' or Ты шутишь? 'Are you kidding?' that appeared in an educational video viewed in the class.

Other linguistic forms included in the online course materials such as the comparative forms of adjectives also appeared in student exchanges. In the following conversation, students exchanged their personal opinions comparing the theatre and television:

N.: Некоторые люди думают, что театр - это уже неинтересно, что это прошлый век. Они любят смотреть телевизор и всегда смотрят спектакли по телевизору. А что думаете вы? Вы тоже думаете, что театр уже "умер"?

'Some people think that theater is not something interesting anymore and that it is from a past century. They like to watch TV and always watch shows on TV. And what do you think? Do you also think that theater has already died?'

T.: что театр уже "умер" (died)? По-моему, Я думаю что люди предпочитают театр но театр стоит дороже чем смотреть телевизор!

'What, has theater already died? In my opinion, I think that people prefer theater but theater costs more than watching TV!'

N.: Театр дорогой во Франции? В России смотреть телевизор дешевле, но театр интереснее. Русский театр очень знаменитый.

'Is theater expensive in France? In Russia to watch TV is cheaper but theater is more interesting. Russian theater is famous.'

P.: Я думаю, что театр и телевизор очень разные и не можем сказать что театр лучше или неинтересный.

'I think that theater and TV are different and we cannot say that theater is better or not interesting.'

T. = teacher.

Another example of students pushing the limits of their learning comes from the Elementary Hybrid II class. The assigned task was to read an article adapted from the Russian magazine *Ogoniok* called "Mysterious American Soul" in which the author discussed the differences between Americans and Russians. The main point of the article was the idea that Americans value family more than they value work while Russians have the opposite priorities. Students were asked to express their opinions. Many of them disagreed with the idea that Americans value family very much.

B.: Я думаю американцы только хотят деньги в карманах. По-моему, американцы хотят деньги больше, чем они хотят семью, любовь или счастье. (особенно люди здесь)

'I think that the only thing that Americans want is money in their pockets. I think Americans want money more than they want family, love or happiness (especially people here.)'

M.: Ну... деньги это хорошая вещь. [...] за деньги покупается все : и здоровье, и образование, и даже друзья! **И это печально.**

'Well, money is a good thing. Everything is bought for money: health, education and even friends! And **it's sad!**'

L.: Я согласна, что многие американцы хотят деньги больше чем они хотят семью. Это не хорошо, но, если нет денег, будет очень трудно [иметь] семью.

'I agree that many Americans want money more than they want family. It's not good, but if there is no money, it would be very difficult [to have] a family.'

J.: М., ты не можешь купить меня!

'M., you can't buy me!'

M.: Конечно не могу, т.к. у меня совсем нет денег после поездки в Европу :((И пиво я тебе не могу купить ;) Так что извини ...;)

'Of course, I can't because I'm broke after my trip to Europe:(And I even can't buy you beer;) So, accept my apologies ...;)

B.: Денги тебе не могут купить настоящих друзей. И если девушки меня хотят, они не должны меня хотеть из-за такой поверхностной причины как деньги. Они должны меня хотеть из-за моего тела.

'**Money cannot buy you real friends. And if girls want me, they should not want me for such a superficial reason as money. They should want me because of my body.**'

M. = course teaching assistant.

The conversation reveals a high degree of authenticity and personal involvement while mixing serious statements with puns and jokes, all features of real-life communication. To be involved at such a high level of communicative complexity, students must consider the language they are using as they compose: vocabulary and syntactic constructions in addition to tone and register. The advantages of CMC that students reported in this regard were many. One of the interviewed students from the Intermediate Hybrid class said,

The clear advantage of online discussions is that we have more time to think about the argument, whereas in the f2f classroom you have to think on your feet. Plus in the f2f class you are limited to the constructions and vocabulary items you have already learned so far or you have to ask your instructor to translate the word which leads to interruption of the conversation. Online you can look up new words in the dictionary, and on the surface it looks like the conversation goes smoothly, without interruptions.

Some students from the Elementary Hybrid II expressed their concern that errors made by their classmates during online communications might have a negative impact on their learning. As one of the students mentioned in her written free-form evaluation of the online discussions,

Students may not know of specific grammatical constructions that accompany particular words, and may be reinforcing improper habits in their own grammar and that of their peers. Corrections should be made on the blackboard. The

blackboard system should be written to allow the instructor to place corrections in another color over the already typed messages. In this way, students will be able to benefit from seeing the corrections made for their fellow students, and their knowledge of proper grammatical constructions will be reinforced.

As an instructional strategy to further draw attention to form, students were provided with electronic copies of their online messages saved in a *Word* document with all their errors highlighted. Students were encouraged, using these notes as a guide, to modify their own messages. Most students seized this opportunity and worked meticulously on their own errors. As reported in the questionnaire (see Table 4 above), 5 students out of 6 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I was satisfied with the error correction system for this activity," while one student was neutral. In the Intermediate Hybrid class where the instructor did not provide students with printed copies of their messages with highlighted errors but, instead, used only implicit correction injected in the body of her messages, only 2 students were satisfied with error correction, 3 students were neutral, and one student was dissatisfied. The difference in responses between the two groups underscores students' expectations for error correction and their continuing perceived need for teacher intervention as they progress in the language.

Overall, in these CMC activities, language students demonstrate a level of productive target language use that is unusually sophisticated compared to that in traditional beginning language courses. They made use of the time, the text, and various resources to understand and generate motivated messages, processes which ultimately contribute to students learning the target language.

Instructor's Role

While the role of instructor discourse has been the focus of much recent research on asynchronous online instruction (Ferding & Roehler, 2004; Kebede, 1999), the instructional discourse of foreign language instructors has only recently received attention (Meskill & Anthony, 2004, 2005). These studies demonstrate that the asynchronous nature of the online environment can provide excellent opportunities for instructors to implement effective teaching techniques such as saturating input with specific linguistic forms, providing linguistic tools, engaging incidental modeling, calling attention to forms, giving meaning/form-focused feedback, using linguistic traps, and corralling learning. These online strategies can be interwoven into CMC conversations and crafted to call attention to forms that instructors deem teachable/learnable at that point in the conversation. As the examples below demonstrate, CMC allows instructors to pause, reflect, and "inject" their instructional language in such a way that maintains the communicative momentum while tailoring feedback to focus learner attention (Meskill & Anthony, 2005). The following is an excerpt from the discussion "Where You Live and Where You Want to Live" that took place in the Elementary Online II class:

- S: Сейчас я живу в Атланта, Джоржа. Это красивый город и это тёплый климат. Но я хочу жить в космосе. В космосе очень холодный. Мне **кажется, надо носить куртка!**
'Now I live in Atlanta, Georgia. It is a beautiful city and it is a warm climate. But I want to live in space. It's very cold in space. It seems to me that one needs to wear a coat!'
- T: Как интересно! Вы живёте в Джорджии, в Атланте, а я живу в Нью-Йорке, в Олбани. Ирина тоже живёт в штате Джорджия, в Атланте. В космосе не холодно, а УЖАСНО холодно. Надо носить **не куртку, а скафандр! :-)**

'How interesting! You live in Georgia, in Atlanta, and I live in New York, in Albany. Iryna also lives in the state of Georgia, in Atlanta. It's not cold but TERRIBLY cold in space. One should wear a space suit, not a coat :-)'

S: В Джорджии, Наташа? Потому что вы живёте в Нью-Йорке, может быть вы не знаете Ирина и я живут в «Jaaw-zha»! :) Но сейчас я пишу «Джорджия». Правильно? По возможности летать космос-скафандр? Я хочу летать.
'In Georgia Natasha? Because you live in New York maybe you don't know that Iryna and I live in "Jaaw-zha"! :) But now I'm writing "Georgia." Is it correct? Possibly to fly into space a space coat?[It is unclear what the student wanted to say here.] I want to fly.'

T: Да, я знаю, что американцы говорят "Джорджа". Русские говорят "Джорджия". Вы хотите летать? Это очень дорого – летать в космос. Я знаю, что один американский миллионер летал в космос. Вы миллионер? :-)
'Yes, I know that Americans say "Georgia." Russians say "Georgia." Do you want to fly? It's very expensive to fly into space. I know that one American millionaire flew into space. Are you a millionaire? :-)'

S: Летать, нет, но я люблю идея жить в космос. И я не миллионер ... пока! :)
'To fly, no, but I like the idea to live in space. And I'm not a millionaire ... yet! :)'

T: Почему вы любите эту идею? В космосе вы будете совсем один. Скучно!
'Why do you like this idea? In space you will be all alone. Boring!'

T. = teacher, S. = student.

The grammar learned by students (prepositional and accusative cases) naturally became a part of an authentic dialog. For example, in the above excerpt, the instructor modeled the use of prepositional case: в **Джорджии** 'in Georgia,' в **Атланте** 'in Atlanta,' в **Нью-Йорке** 'in New York,' в **космосе** 'in space,' and so forth. She modeled the use of prepositional case with and without an apposition: в **Джорджии** 'in Georgia' and в **штате Джорджия** 'in the state of Georgia' to call students' attention to the difference between the two grammatical endings. The instructor deliberately used the word космос 'space' in different cases—prepositional and accusative—with different endings to demonstrate the difference between grammatical expression of location and destination in Russian. What is more important, she provided implicit feedback and gently corrected the student when he erroneously used the nominative case instead of prepositional and accusative:

- Сейчас я живу в **Атланта, Джоржа** [nominative case erroneously used instead of prepositional].
'Now I live in Atlanta, Georgia.'
- Вы живёте в **Джорджии, в Атланте** [prepositional case].
'You live in Georgia, in Atlanta.'
- Мне **кажется, надо носить куртка** [nominative case erroneously used instead of accusative]!
'It seems to me that one needs to wear a coat!'
- Надо носить не куртку [accusative case], а скафандр! :-)
'One should wear a space suit, not a coat :-)'

- Я люблю идея [nominative case erroneously used instead of accusative] жить в космос.
'I like the idea to live in space.'
- Почему вы любите эту идею [Accusative case]?
'Why do you like this idea?'

The student immediately noticed the correct form in the instructor's posting and responded with the use of correct forms: В Джорджии, Наташа? Потому что вы живёте в Нью-Йорке, может быть вы не знаете Ирина и я живут в «Jaaw-zha»! :) Но сейчас я пишу «Джорджия». Правильно?" 'In Georgia Natasha? Because you live in New York may be you don't know that Iryna and I live in "Jaaw-zha"! :) But now I'm writing "Georgia." It is correct?' In this case, the student explicitly acknowledged the fact of noticing and adopting correct forms.

In most cases, students do not explicitly acknowledge noticing linguistic forms in the online discussions, however, by adopting the correct forms from the instructor's messages, they demonstrate that they are attending to both the meaning and the form of their postings. For example, the following dialog took place in the Intermediate Hybrid online discussion on the topic of what country to choose for a vacation:

- I.: Мы должны полететь в Бермуды. Гольф, теплая погода, но не слишком жарко ... совершенный. И они говорят по-английски, замечательные! Никто не спорить с этим.
'We have to fly in Bermuda. Golf, warm weather, but not very hot ... perfect. And they speak English, wonderful people! Don't argue with this!'
- B.: Я согласен. По моему мы должны поехать в Бермуды тоже. Но мы должны отплыть от Флориды.
'I agree. I think so too that we have to go to Bermuda. But we have to sail from Florida.'
- T.: Это моя мечта - поехать на Бермуды. Кто ещё хочет туда поехать? Вы хотите поплыть на пароходе или полететь на самолёте?
'It is my dream to go to Bermuda. Who else wants to go there? Do you want to go by ship or by plane?'

T. = teacher.

In this instance the instructor recast the incorrect use of the preposition в 'in, into' instead of the preposition на 'on, to' in I's utterance Мы должны полететь в Бермуды. 'We have to fly in Bermuda.' by using the correct preposition, Это моя мечта - поехать на Бермуды. 'It is my dream to go to Bermuda.' and modeled the use of unidirectional verbs of motion with the prefix по- indicating the start of movement. The student then used the construction correctly in a later message.

- L.: Мне нравится идея -поехать на Каррибы, но, я не хочу поехать на Бермуды потому что мы найдём "Бермуды Треугольник". Может быт мы поедём на другой остров? Что вы думаете о Арубе?
'I like the idea of going to the Caribbean, but I don't want to go to Bermuda because we'll find the Bermuda Triangle. Maybe we'll go to some other island? What do you think about Aruba?'

As illustrated in the above example, students were responsive to implicit negative feedback and, without referring to it directly, demonstrated their awareness of error correction by using correct structures. When students were asked whether they had noticed the communicatively occurring grammatical forms and the above mentioned types of error correction during the interviews, all of them confirmed that they indeed had and had also made direct connection between these forms and what they had been learning in the classroom. They found the recasting of incorrect constructions beneficial because the information was available to be taken note of while not being too intrusive, threatening, or disruptive to the conversational flow.

Overemphasis on Form

One of the major concerns of contemporary language instruction is achieving a balance between form and meaning. The same is true of online discussions. Sometimes, when given the opportunity to initiate discussions, students overemphasize form to the point of almost entirely neglecting meaning. For example, in the Elementary Online II class one of the students took the initiative to start a discussion forum for the lesson, "Weather and Seasons." He posted the following message to the discussion board:

S: Сейчас в Москве 6 градуса мороза по Цельсию или 21 градуса тепла по Фаренгейту. Сейчас в Санкт-Петербурге 5 градуса мороза по Цельсию или 23 градуса тепла по Фаренгейту. Сейчас в Киеве 1 градуса тепла по Цельсию или 34 градуса тепла по Фаренгейту.
 'Now it is 6 degrees below zero Celsius and 21 degrees above zero Fahrenheit in Moscow. Now it is 5 degrees below zero Celsius and 23 degrees above zero Fahrenheit in St .Petersburg. Now here it is 1 degree above zero Celsius and 34 degrees above zero Fahrenheit in Kiev.'

Another student responded to this message with the following posting:

E: Сегодня в Москве 12 градуса тепла по Цельсию или 54 градуса тепла по Фаренгейту. Сегодня в Ялте 9 градусов тепла по Цельсию или 46 градусов тепла по Фаренгейту. Сегодня в Барнауле 1 градуса тепла по Цельсию или 34 градуса тепла по Фаренгейту. **(Весна везде за исключением в Сибире!)**
 'Today here it is 12 degrees above zero Celsius and 54 degrees below zero Fahrenheit in Moscow. Today here it is 9 degrees above zero Celsius and 46 degrees below zero Fahrenheit in Yalta. Today here it is 1 degree above zero Celsius and 34 degrees below zero Fahrenheit in Barnaul. (It's spring everywhere except for Siberia!).'

In this example, the language elicited and generated by learners does not represent authentic communication. The students simply engaged in a drill-and-practice type of language activity to practice the target forms. A similar event took place in the Elementary Hybrid II class. When two students were assigned to start a discussion forum based on their own interest, they chose a task that forced their classmates to use the linguistic forms that were in focus in the course at the time, namely, genitive case after number: "What you have to do is make up a name and a grocery item that you would like to purchase, both of which must start with your letter. For example: A) Hi my name is Anna and I buy apples. B) Hi my name is Ben and I buy bananas ... and so on." Again, the language generated was drill-like and devoid of communicative intent.

- L: Привет. Меня зовут Анна, и я куплю восемь коробок апельсинов.
'Hi. My name is Anna, and I'll buy eight boxes of oranges.'
- P: Привет. Меня зовут Саша, и я куплю шесть свитеров.
'Hi. My name is Sasha, and I'll buy six sweaters.'
- B: Привет. Меня зовут Ольга, и у меня много окон.
'Hi. My name is Olga, and I have many windows.'

Such types of online discourse do not promote interactive learning, do not increase self-disclosure and collaboration among learners, and do not engage learners in authentic conversation. The fact that students preferred drill-and-practice exercises over meaningful discourse is revealing and supports the observation made by Conrad (1999) that beginning learners in general value repetition and a relatively structured environment. When pushed and supported by the instructor, however, students responded positively.

Playfulness

It is interesting to note that the students in all five classes frequently engaged in playful conversation while communicating about instructor-generated tasks. The use of humor, puns, teasing, and irony was common, a phenomenon that tends to be less noticeable in the "serious" environment of the f2f classroom. According to Broner and Tarone (2001), Cook (2000), Lantolf (1997), and Warner (2004), the role of playful and creative uses of language in second language acquisition is a powerful one for foreign language teaching. As Warner (2004) states, when learners play with the language and *within* the language they are learning, they are thereby negotiating meaning, relations between speakers, the medium, and the context. Most important, they negotiate their relationship with the language they are trying to learn. Through play, they transform the target language from being foreign and inauthentic into something with which they are more comfortable. For example, the following online conversation took place in the Elementary Hybrid II class:

- L: Мне не нравится учить историю. Это очень трудно. Мне не нравится читать о людях которых зовут Арса ...сумасшедшие Римланини ... Я должна пить много кофе, нет? Вы согласны?
'I don't like to study history. It is very difficult. I don't like to read about people called Arsa ... crazy Romans ... I have to drink a lot of coffee, no? Do you agree?'
- J: Кто Арса? Я никогда не слышал о нём. По моему кофе хорошо, а чай лучше.
'Who is Arsa? I have never heard of him. I think coffee is good but tea is better.'
- L: Арса человек в исторической книге. Мне нравится чай тоже. ;)
'Ursa is a person from a history book. I like tea too ;)'
- J: По-моему, ты не должна пить кофе. Ты должна пить много пива. Много алкоголя тебя может помоч учит трудную историю :)
'I think you shouldn't drink coffee. You have to drink a lot of beer. A lot of alcohol will help you study difficult history.'
- L: Нет, спасибо. Я так не думаю. Мне не нравится пиво. ... Я очень грустная. Это семестр (или триместр) будет кончать! Мой первый год университета

почти кончало! До свидания, тридцать шесть тысяч долоаров ... боже мой
 ...
 'No, thanks. I don't think so. I don't like beer. ... I'm very sad. This semester
 (or trimester) will be over! My first year at university is almost over! Good-
 bye thirty six thousand dollars ... oh my God ...'

In this playful conversation, two students discussed their personal feelings and attitudes using expressions that they had learned from their textbook such as Я **очень грустная**. 'I'm **very sad**', боже мой 'oh my God,' Я никогда не слышал о нём. 'I **have never heard of him**', and others for reporting their own personal experiences. Research in teaching and learning generally, and second language learning in particular, consistently underscores the power of student personal involvement in learning activities as a key to success. Here these two students are personally and playfully invested in their CMC conversation.

Implications

It is clear from these data that students both recognized and demonstrated the language learning progress they made in the CMC component of their coursework. The static, written language of their own and others' postings along with access to supporting language resources offered opportunities that they did not enjoy in other venues for making sense of and producing meaningful utterances using the Russian language exclusively. It is also clear, however, that both task design and the continuous implementation of instructional strategies that capitalized on the teachable moments that arose during these communicative exchanges was key to the learning. As much as we would like to think of CMC as a place where students can learn productively with and from one another, in these high-beginning and low-intermediate Russian language contexts it was eminently evident that the instructor's continued orchestration of tasks and facilitation of the task/discussion processes was critical to students attending to and appropriating the Russian they needed to communicate.

It follows that language teachers' awareness of the possibilities that CMC represents in terms of teachable moments and of the most effective instructional strategies they can use to capitalize on such moments can be viewed as an important part of contemporary professional development and practice in the 21st century. Further research on the influence of CMC-generated awareness of teachable moments for language learning—what Allwright (2005) calls "learning opportunities"—on f2f language classroom practices may reveal the utility of CMC as a powerful professional development tool for such awareness raising.

CONCLUSION

According to Long (1991, 1996), the main focus of a language learning activity should be on motivated interactions with a focus on form arising incidentally in meaningful, close to authentic, communication. Doughty and Varela (1998) also argue that incidental focus on form that emerges out of natural, uncalculated communication is beneficial for promoting target language use and accuracy. The advantages of CMC include the opportunity for both instructor and students to stop the clock, examine the language being used in interactive online conversation, attend to specific features, and engage in form-focused dialog. In this way, balance is achieved between the development of communicative fluency and an incremental increase in accuracy. Uses of instructional focusing based on students' own language production in online environments has been elsewhere described as positive (Levy & Kennedy, 2004; Meskill & Anthony, 2004, 2005). As in the f2f classroom, in instructor-orchestrated CMC activities, intentional focus on form within authentic, real-life communication in which learners are personally engaged can increase learners' grammatical, lexical, and syntactic competence.

In the past decade, CMC has offered a tremendous boon to education in general and to language education in particular. The technology has been harnessed into the service of learners and instructors around the world. For learners of other languages, they now have access to native speakers and their target-language-learning peers whom they can query and with whom they can practice and learn. For instructors, they now have very useful tools for guiding communication practice through conversations with students that are highly productive and instructive and that allow for teachers to undertake contextual analysis and focus learner attention on target language forms. In short, the medium is a powerful one for learning and teaching language and can be used in ways that afford optimal pedagogical practices.

In setting out to determine learners' reactions to a required CMC component of their high-beginning/low-intermediate Russian language courses, this study determined that the learners responded positively to CMC as a venue for conversing in the target language and for their instructors to teach and reinforce language forms in a conversational context. Based on the reactions of these students, we can also say with some confidence that lower level foreign language learners can indeed engage in and benefit from instructional conversations in CMC.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Tasks

1. Students were asked to discuss topics such as

"Stereotypes about Russia and Stereotypes about America" (Elementary Online I)

Какая Россия? Какая Америка? Что вы думаете? Какие стереотипы о России и об Америке вы знаете? 'What kind of country is Russia? What kind of country is America? What do you think? What stereotypes about Russia and about America do you know?'

"Friendship" (Elementary Hybrid I)

Ребята, как вы думаете, что такое настоящий друг? У вас есть такой друг? Почему вы его любите? 'Guys, what do think it means to be a "real friend?" Do you have such a friend? Do you love him/her?'

2. Students were asked to discuss articles from newspapers or magazines such as

"There is a Fly in My Soup" (Elementary Online II)

During this week you will participate in the text-based asynchronous online discussion with your classmates and instructors. The topic is "В моём супе муха" (*There is a Fly in My Soup*). In order to participate in this discussion, you have to read the attached article from a newspaper (in English) and express your opinions (in Russian only). What do you think about the problem presented in the article? Do you agree that it's a problem? Is it exaggerated? Give your reasons. You can start new threads or answer others' postings. The minimal number of messages that each of you has to post during these two weeks is 3. You can follow the model below.

Model № 1:

Я согласен с этой статьёй. Рестораны в Америке – большая проблема. Некоторые рестораны очень грязные. Я думаю, что нам нужен контроль. 'I agree with this article. Restaurants in America are a big problem. Some restaurants are very dirty. I think that we need control.'

Model № 2:

Я не согласен с этой статьёй. Я часто ужинаю в ресторанах. Мне нравится ужинать в ресторанах, потому что там чисто, красиво и вкусная еда. 'I disagree with this article. I often have dinners at restaurants. I like to dine at restaurants because they are clean and beautiful and there is tasty food.'

"Mysterious American Soul" (Elementary Hybrid II)

Ребята, прочитайте статью «Загадочная американская душа» и ответьте на вопросы. Что вы думаете об этой статье? Вы согласны с авторами статьи, что у американцев на первом месте семья, а на втором – работа? Вы считаете, что семья – это главное в жизни? Или работа – это главное в жизни? 'Guys, read the article Mysterious American Soul and answer the questions. What do you think about this article? Do you agree with the authors that for Americans family is always a priority and job is secondary? Do you think that family is the most important thing in life? Or that work is the most important thing?'

3. Students were asked to participate in role plays such as

"Wheel of Fortune" (Intermediate Hybrid)

All six of you participated as a team in the Wheel of Fortune game. Your team won an international trip. All six of you together can go to any country of your choice. You have to discuss and decide to what country all of you would prefer to go. Negotiate and compromise. Be sure to discuss why you prefer this or that country. Use verbs of motion where appropriate. Your final product is the name of the country you are going to.

4. Students were asked to participate in "conversational" activities such as

"You Look Nice" (Elementary Online II)

Attach your own photo to your posting to the asynchronous text-based discussion forum. In your posting, ask your classmates and your instructors if one of the clothing items on your photo suits you. You also have to respond to at least one posting and answer to the similar question of at least one of your classmates. Follow the model below.

Model:

Мне идёт эта красная куртка? 'Does this red jacket suit me?'

Мне идёт этот синий пиджак? 'Does this blue blazer suit me?'

Сара, тебе идёт эта красная юбка. 'Sarah, this red skirt suits you.'

Джефф, тебе идёт эта голубая шляпа. 'Jeff, this blue hat suits you.'

APPENDIX B

Anonymous Questionnaire (Evaluation of the *Blackboard* discussion activity)

Please don't write your name on this evaluation.

Please check the appropriate box.

Statement	Responses				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I learned a lot from this activity.					
2. This activity was very helpful for practicing my writing skills.					
3. This activity was very useful for practicing my reading skills.					
4. I wish the instructor participated more.					
5. I wish my classmates were more motivated to participate.					
6. I liked the discussion topics .					
7. I was satisfied with the error correction system in this course.					
8. I enjoyed this activity. It was fun.					
9. I invested too much time in this activity.					
10. I experienced technical difficulties (access to computers, Cyrillic, etc.).					

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

1. How does participation in the online activities for this course help develop your reading skills? What techniques do you use reading others' messages? Do you read all the messages posted? Based on what criteria do you select messages for reading?
2. How does participation in the online activities for this course help develop your writing skills? What techniques do you use? Do you try to adjust your messages to the level of your proficiency in Russian? Do you challenge yourself?
3. What type of the online activity would you prefer: task-based discussions or open-ended discussions on different topics? Peer-paired, whole class or instructor-paired?

4. Do you read all of the instructor's messages? How do you perceive the instructor's role in online activities? Have you noticed any specific instructional techniques? How do they work for you?

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

1. What is the role of online text-based threaded discussions? How did they help you to learn Russian better? What prevents you from participating in them? What do you think would help you?
2. What instructional techniques did you identify so far?
3. How do you perceive the role of an instructor in online text-based discussions?

AUTHORS' BIODATA

Carla Meskill is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University at Albany. Her research and teaching explores new forms of technology use in language education. Her area of specialization is in computer-assisted language learning, the design and evaluation of multimedia language-teaching environments, and the use of media in language classrooms. Dr. Meskill is the director of the Technology Assisted Language Learning (TALL) project and is also the coeditor of MERLOT World Languages.

Natasha Anthony is International Language Lab Director and designs and teaches online courses for learners of Russian at Hudson Valley Community College. She is also a Ph.D. student in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University at Albany. Her research focuses on computer-assisted language learning and teacher education.

AUTHORS' ADDRESSES

Dr. Carla Meskill,
Associate Professor, ETAP
ED 115
University at Albany, SUNY
1400 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12222,
Phone: 518 442 5007
Fax: 518 442 5008
Email: cmeskill@uamail.albany.edu

Natasha Anthony
Director, International Language Lab
BRN 112
Hudson Valley Community College
80 Vandenberg Ave.
Troy, NY 12180
Phone: 518 629 7500
Fax: 518 629 7541
Email: anthonat@hvcc.edu