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Managing synchronous polyfocality in new media/new learning: Online language educators' instructional strategies

Carla Meskill [a], Natasha Anthony [b],*

[a] Department of Educational Theory and Practice, State University of New York, Albany, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222, USA
[b] Professor Walter D. Karpiak International Language Laboratory, 80 Vandenburgh Ave, Troy, NY 12180, USA

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ABSTRACT

As more formal academic coursework moves online, especially to synchronous, multimodal sessions, the issue of directing and ensuring learner attention becomes particularly problematic. Polyfocalilty – individual and group attention distributed between and among information and communication sources and their varying modalities – becomes particularly challenging for online language education. This study set out to determine what instructional strategies online instructors are employing during their live conferencing sessions to meet such challenges. Seven online Russian language educators were interviewed concerning their practices. These instructors report instructional strategies that are addressed in the context of new media and new learning practice.

1. Introduction

Diffuse human attention as a consequence of continuous digital connectivity represents new challenges for educators (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009). This view sees contemporary digital learners as having been conditioned by recreational multitasking and the frenetic jumping of modalities. Such observations are particularly relevant to language education as experienced language educators rely a great deal on successfully reading learners' attending and comprehending behaviors in live classrooms; behaviors that are visually and aurally registered (Gorham, 1988). Verbal and non-verbal information – gestures, eye contact, affective cues – facilitate instructor signaling and responding to signs of attending and non-attending in instructionally productive ways with attendant moment-by-moment assessments of language learning a central characteristic of language teaching and learning dynamics (Meskill, 2010; Poehner, 2008).

In the brief history of online teaching and learning, it is widely understood that moving epistemologies and routines from brick and mortar classrooms to online venues is not pedagogically productive (Anderson, 2008). Because internet-based digital learning environments are fundamentally different, attempts at mimicking face to face instruction online are far from productive for both teachers and students. What, then, are the particular instructional designs and dynamics of synchronous language teaching and learning online that make sense to educators? In our attempt to systematically document language educators' instructional practices in synchronous online sessions along with their underlying new media/new learning epistemologies, we probed online instructors' experiences accordingly.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 518 629 7500.
  E-mail addresses: cmeskill@albany.edu (C. Meskill), n.anthony@hvcc.edu (N. Anthony).

2. Perspective

The perspective that guides this inquiry aligns with current shifts in language education away from focusing on discrete activity inside learners' heads to broader, contextual influences that shape socially and culturally mediated learning experience (Block, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Ortega, 2011). As a means of entrance into the socially mediated practices of online language educators, we take as a point of departure a *new media and new learning* approach to this phenomenon (henceforth "new media/new learning" to reflect conceptual interdependence). We thus employ the four dimensions that Cope and Kalantzis (2007) have proposed in addressing new digital teaching and learning: *design*, *pluralism*, *synaesthesia*, and *pedagogy*.

According to Cope and Kalantzis, the first dimension of new media/new learning, *design*, means that teachers and learners become designers, no longer deliverers and acquirers, of content. Both are agents of educating processes. With new media, teachers become co-designers of new knowledge and new forms of understanding alongside their students. The second dimension of the new learning, *pluralism*, is not only essential in an age of global connectivity and community building but also acknowledges the dynamism of learners and learning; this view does not, for instance, see individual or group traits as static, but rather as ever-shifting and developing in complex interaction with the world. The third dimension of new learning, *synaesthesia*, is the melding of perception between and among visual, aural and textual modalities. Cope and Kalantzis argue that this dimension of synaesthesia warrants investigation as it is now an intrinsic aspect of planning for, examining, and evaluating contemporary educational goals and processes. Finally, the dimension of *pedagogy* sees the active, co-constructing of learning as central especially as the learning is manifest in the higher-order shaping of new media's "cartographies and its grammars" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2007, p. 79). In short, this shift to new media/new learning sees educators and their learners as designers, builders, producers and critical evaluators of content, rather than receivers of pre-packaged content. This key perspective shapes our inquiry into Russian language teacher beliefs and practices regarding their online instruction in synchronous multimodal environments.

This study's perspective also shares a social perspective in keeping with the synthesis of theoretical shifts outlined by Ortega (2011) and Block's social turn (2003) in second language acquisition research. In analyzing the historical shift away from conceptualizing second language learning as predominantly psychological toward a more socially-based account, these scholars identify those perspectives shared among a number of SLA theoreticians who view learning processes as socially mediated. Because we are concerned with student attending in highly social multimodal environments, nested within the framework of new media/new learning through social processes we concurrently situate our research using Jones' construct of multimodal polyfocality, the complimentary and competing splits in focus so prevalent in 21st human digital activity (Jones, 2004).

When we point something out to someone, our intention is to change the focus of attention and mental state of that individual (Tomasello, Carpenter, & Liszkowski, 2007). When the pointer (in online learning this is most often the teacher) points during synchronous online sessions, she has limited ways of detecting if and how students' attention is impacted as a result of her directing. Mutual attending, then, is potentially problematic. Indeed, by virtue of the environment, synchronous online instruction radically alters the common perceptual field of interactants and thus the discourse of referring that works best (Hanks, 1992). The aspect of polyfocality is thus a central concern for our inquiry into teacher practices in new media/new learning. Fig. 1 (below) represents the theoretical stance for the inquiry.

Our theoretical perspective has each of Cope and Kalantzis' four broad elements of a new media/new learning perspective while also considering component interests particular to synchronous online language education processes: 1) second language learning social processes; and, within these processes, 2) the element of multimodal polyfocality. Thus, within the broader concept of new media/new learning, focus is trained on SLA processes and, further, within these the polyfocality inherent in synchronous language education. Our theoretical perspective, as represented in Fig. 1, guided conceptualization of this inquiry's focus, method and analysis of online educator interview data. We thereby explored the concepts and strategies
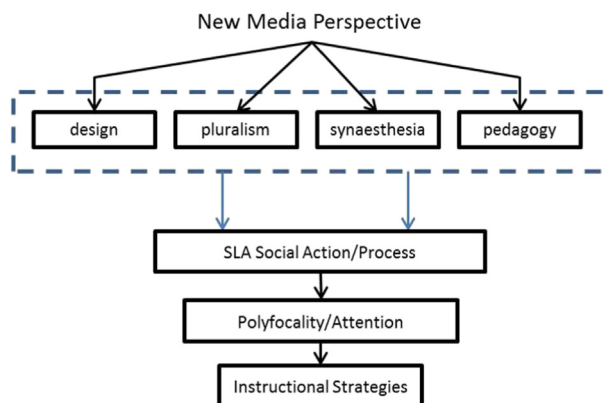

Fig. 1. Theoretical perspective.

of a group of educators as they reported and reflected on their instructional craft in multimodal online synchronous environments.

3. Background

There is broad consensus in the online teaching literature that synchronous online teaching is demanding. Multimodal environments that contemporary online instructors use to conduct live sessions are challenging to manage in instructionally positive ways. Indeed, managing learners at a distance using digital tools requires that instructors develop alternative teaching strategies from those used in traditional classrooms (Cunningham, Beers Fägersten, & Holmsten, 2010; Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Meskill & Anthony, 2010). Fairly radical changes in interactional patterns are required by the multimodality of online synchronous teaching so that educators find they must adapt both their perceptions of teaching and learning processes and the ways in which these are enacted. In short, "instructors still need to have their roles transformed pedagogically, socially, and technologically if they are to establish a more engaging and fruitful environment for online learning" (Liu, Bonk, Magiuka, Lee, & Su, 2005, p. 29). This is acutely important as, like in f2f classrooms, carefully crafted online teaching behaviors result in more alert and attentive learning (Kim & Bonk, 2010).

In the field of language education, research on students' attentional patterns during *asynchronous* course discussions indicate that when directed to attend through text highlighting and instructional conversation strategies, not only can students' attention be drawn to focal issues while they are engaged in authentic communication, but students' report that the extra time they had to process this visual guidance was highly valuable to their grammatical and lexical development (Lai & Zhao, 2006; Meskill & Anthony, 2007; Sachs & Suh, 2007). And while numerous and important studies have been undertaken examining the nature of synchronous learner interactions (e.g., Darhower, 2002; Jepson, 2005; Kötter, 2001; Kötter, Shield, & Stevens, 1999; Lai & Zhao, 2006; Sotillo, 2000) including how learners make use of the various modalities (Hampel & Stickler, 2012), few studies to date examine synchronous online interactions from *teachers' perspectives*. Those that have examined the multimodal dynamics of these synchronous sessions from a teaching perspective (Ene, Görtler, & McBride, 2005; Hauck & Haezewindt, 1999; McBride & Fägersten, 2008; Murday, Ushida, & Chenoweth, 2008) underscore the demanding nature of such instruction in terms of pre-planning and orchestration (Lee, 2008).

Earlier research on televised teacher behaviors underscores the importance of teachers' immediacy behaviors in that "instructors who engaged in immediate behaviors such as encouraging involvement, offering individual feedback, maintaining relaxed body posture and using vocal variety were viewed more favorably" (Hackman & Walker, 1990, p. 196). In online environments, such instructional actions have been variously examined as *e-moderating* (Salmon, 2000), *online facilitation* (Liu et al., 2005), *moderating strategies* (Shi, Bonk, Punya, & Tan, 2008) and *orchestrations* (Heuer & King, 2004). For the purpose of this inquiry, we probe the language-teaching specific construct of instructional strategies as these are articulated by practicing online educators in the context of Cope and Kalantzis' (2009) four dimensions.

Our four overarching research questions are thereby:

1) What instructional strategies do instructors envision when designing tasks and assessments for synchronous online sessions? How do they foresee managing individual and group communication and attention during such tasks? (DESIGN)
2) What instructional strategies do instructors use to build community between and among learners that promotes productive attention and interaction? (PLURALISM)
3) What instructional strategies do instructors employ to manage online multimodal tools in ways that promote productive attention and interaction? (SYNAESTHESIA)
4) What instructional strategies do instructors see as simultaneously managing the social, attentional and instructional goals of language teaching? (PEDAGOGY)

4. Methodology

4.1. Methodology: context

Study participants consisted of seven Russian educators teaching in the U.S. The range of time they had taught Russian online ranged from 3 to 8 years. Participants were recruited for the study via a professional network of online Russian teachers. Each had been teaching online for a minimum of 3 of the last 10 years. Each had varying amounts of experience planning and implementing live instructional sessions using one form of audio/video conferencing or another (see Appendix A). In their online contexts, learners participate in live sessions either from home computers or from school computers as part of supervised classes or as groups of students from different schools who gather to attend the same live sessions. They hear and see real time actions of teachers and students via changes in the appearance of the shared screen space as well as through hearing the teacher's and other students' voices. The general goal of their online teaching was to conduct form-focused communicative instruction in Russian where attention to targeted linguistic features arises in the context of meaningful communication.

Each 30-min interview was conducted via the Wimba Classroom. To attend this Wimba Classroom interview session, each teacher used an anonymous login. The interviews were recorded using the archive feature of the Wimba Classroom, saved to

the server, downloaded as mp3 files, then transcribed and analyzed. Subsequent follow-up questions were subsequently discussed through the same anonymous login.

4.2. Methodology: data

As a source of data on instructional processes, interviews are useful to understand "the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of the experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Language educators who are intellectually engaged in their instructional planning and processes indeed live the experience of synchronous online teaching and thereby represent the most reliable source of insight into such environments and appropriate practices within them. Through these interviews we sought to develop an understanding of online language-teaching practices given our theoretical perspective. We developed our interview questions accordingly (Appendix A).

In addition, as part of their interview process, instructors were asked to supply excerpts from their online courses that they saw as illustrative of their practices. These extracts, along with participants' commentary on the instruction reflected in these extracts, were central in developing subsequent, *in-vivo* (in the moment) questions for the participants. Stimulated by course excerpts and participants' responses, these were used to elicit detailed information regarding the instructional strategies employed by these online educators. Open-ended questions enabled us to explore instructors' impressions of the online sessions (McKay, 2006; Seidman, 2006) and allowed for more opportunity for participants to freely reflect and respond to interviewer follow on (Seidman, 2006). Probing questions brought forth details relevant to both the interviewer and the instructors and allowed for expansions and clarifications. As such, we consider these interview data not merely reports of practice, but reflections aroused through reflective conversation. This interviewing approach is what Talmy and Richards (2011) term interview data with an orientation to social practice; in this case the practice is professionals conversing about their work.

Digital texts of these educator interviews, along with annotated excerpts from their archived courses that they provided as illustrations, and about which they were probed, were in turn reviewed first independently, then jointly by the two authors to determine thematic categories for our new media/new learning framework (Fig. 1). In the following section, educators' observations and reflections on their synchronous online language-teaching practices are grouped and discussed by this framework's categories of new media/new learning and, subsequently, by thematic instructional strategies that thus emerged.

5. Outcome

5.1. The design dimension

Instructors spoke about the ways in which re-conceptualizations of course design were necessitated and responded to for multimodal, synchronous sessions.

5.1.1. The flipped classroom

One design shift for online courses that include synchronous sessions is the flipped classroom. This means loading up on both autonomous and group study prior to the live sessions with the instructor. This reserves what Teacher 1 called "precious time" for the kind of lively, fast-paced interactions she reports orchestrating. As Teacher 1 aptly pointed out "what's the point of doing that [watching video] in class if everyone can listen separately?" Teacher 4 concurred by saying "Why would they [students] bother logging in at the same time, finding time to match for everybody if we can record the video of us lecturing, putting it on the server, and it would be the same."

An example of the flipped classroom comes from Teacher 2 who reported assigning students to view a Russian children's video series in advance of the class's live sessions. "I found tons of YouTube videos for *Eralash* (a Russian movie journal for children) that do not involve too much comprehension skills, they have lots of action and lots of cultural realities and some Russian words that are easier to understand." Learners can, moreover, view videos and interact with multimodal materials at their own pace and convenience while they access materials to support their comprehension and production in the process. As such, learners actively prepare to use the new target language during the synchronous sessions.

5.1.2. The whiteboard

Teacher 3 observed that "the whiteboard is probably the pivotal point of the whole class. It connects everyone in the room…what's going on there should be engaging and informative. It has to have models and feedback, clarifications, you name it." This was echoed by all interviewees who stressed that the visual component in the design of synchronous online sessions assumes the centrality of the whiteboard to nearly all instructional interactions.

5.1.3. "Poof, it's there" (Teacher 1)

Another design element that was widely reported among interviewees is the pre-session organization of digital materials. Unlike the f2f classroom, online language educators can prepare and have at their fingertips all of the visual and aural material they anticipate needing; digital material that Teacher 1 observes is "fumble-proof." Rather than handling physical objects or writing out examples and cues on a board, online instructors can find and display relevant material quickly and efficiently.

Such efficiency was widely lauded, with the caution that pre-planning the incorporation of digital materials required careful forethought and organization. Additionally, Teacher 2 extolled the virtues of creating slides "inside of the program in the middle of class. You can be more spontaneous". While praising this feature, she, like the other online Russian educators, also reported keeping stores of focal and contingency slides at the ready.

Teacher 1 emphasizes the importance of consistent structure and layout of the central visual/instructional focus. Similar formats and structures, she says, "trigger[s] learners to understand" what they are expected to attend to and what they are expected to do. Three instructors discussed their use of a constant visual anchor – most often a set of focal words or structures – visually apparent on all session slides and activities that encapsulates what learners are to focus on, practice and master in a given session (e.g., Fig. 2, Task Toolkit). Indeed, this visual anchor that lays out the focal language for a given session was consistently pointed to as a key design element both for student attending and as a tool for the instructor.

5.1.4. High stakes participation

Building in high stakes for student participation during synchronous sessions was reported as a critical strategy to ensure continued student focus and engagement. All seven instructors referred to the importance of graded participation whereby students are evaluated on their performance before, during and after the live online session. Teacher 2 specifically describes tracking learner actions, their visual and aural responses to what appeared on the slides and to what she and others students said. She called these student actions "materialized attention" when learners responded to her cues to circle, underline or otherwise signal understanding on a course slide. Learners quickly come to understand that their actions are being orchestrated and closely monitored to assess participation and learning.

Ensuring learner attention during the fast-paced interactive processes that instructors report as characteristic of their synchronous sessions appears to be very much tied to the design of course structure and its attendant elements, visual, aural and kinesthetic. Structure is an element of pre-planning that, like traditional f2f classrooms, requires amassing and organizing diverse materials according to a conceptual map of what will unfold during the synchronous session. Here, instructors reported that this pre-planning design has a central motive to capture and sustain learner attention and interest. This element was consistently cited as central to design decision-making.

5.2. The pluralism dimension

When probed about diverse learner identities, how these are shaped and experienced within the online course community during these live sessions, and what specific strategies instructors used to promote what Cope and Kalantzis's term pluralism, participants were quite forthcoming and reflective about this particular aspect of new media/new learning.

5.2.1. Social, affective spaces

Five of the seven interviewees emphasized the inherently social nature of synchronous online learning and the ease with which digitally proficient young people become part of a high-functioning learning community. Teacher 4 observed that individual student patterns and personalities get noted and integrated into the ongoing instructional conversations. She also mentioned the many opportunities she has to personalize instruction via the fully public forums, the small group work she assigns, and, especially via the opportunities afforded by the chat function, opportunities that three of her online teaching colleagues echoed as abundant. Indeed, for many the chat feature is viewed as a means of getting to know individual learners and tailor instructions for them, something which Teacher 5 pointed out is not as easily accomplished in the live classroom. It is also, as Teacher 4 observed, an excellent affordance for building trust and confidence in learners:

Fig. 2. Task toolkit.

I think it's a vulnerable position to speak a foreign language and so puts students on the spot in real class and there is something being behind the screen in the computer class that makes this experience much more pleasant and less vulnerable for the students. And if they have a teacher like me, for example, who is very intuitive when my students are having difficulty and I am very generous with my support sometimes you give them one word and that's enough I think that makes it that much more comfortable for them. May be somebody is thinking gosh somebody is sitting behind the screen and laughing at me. Yes, but at the same time at least they don't see it and that is not that scary. You can be all red and blushed and you know and feel uncomfortable but it's better.

Teachers 2, 3 and 6 described the community cohesiveness they maintain and experience:

I don't know why but I know about each class a lot. From the very beginning, I ask them personal questions like if somebody had a birthday and I ask what presents did you get and it's rolling by itself. Some kids know each other because some of them are from the same school in spite the fact they are taking college classes. They introduce themselves at the beginning and when work together and ask each other questions, they learn about each other. (Teacher 2)

I had one class that they were already a community before they came into the Wimba classroom. They knew each other, they took the same classes. Some were close friends. Some even were attending the Wimba sessions from the same room. So they were inclined to use chat. They chatted all the time commenting on everything that was going on in class. All I had to do is to re-channel their chat into the right tunnel. I intervened in their chat with questions, comments all in Russian and prompted them to use Russian in their chat communication. And lots of humor. I even did not have to make any jokes. All I had to do is to recognize theirs with you know smiley faces, thumbs up, clapping – all those emoticons to encourage them to joke more and use Russian in such an informal, fun and engaging way. (Teacher 3)

Kids think it's neat that they are not sitting next to each other. They get to know each other by asking questions about what activities they like to do. They start maybe chatting a bit with each other. They think it's kind of a cool thing. (Teacher 6).

Teachers 1, 2, 3 and 5 reported asking students about their daily lives and their personal opinions as a means of community building. These conversations are undertaken as an entire class and/or as private asides between teacher and student via text chat. Teachers 4 and 6 reported students' side conversations whereby students use Russian to socialize during the live sessions. "Using the private chat teachers actually build connection and build trust online and that minimizes the feeling of isolation." (Teacher 4).

Having students work individually but in the same physical space afforded by the whiteboard where the behaviors of all are immediately observable was reported as an effective instructional strategy. Below is an example from Teachers 4's class whereby she instructed each of her students to draw a "crime suspect" into a cell on the whiteboard while she was reading his or her description. In this activity, the sense of cohesion and community, she observes, was palpable (Fig. 3).

Grouping students to work together in online breakout rooms can also work to support plurality. "I think they really love those group sessions (breakout rooms). Even the college students love that stuff, you know" (Teacher 4). However, Teacher 5 cautioned:

It's difficult at the beginning. It's hard to put them in groups and make them work together because they have no language skills but after they get some Russian skills, it's getting better. For example, they can have a list of questions for interviewing each other in Russian. I put them into the breakout rooms and then to present to the rest of the class what they learned. Because the questions were personal like what music do you like or what is your favorite meal, there is a strong sense of community getting established.
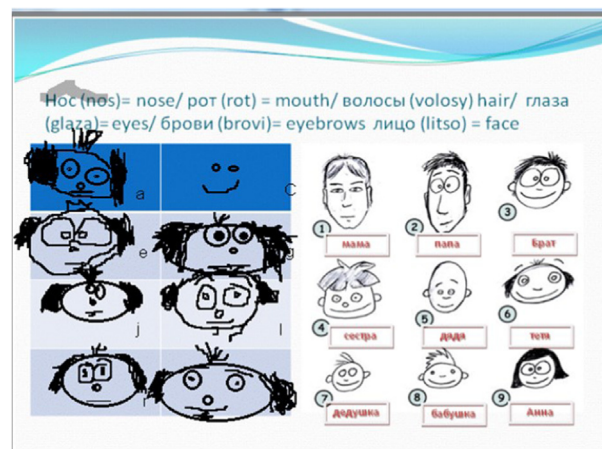

Fig. 3. Social, affective spaces.

The youngest and least experienced of the interviewees, Teacher 7, firmly disagreed with the notion of community building. "My main concern is to reach the lesson objectives. I also think establishing a community can be distracting. Kids start chatting with each other about personal things and miss some important things that are done in class."

5.2.2. On the ground

At students' distant locations, there is sometimes a facilitator whose responsibility it is to monitor and ensure students are engaging with the activity on the screen. Teacher 1 calls this setting "on the ground". More than one on-the-ground class might be involved in the same session separated by location. When asked about how this scenario works in terms of building and maintaining community at a distance, Teacher 6 reported that geographically diverse learners mix very well online because contemporary learners are accustomed to online environments, modes of chatting, multitasking, etc. This is echoed by Teacher 4 who reflected that "we learn differently nowadays than we did before with this multitasking".

5.2.3. Multimodal pitfalls

As in all human interaction, the plurality dimension can sour. Teacher 3 reported on community building gone awry in her synchronous sessions.

> It was distracting sometimes when it got too wild. That was the whole parallel world at times and I was like hmmm do they really attend to all the things I'm saying and showing on the whiteboard and to everything other students are saying. I know multitasking is everything now but to what degree can it go? At some point when I felt it was really too out of control, I just disabled the chat and asked all of them to participate in the "real world". It's kind of funny that I'm thinking about it right now. The virtual world, and I mean speaking and listening with mics, became their real world and the chat became an underground world. Oh those realities! Anyway, that is one of the ways I create a community. When students are shy, don't know each other, I myself start chatting in Russian making comments that are made of basically cognates and emoticons to make them relax and see that this language is not something absolutely unfamiliar and foreign. (Teacher 3)

Teacher 2, while admitting that some features available to them during live sessions can be used by students disruptively, also pointed out that when thoughtfully controlled by the teacher, these tools contribute greatly to bringing the class together:

> Indeed, it can be distracting but I only had one class that was out of control with their texting to each other on the topics not related to the lesson. If it's too disturbing, teachers can disable chat. Although I have never done that, even in that chatty class. In the newer programs for live communication, chat, even private chat between students, is supervised, and I warn my students right away that I can see everything they type. Besides, I can see what tools each of them uses, and if one decided to scribble on the whiteboard just for fun, I can see who did it and stop it. (Teacher 2)

Thus, while different features of audio conferencing can be potentially misused, in general, with new more sophisticated teacher control devices, multimodal pitfalls apparently can become manageable.

For synchronous online language learning sessions, the element of pluralism is complex as it is in the broader new media/new learning paradigm. In the case of monolingual U.S. students learning Russian, this is in large part a factor of the complexities of social processes when 1) diverse learners and learning constitute those processes; and 2) the challenges of the multifaceted online environment and these learner differences are skillfully managed. All save one of these instructors reported a range of connecting strategies that work toward shaping the pluralism dimension into a positive one for these real time sessions.

5.3. The synaesthesia dimension

Managing and orchestrating multiple modalities to guide and support Russian learning while in multimodal synchronous environments is clearly challenging and, as interviewees made clear, represent opportunities for pedagogical craft and creativity.

5.3.1. Visual attending

Teacher 3 sees digital visuals as dependable means "to make sure students pay attention". She combines images, audio and her voice to insure learners are attending to the focal material. "I would also simplify the grammar explanations provided in their textbook and put a simplified and visualized version on the slide with the task." Teacher 4 is a proponent of "less text, more visual" to secure and sustain learner attending. Teacher 3 reported using the chat feature to

> duplicate in written form what I say in Russian or what they say in Russian. I think because they don't have moving lips in front of them, all the input should be done in two modes: oral and written.

Teacher 7 referred to this aspect of teaching in the synchronous online medium as "doubling the effects" by virtue of multimodal input.

Teacher 4 advocates visual variety as a means of maintaining students' attention. "I've noticed attention is much shorter so I break my activities up. I honestly think that something should be going on every 30 s on the slide in order to keep attention even if you have like a portion of your synchronous component when you present something or explain something so that every second something should happen and then you can change the activity."

The youngest of the interviewees, a teaching assistant who was provided with instructional materials by her mentor, reported: "Sometimes I divide one slide into two slides when I see too much information…the slide looks too busy. I color the slides, color the words blue or red, the key words to call attention to them. I would also use italic fonts and separate lines of the dialog to avoid confusion."

Teacher 1 observed that using digital visuals in various forms makes concrete what is typically abstract in a live classroom, e.g., "Relaxing on the beach is not something you can act out in class very well but you can put up the clip art, ask somebody to say something, and all of a sudden, they are sitting relaxing on the beach". She also reported collecting pictures of her students that she then integrates into stills, animations and videos to personalize the visual prompts. "For instance, if I'm doing practice with verbs, I would put up clip art with actions and replace the faces in the clip art with the faces of my students."

5.3.2. Non-verbal cuing

Teacher 1 reported a range of multimodal cuing that can be orchestrated in online synchronous teaching environments. One strategy, "hamming it up" in front of her webcam using affirmative nods, puzzled looks, and "happy dances when they are right; I pause and look expectantly as a form of providing gentle feedback", she reported as integral to her online instructional repertoire. Teachers 2 and 3, on the other hand, shunned pointing the webcam at themselves. Indeed, Teacher 2 sees a video of herself as a potential distraction from focusing on the slides she carefully prepares and manipulates. Teacher 3 sees video of herself as non-additive and observes:

> Lots of things are going on at the same time. I have to deal with the distractions of the real world around me (laughing). You know, when you are in a real class, it's sacred. No one disturbs you. Everyone understands that you are there to teach and this process should not be interrupted. In a virtual class, it's always something. Someone knocks on your door, the phone rings, emails are popping up. I'm all over the place trying to handle many components of both environments at the same time. I don't think my face would be too helpful to students (laughing).

All interviewees reported manipulating visuals to great effect to cue responses and reinforce understanding. Teacher 4 emphasized that she is more inclined to use visual techniques such as highlighting and circling in lieu of her own voice to cue learner comprehension and production. Teacher 5, on the other hand, tends to use her voice plus action on the whiteboard as "effective tools". To ensure continued attention, she uses both voice and actions to "call on names randomly". She believes "this medium even helps them keep on the ground instead of distracting. They have to watch what I'm showing by underscoring and what I'm saying." Similarly Teacher 1 stated, "I put pictures on the screen like various things and then I'll say a word and they have to move their pointer to it so it's just a physical response to a verbal cue."

5.3.3. Modeling the visual and aural

Teacher 3 described her approach to orchestrating the aural and visual: "When I [verbally] model what is on the slide, at the same time I use different colors, underscore the words and phrases on the slide or just circle the key words or put checks next to each line in the dialog. Whatever! I use everything to call their attention to the models." The visual strategies of circling, underlining, checking off, etc. were consistently cited by the interviewees as effective attentional strategies during the live sessions. Teacher 3 also pointed out that by simply returning to an earlier slide she can cue learners to attend to their output and make changes according to what appears on the revisited slide.

Modeling pronunciation via the teacher webcam and using pictures and animations were also reported as efficient, multimodal means of instructing, though this most often occurs incidentally as other communication practice is being undertaken.

Rather than struggle with typing in Cyrillic, some students use the cut and paste function in chat to "respond" to their instructor and classmates. Two strategies to avoid this shortcut were reported: 1) direct students to respond via their private chats where the shortcut is not possible; and 2) engage learners in what Teacher 1 called visual dictation: "I put words on the whiteboard and ask them to type them out" thus forcing students to practice typing Cyrillic.

Teacher 3 also advocates "practicing concepts in multiple modalities" as a means of effective language learning and employs a range of combined visual, aural and textual strategies as a result. She also reported assigning short YouTube clips and having students write down and report key elements. In one case students watched and wrote down the names of professional occupations mentioned in the video.

Clearly the orchestration of multimodalities can, when well undertaken, enhance social language learning processes while contributing to learner attending. Visual instructional strategies – instructors and students performing visual actions on class slides and/or whiteboard – accompanied by aural commentary, questions, observations, etc. stand out in participants' reflections on their online instructional practices and reportedly play a central role in securing and maintaining learner attention throughout.

5.4. The pedagogy dimension

Cope and Kalantzi's contention that new media/new learning is experiential, co-productive learning is certainly reflected in these Russian teachers' reflections on their craft. Keeping students directed via active participation in a range of multimodal actions is central to this effort.

5.4.1. Focus, model, repeat

Across all seven participating teachers, the pedagogical mantra was focusing attention, modeling and repetition. To focus learners attending to the linguistic goals for a given session, Teacher 1 reported beginning the session with a question and answer period to anchor the focus on what is to be practiced and learned. Her teaching is also driven by "the notion of exposure, exposure, and exposure before production." This includes the pedagogical dimension of modeling as well, a feature of online language teaching that was consistently emphasized as central, especially when it comes to lengthy Russian words for which repeated, modeled pronunciation is a necessity. By contrast, Teacher 2 uses slides that are not self-explanatory to focus learner attention. "While I'm telling them something, they have to look at the slide and think what I'm going to do with this slide." She reported that this keeps students from rehearsing what they will say or do in response to the visual and thus concentrate more on the instructor's voice.

Teacher 1 uses a model dialog that cues students to practice the language targeted. Like many of the other interviewees, she also reported using a good deal of pointing at materials on her slides to model what she wishes her students to do, then cuing them throughout through matching verbal and non-verbal cues. One of her goals in doing so, she stated, is to gradually relinquish responsibility and have students take over speaking while manipulating the visual materials themselves, something she has "braver students" take on initially. Teacher 2 uses her slides and her voice to cue students to fill in missing parts, endings and selections on the whiteboard while providing commentary on their on-screen actions in Russian. While she models these actions, and while other students perform them "they have to track the process" and thereby attend to comprehending multimodal content throughout. She also reported using "verbal problem solving traps" as a technique to maintain student engagement and focused practice, a form of questioning that elicits responses that indicate learners are engaged in the problem at hand.

As mentioned in relation to the design dimension, having a constant visual anchor that encapsulates the language learning goals for the live session on all screens and during all activities is equally a sound pedagogical strategy in that the visual anchor to what is being practiced and learned can be actively manipulated by the instructor. For example, Teacher 1 reported "I cover things [the constant list of learning focus] up if I want to quiz them. I reveal the answers. I almost always have a grammar table or a bit of information we're working on carrying it through every single slide."

5.4.2. Teachable moments

Without disrupting the communicative flow of the real time conversation, the online instructor can insert visual feedback, e.g., happy/sad faces, or a visual hint (Teacher 1). Teacher 2 stated, "I put smiley faces or stars on the whiteboard when they answer correctly. I underscore, circle, point, etc. I put a check mark if they answer correctly." Teacher 3's students use the chat area to ask and respond to questions about grammatical forms within the focal aural activity so as to not disrupt the flow of that interaction. She noted that during her live sessions, questions about vocabulary are usually posed and responded to orally whereas grammar queries are worked out in the chat box.

Teacher 1 reflected that she is able to understand "based on their reactions" whether students are paying attention and understanding what is going on and that she makes adjustments accordingly, much like in the f2f classroom. The difference, of course, is the rate and mode of reaction she can observe. Teachers 3 and 5 noted that the chat feature often becomes a place where students themselves respond to teachable moments by providing scaffolding, explanations and support to one another using both English and Russian. And Teacher 2 highlighted the value of the instant screen shot whereby she snags an image to correct, reinforce or introduce relevant visual information in response to a teachable moment.

Teacher 1 described the orchestration of the visual and aural she practices while responding to student learning:

> I circle it or make a rectangle over it or use a pointer and point to it… [I] keep it lively enough so that they will pay attention…I use the pointer, I call it the magic want, and you can change it and my favorite is the flashing light bulb … and you can put clip art up on the screen and so on and you have the standard drawing tool and the cool thing is that you can type in Russian on the screen and use these. (Teacher 1)

In the context of teachable moments, Teacher 6 pointed to the distinct modality of non-seeing. As regards teachable moments, she observed that for her teaching in synchronous online venues differs little from the f2f classroom save the fact that "really, you're just not seeing them [students]".

5.4.3. Capitalizing on chat

Teacher 1 reported that her students often carry on side conversations with her in chat about news from Russia or Russian media. "If I want to send them a link about something, the chat box is a good place because it's a live link." (Teacher 1). Teacher 3 stated that she "insert[s] links into the chat so that they can click on them and read more on the subject. I have a couple of sites in mind that I know well and I like their grammar explanations – concise and to the point – I refer students to them when I see if one struggles with that concept." Finally, Teacher 1 said that she disables the student–student chat feature if she feels students' attention is straying from the central tasks.

Instructional strategies and actions in synchronous online sessions to some extent mirror those of the traditional f2f classroom. From these interview data the difference seems to lie in the visual and aural means by which instructors guide learner attending to the focal language to be learned for a given session. Teachable moments are characteristically unique in that instructors must rely on learner aural and on-screen actions to assess such moments, and in that they have a unique arsenal of multimodal responses and response ornamentations at their fingertips. This also means many and more opportunities for individualizing instruction.

6. Discussion and implications

Using a new media/new learning perspective that accommodates second language learning processes, including the polyfocality inherent in online synchronous instructional sessions, we investigated educators' observations about the design, pluralism, synaesthesia and pedagogical dimensions of their practices. As we have seen in the previous sections, when these online instructors design their synchronous sessions, they use specific structuring strategies. Indeed, it is clear that managing learner attention around the focal language of that session is in the foreground of their planning. In conjunction with designing for attention, like most language educators, they employ instructional strategies that encourage active community building and attentive interactions with others as part of the pluralism dimension of new media/new learning. Specifically, they reported employing connecting strategies to do so. Further, the ready availability of multimodal tools assists in planning for and implementing such strategies thus addressing the synaesthesia dimension within which they reported manipulating modalities to great effect. These multimodal strategies simultaneously serve in managing their concurrent social, attentional and pedagogical goals for the synchronous sessions where they actively manage learner attention while conversing for pedagogical purposes.

When we consider the whole of these professional educators' reported practices, it becomes clear that while synchronous online language teaching has its challenges, at the same time online teaching venues afford the use of multiple digital tools and resources, something that these online Russian educators are apparently exploiting to positive instructional effect. For example, these instructors indicated that their planning and design of synchronous instruction, their efforts toward cultivating a sense of online community during the live sessions, and their orchestration of multi-modalities along with their pedagogical practices are attuned to the advantages and limitations of the online environment. They reported compensating for not being able to observe their students directly through a variety of multimodal instructional means. Indeed, limitations of synchronous online environments can apparently be transformed into advantages. The continual need to direct and assess learner attention, for example, which risks devolving into something akin to direct instruction can be creatively exploited as language learning episodes through the various multimodal channels. Such pedagogical accommodations are discussed and illustrated throughout these educators' interview responses and in the course excerpts they provided. Such accommodations are clearly integral to their language-teaching calculus as they plan and orchestrate activity so that the target language is productively used while student attention gets creatively managed.

As far as implications for teacher professional development in online language instruction are concerned, clearly, the success using medium-specific instructional strategies was, for all participants, a matter of trial and error based on their experiences and accumulated expertise from traditional classroom teaching. As Teacher 1 confided, "you learn a couple of things then you move on and learn a couple of other things and then you try more and you like 'wheee!' that's fun, let's try more." Regarding language teacher professional development in synchronous instruction, teacher development can benefit from critical examination of precepts concerning pedagogy and the many dimensions of technologies that can augment, reshape or suppress these. The voices of practicing online language educators are central in this regard. That said, an inquiry such as the one reported here can provide a mapping of the perceptual and procedural focus of such training, a need for which has been well documented elsewhere (Berglund, 2009; Hampel & Hauck, 2003; Hampel & Stickler, 2005, 2012).

From a new media/new learning perspective, mapping out what educators report as effective online teaching strategies that are particular to second language processes and that make accommodations for polyfocal online environments can serve as a launching point for future professional development design and research. Exploring those instructional strategies that professional educators see as central to their practices is positively productive in this regard and can lead to a common lexicon of new media/new learning practices for 21st century language learning and teaching. The *structuring* and *connecting strategies*, along with *manipulation of modalities* and the *managing of learner attention while conversing* that these educators report and illustrate are clearly areas of interest in this regard.

7. Conclusion

The dynamic nature of educator development, especially given new tools, new environments and the larger new media/new learning phenomena of contemporary digital life, is something from which we stand to learn a great deal. Experienced online language educators represent a rich source from which to draw in this regard. Accordingly, this study set out to explore language educators' practices while teaching Russian in synchronous online venues. When probed for and analyzed from a new media/new learning perspective with an eye to social processes and the polyfocal demands within these, educators' responses illuminate a number of educator-generated instructional strategies regarding design, pluralism, synaesthesia and pedagogy that shape language learning processes and the attention they require. Its outcomes thereby represent a step toward development of a much-needed productive grammar for these language-teaching practices as well as for the concept of new media/new learning in synchronous online environments generally. In sum, as online language education continues to evolve, turning to professional educators to see what is central to their craft is potentially informative and productive to the development of empirically-grounded foundations in the field of online education.

Appendix A. Participant information

	Nationality	Years teaching	Contexts of teaching	Philosophy of language teaching
Teacher 1	U.S.	Russian and ESL for more than 20 years	Both f2f and online; taught both college and high school	Communicative language teaching; activating students' life knowledge in language learning is key; memorization is frequently underrated; modeling; playfulness
Teacher 2	Russian	Taught ESL, Russian, and applied linguistics in the US for 10 years and in Canada for 3; total experience teaching 25 years	Both f2f and online; online course development; taught both college and high school	Communicative language teaching; collaborative construction of meaning
Teacher 3	Russian	Taught Russian and professional development courses in the US for 12 years; total experience teaching 20 years	Both f2f and online; online course development; taught college level	Communicative form-focused language teaching
Teacher 4	U.S.; Russian heritage speaker; bilingual	Russian, Spanish, ESL, Instructional Technology, Distance Learning, General Ed; total experience teaching 16 years	Both f2f and online; taught both college and high school	Communicative language teaching; also believes in the constructivist approach
Teacher 5	U.S.; Russian heritage speaker; bilingual	Years of teaching- 12 overall, 6 years of online teaching; teaching mostly Russian or English	Both f2f and online; taught college	Philosophy of language teaching varies from school to school; overall believes in combining various techniques (visual, audio, conversation, information gap) to achieve the best results; basically, ensuring that every type of learner is reached
Teacher 6	U.S.; Russian heritage speaker; bilingual	Taught Russian, Spanish and French for 5 years	F2f and online; K–12 and college levels	Communicative language teaching
Teacher 7 (TA)	Russian	Taught Russian in the US for 3 years; total experience teaching 3 years	Online only; taught college level	Grammar based with communicative emphasis

Appendix B. Interview Questions

- When you design synchronous sessions, what are your primary steps? Concerns?
- What kind of planning do you do to insure learners are attending?
- When you consider the multiple modalities of which you might make use, what do you consider?
- What do you consider in terms of directing and sustaining learner attention?
- When orchestrating these live sessions, what considerations do you have concerning class community?
- What are some strategies you use to establish and maintain class community/group involvement and learner attention?
- While you are teaching, how would you characterize your instructional strategies?
- Do you use any of the digital tools to gain students' attention? If so, how?
- How do you know when students are actively attending? What signals this to you?

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