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Newly Arrived Migrant Students' perceptions of second language learning conditions in Emergency Remote Teaching: The case of Flanders

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Abstract When Newly Arrived Migrant Students (NAMS) enter their country of arrival, they are expected to get familiarized with the new educational system, while simultaneously acquiring the language of instruction. Within this context, comprehensible input and meaningful interaction are needed to effectively acquire a second language. While educational systems worldwide switched to Emergency Remote Teaching due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, such online learning environments often fail to meet these language learning conditions adequately. We investigated NAMS' perceptions of second language learning conditions during online learning through six semi-structured focus groups with 23 NAMS. Results show that participants encountered greater difficulties in understanding their teachers' input in online classes. Although alternative input channels, such as video recordings, reportedly did not entirely compensate the lack of interaction in the online environment, participants believed that processing alternative sources of input enabled them to maintain their Dutch proficiency through Emergency Remote Teaching.

Keywords Newly Arrived Migrant Students, language learning, Emergency Remote Teaching, COVID-19, focus groups

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1 Introduction

Within the field of second language acquisition, it has been well established that the success of language learning relies on various conditions. In the first place, research has confirmed that comprehensible input is advantageous for different aspects of language proficiency, including vocabulary knowledge (de Vos et al., 2018) and speaking skills (Saito & Hanzawa 2018). Moreover, it has been shown that qualitative interaction facilitates language learning in the second language classroom (Kim, 2017). Input and interaction are considered to be key elements of successful second language learning, which makes it especially relevant for Newly Arrived Migrant Students (NAMS): this vulnerable student population is expected to acquire the language of instruction, while also getting familiarized with the educational system and integrating in a new social culture (Emery et al., 2020). In 2020, educational systems worldwide switched to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) due to the outbreak of COVID-19 (Drane et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Thus, along with a large number of students all over the world, many NAMS moved their

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learning trajectories to an online environment. Referring back to the importance of input and interaction for (online) language learning, it is relevant to consider in what way NAMS perceived input and interaction in the context of ERT. Therefore, this exploratory study focuses on NAMS' experiences with these language learning conditions during ERT. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 NAMS in Flemish mainstream secondary education, focusing on participants' experiences with online interaction and participation.

2 Literature review

2.1 Conditions for second language learning

Over the past decades, applied linguistics theorists have put forward several necessary conditions for second language learning to take place, two of which are comprehensible input (Krashen, 1992) and meaningful interaction (Long, 1996).

Firstly, input refers to "language that is available to the learner through any medium (listening, reading or gestural in the case of sign language)" (Gass & Mackey, 2006, p. 5). Since the 1970s, the notion that language acquisition requires a significant amount of input in the target language has been a prevalent theme in second language acquisition research (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021). This concept was further developed by Krashen (1985) in the Input Hypothesis, stating that language acquisition occurs through understanding messages, which is why comprehensible input in the target language is necessary. More specifically, Krashen's hypothesis suggests that comprehensible input should ideally contain an "i + 1", i.e. a language feature that the language learner has not yet acquired, but is ready to do so. However, this notion of "i + 1" has been criticized of being poorly defined (Ellis, 1994), leading to various revised versions of the input hypothesis. For instance, Lichtman and VanPatten (2021, p. 296) suggested a reformulation of the input hypothesis stating that comprehensible input is "the principle data for the acquisition of language". Thus, although certain aspects of the input hypothesis have faced considerable criticism (Bailey & Fahad, 2021), the central premise of the input hypothesis remains valid to this day (Loewen, 2021).

Expanding on the significance of input, research in second language acquisition later shifted its attention towards the role of interaction for language learning, with Long's Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) as one of the main frameworks. This hypothesis describes the value of interaction for language learning, and especially highlights the importance of negotiation for meaning (Long, 1996). When a second language learner and an interlocutor are interacting, the interlocutor might produce input that is incomprehensible to the second language learner. The resulting interaction between the two speakers, in which they both make efforts to understand each other, creates opportunities for the second language learner to understand and use the language that was incompre-

hensible at the start (Mackey, 1999). In other words, through negotiation for meaning in interaction, input that is initially incomprehensible can be made comprehensible. According to the interaction hypothesis, the process of negotiation for meaning facilitates second language comprehension and acquisition (Long, 1996; Mackey, 1999).

Building on the hypotheses above, various studies have attempted to gauge the impact of input and interaction on second language learning. In the first place, although there is a certain challenge to measuring second language input (Flege, 2008), many efforts have been undertaken to estimate input and its effects on language learning in various ways. For instance, Saito and Hanzawa (2018) conducted a longitudinal study focusing on the impact of L2 input on the speaking proficiency development of 40 Japanese learners of English as a foreign language. The study found that, especially in the early stages of language learning, there was a notable correlation between the total hours the participants spent in English classes and their progress in English pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar (Saito & Hanzawa, 2018). More specifically, a meta-analysis of 30 studies measuring incidental vocabulary learning through spoken input revealed that, on average, participants enhanced their vocabulary proficiency by 1.05 standard deviations following exposure to meaning-focused L2 input (de Vos et al., 2018).

Additionally, several research studies utilizing both experimental designs (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019; Luan & Sappathy, 2011) and longitudinal approaches (Saito et al., 2021) have attempted to evaluate the degree to which participating in target language interactions enhances learners' second language proficiency. In the experimental study of Luan and Sappathy (2011), it is investigated to what extent vocabulary items are retained after conducting various vocabulary tasks. Participants consisting of Malaysian primary school students were divided in two groups: a control group, receiving input-only tasks, and an experimental group treated to both input and two-way interactive tasks. The analysis of participants' results in various post-tests indicated that the experimental group exhibited a notable enhancement in their vocabulary knowledge compared to the control group, in both the immediate and delayed post-tests. This led to the conclusion that interaction facilitated participants' vocabulary learning (Luan & Sappathy, 2011). Similarly, Saito and colleagues (2021) conducted a longitudinal study to determine the way in which speech learning in experienced and inexperienced second language learners is enhanced through interaction. While the less experienced group demonstrated improvement in their L2 speaking skills primarily in the areas of vocabulary richness, grammatical accuracy, and fluency, the more experienced group also showed slight progress in pronunciation (Saito et al., 2021). Similar results were reported in the experimental study of Namaziandost and Nasri (2019), where it was found that peer interaction fosters the speaking skills improvement of Iranian English learners.

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2.2 The potential of second language learning conditions in an online context

Above, it is stated that comprehensible input and meaningful interaction have proven to be important facilitators of second language learning, which can be transferred to the language classroom. However, in preceding years, language classrooms have expanded from traditional, face-to-face classrooms to online settings (Kryshtanovych et al., 2022), particularly in the form of distance education. In what follows, we explore the potential of input and interaction for language learning in such distance education contexts.

Due to the interconnection between input and interaction in the context of acquiring a second language, there are only a limited number of studies that explore the potential of input alone in an online language learning environment. However, Zhang and Zou's (2022) review study stands out as a noteworthy exception. Through conducting a systematic review of 57 articles on technology-enhanced second or foreign language learning, it was found that various technological sources of input, from audio and video clips to peer instruction, have proven to be effective in online language learning.

Unlike input, the benefits of interaction for language learning in distance education settings have been explored in numerous studies. For instance, an experimental study by Souzanzan and Bagheri (2017) investigated how the speaking proficiency of Iranian learners of English as a foreign language was affected by online learner-teacher interaction through video calls. Results showed that the considerable amount of interaction between learners and their teachers significantly improved learners' speaking abilities compared to a control group who did not have such interactions. Similarly, Yen et al. (2013) investigated the potential of online interaction for improving second language acquisition by working with 42 'English Conversation' students in Taiwan. Their study found that one-on-one role-play interactions between learners through video call sessions enhanced students' accuracy in speaking English, as indicated by a significant reduction in speaking errors following the interactional intervention.

2.3 Second language learning conditions and Emergency Remote Teaching

The aforementioned studies investigated language learning through computer-mediated tools, thus exploring the potential of online distance education for language learning. However, it is important to distinguish between language learning through distance education and language learning in Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), which was implemented due to COVID-19. While distance education encompasses all forms of learning originally intended to be conducted with a physical distance between the instructor and learner (Aguliera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020), ERT specifically refers to the use of fully remote teaching solutions for courses that were previously face-to-face or blended in a crisis context, and that are intended to revert to that format once the crisis or emergency subsides (Hodges et al., 2020).

Regarding language learning in the ERT context, the majority of studies have centered on the general viewpoints of both teachers and students. In the first place, research on teachers' perceptions of language learning in ERT shows unsatisfactory results. For instance, Moser and colleagues (2021) spread a survey among 377 K-12 language educators, who expressed unfavorable views on online language teaching and learning. According to the participants' responses, virtual classrooms were perceived to result in undesirable learning outcomes, although the participants did not provide specific explanations for these observations. Similar results were reported by Harsch et al. (2021): in another survey conducted among teachers, participants reported that ERT resulted in reduced opportunities for target language interaction, ultimately leading to lower language learning outcomes.

Multiple studies have yielded mixed findings regarding students' perceptions of language learning through ERT. For instance, students have expressed difficulties with language learning in an ERT context, as it reportedly impedes direct interaction with teachers and peers and causes frequent misunderstandings due to technological issues (Harsch et al., 2021). The same challenges were reported by the participants in a study by Thomas et al. (2021), in which 7 primary-school aged English as an Additional Language pupils were interviewed. However, the participants generally expressed their happiness in learning English through these ERT classes, despite the circumstances. Moreover, they reported that the lessons were advantageous for their progress in acquiring an additional language (Thomas et al., 2021). More positive student perceptions of language learning through ERT were reported in Saud Alahmadi and Alraddadi (2020): through a questionnaire, participants reported having experienced meaningful interaction in the online learning environment, causing virtual classes to improve their second language skills.

In sum, while previous research has highlighted the potential of input and interaction for language learning through distance education, research on second language acquisition in the specific context of ERT has been limited to the study of teachers' and students' perceptions, predominantly assessed via surveys. Although we acknowledge the significance of these perceptions, it is important to note that conducting in-depth interviews could potentially expand our comprehension of the role that input and interaction play in ERT, specifically when it comes to second language learning.

3 Research context: NAMS in Flemish education

The present study is set in Flanders, Belgium. Flanders' unique educational system for NAMS, described by the European report on education for NAMS as a "compensatory support model" (European Commission, 2013), makes it a compelling context for conducting a study on this student population. Within a compensatory support model, reception

education for NAMS is organized separately with a heavy focus on language support. In Flanders specifically, children between the ages of 12 and 18 who have only recently migrated are enrolled in reception education. This separate educational track, designed and organized exclusively for NAMS, aims at (1) the acquisition of Dutch, which is the language of instruction of Flanders, and (2) the enforcement of pupils' social integration in Flemish society (Van Avermaet et al., 2017; Kemper et al., 2022; Ravn et al., 2018). In recent years, the number of NAMS in reception education has shown a consistent increase: while the school year of 2018-2019 started with just under 3000 pupils enrolled in reception education, this number rose to 3880 by September 2021 (AGODI, 2023). More recently, these figures have nearly doubled following the substantial influx of Ukrainian refugees in 2022.

After approximately one year of reception education, most NAMS proceed to mainstream secondary schools. There, they start building their educational trajectories in a new education system by following regular classes alongside mainstream students (Emery, 2022). Additionally, they are expected to continue their Dutch language acquisition process, primarily through implicit learning as they immerse in content-based classes (such as history, mathematics, and science) where Dutch is the medium of instruction. It is important to note that while no language tests are associated to this transition, research has shown that NAMS' Dutch language proficiency does play an important implicit role in their grade and track allocation in mainstream secondary education (Emery et al., 2021). Nonetheless, NAMS with diverse levels of Dutch language proficiency are enrolled in mainstream education after completing reception education.

Following NAMS' transition to mainstream secondary education, problems often start to arise. Various statistical analyses have shown that NAMS are more often allocated to the least prestigious tracks (AGODI, 2020; Van Avermaet et al., 2017). Moreover, NAMS are more prone to grade retention and even to unqualified dropout (Emery et al., 2020). In Flanders and internationally, several studies have attributed these educational difficulties faced by NAMS in mainstream secondary education to language-related issues (Evans & Liu 2018; Eynde, 2013; Seynhaeve et al., 2024; Terhart & von Dewitz, 2018). The same belief seems to be held by NAMS themselves: in a study conducted by Vanblaere (2012), NAMS indicated that language was the cause of their failure to pass their year. More specifically, they elaborated on how they faced language-related challenges in certain classes, such as taking notes, comprehending subject-specific terminology, and understanding assignments. Comparable struggles regarding language were reported by NAMS and their teachers in Sterckx (2006).

It has been suggested that the root cause of the language-related challenges encountered by NAMS is inadequate language support in the mainstream education system (Ramaut, 2002; Vandecandelaere, 2020). Namely, even though there is a large amount of language support in Flemish reception education, this appears to be deficient after NAMS transition to mainstream secondary education (Van Avermaet et al., 2017). Consequently,

in order to refine their Dutch language proficiency – a process known to take several years (Paradis, 2018) –, NAMS must rely on implicit language learning while receiving subject instruction in their second language.

4 Purpose

In 2020, like many educational systems worldwide, Flemish education adopted a blended ERT approach for high school pupils in response to the second wave of the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, as with numerous other pupils under this approach, many NAMS dedicated 50% of their timetable to an online learning environment, while traditional classroom instruction was permitted for the remaining 50% (Maenhout, 2020).

So far, we have established that comprehensible input and meaningful interaction are important conditions for second language acquisition. However, in the context of ERT, it remains unclear to what degree the aforementioned conditions were prevalent, which consequently raises questions about the potential for second language acquisition through ERT. Moreover, as second language acquisition is crucial to NAMS in Flemish secondary education, it is relevant to consider their experiences with Dutch language learning in an ERT context.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to address NAMS' perceptions of second language learning conditions in ERT. This paper will address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do NAMS in upper secondary education perceive the conditions for second language learning in ERT?

RQ2: How do NAMS in upper secondary education perceive their second language learning during ERT?

5 Method

This paper reports on qualitative research carried out in six secondary schools in Flanders, Belgium. The goal of the present study is to focus on NAMS' perceptions of (conditions for) second language learning in ERT. This study is part of a larger project by this manuscript's author and her colleagues. Therefore, the methodology employed in the present study closely aligns with that of Seynhaeve and colleagues (2022), which is part of the same research project.

5.1 Participants

We aimed to recruit NAMS who had experienced sufficient amounts of online classes during COVID-19. To meet the inclusion criteria, this study is situated in the second

and third stage of the technical and general track of Flemish secondary education. A reception education school in city A provided us with a list of schools to which many NAMS transition after following the reception education programme. We contacted ten schools from this list, all located in city A, to inform them about the study. Four schools agreed to participate. In order to expand the sample of our study, we added city B and city C. In each of these cities, one more school consented to take part in the study.

In the six schools, a teacher was informed about the study, after which they contacted NAMS who fit the inclusion criteria and invited them to take part in the research. These pupils were informed about the study purpose and design through an information sheet, offered both in Dutch and in the pupils' first language. Those who were willing to participate, filled out an informed consent sheet. Underage pupils were requested to have their parents complete the informed consent form.

23 participants (17 female, 6 male) consented to taking part in the research. These participants had migrated to Flanders two to six years before the start of the study. Some of the main first language among participants were Arabic, French and Persian. A detailed table with participant information can be found in the Appendix.

5.2 Materials and procedure

Each participant took part in one of six focus group interviews, organized between February and March 2021, when the blended ERT measures were still ongoing. These interviews were semi-structured: the interview scenario included questions about the participants' experiences with online communication and the possible impact of remote teaching on language proficiency, but space was left to deviate from this scenario when eligible. The focus groups had a median duration of 56.5 minutes (min: 42 mins, max: 72 mins) and consisted of three to six participants.

5.3 Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded, after which they were transcribed using an intelligent verbatim approach (McMullin, 2023). The data were analyzed on NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020), using a combination of deductive and inductive coding approaches. Initially, data were explored and coded using pre-determined coding labels (i.e. interaction, comprehensible input and language learning) derived from the study's conceptual framework and research questions. During this initial phase, all data segments relevant to these broad categories were coded accordingly. After this initial round of coding, a further analysis was conducted within each pre-determined category to identify emerging patterns and subthemes. This involved iterative reading and comparison of data across participants to highlight emergent concepts. As a result of this step, the pre-determined coding labels were refined and broken down into smaller, more

specific categories. For instance, the coding category of 'interaction' was subdivided into subcategories such as 'asking questions', 'speaking opportunities' and 'willingness to interact'.

Finally, the primary researcher interpreted the data based on the coding categories. To gain insights into the participants' overall experiences, the researcher identified the most prominent themes within each category. In what follows, these themes will be used to interpret and report on the participants' experiences.

6 Findings

The comprehensive analysis provided insights into NAMS' perceptions of second language learning conditions during online learning. Below, findings will be discussed on the basis of the three categories researched in the focus groups: interaction, comprehensible input and language learning. For each category, we will discuss the themes that were most frequently mentioned during several of the interviews.

6.1 Comprehensible input

Concerning the theme of comprehensible input, participants discussed comprehensibility of online classes, comprehensibility of tasks and coping mechanisms to enhance comprehensibility.

In general, participants reached the consensus that input from the teacher was less comprehensible during online live sessions than in face-to-face classes. Several individuals agreed that the teachers' speech was too fast, and their instructions were unclear. This was described by one participant as follows:

> 3SPS3: "In the classroom, teachers speak really clearly and more calmly than in online classes. I think they speak really quickly in online classes."

Another issue causing the teacher's input to be incomprehensible was digital malfunctioning. Pupils explained how both themselves and teachers were sometimes experiencing poor internet connectivity, causing the teachers' audio to drop.

Additionally, participants highlighted the lack of non-verbal cues in online classes, which made the teachers' input less comprehensible. As a common practice, teachers would keep their webcams turned off or use the presentation mode during online calls, which led to students being unable to see them and, consequently, missing out on nonverbal communication. Many participants explained how they, as NAMS, were disadvantaged compared to their non-migrant student peers when it came to this lack of non-verbal cues. For instance, one participant stated the following:

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> 1SP3: "For people of whom it's their first language, it's easier to communicate through the internet. But for us, it's a little bit harder. While communicating, we usually look at the eyes or the mouth to be able to understand. But through the internet it's harder to understand."

Besides online classes, ERT largely consisted of tasks for the participants. Many claimed that they faced difficulties in comprehending the instructions for such assignments. Again, they pointed at their limited Dutch proficiency as the cause for these struggles: some participants reportedly took longer to process the assignment instructions and complete the tasks, while others even failed to complete certain elements of the assignment as they did not comprehend specific words in the instructions.

Although many participants reported having issues with incomprehensible input during ERT, they often looked for coping mechanisms to help increase their understanding of the input. A number of the interviewed pupils explained how they searched for alternative, more comprehensible input, for example by watching YouTube videos on the same matter in their first language. Others would heavily rely on teachers' video recordings: at times when they could not understand the teacher's input in a video recording, they would re-watch the video several times. As two participants observed:

> 6SP2: "I sometimes find ERT easy in the sense that we just get video recordings and then we can watch that several times."

> 6SP3: "Yes, then we can understand better. Because when you're in class, you can't make the teacher repeat what he just said."

Because of the ability to re-watch video recordings, many participants enjoyed such medium. Moreover, they believed processing the input of these videos in their own time was beneficial to their subject learning. One participant made the following recapitulation:

> 6SP3: "I find that that when I watch the video recordings and then take notes, I better retain it. At tests, I know the subject materials better from video recordings than from face-to-face classes, because I watch them several times and I take notes. But with online classes, I really don't retain anything."

In summary, the participants reported a reduced level of comprehensible input in online classes and tasks during ERT. However, many of the students who were interviewed found video recordings advantageous as they could process the teacher's input at their own pace.

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6.2 Interaction

Participants' discussions of interaction were categorized in two themes: interaction opportunities and communication breakdowns.

In general, participants' experiences with opportunities for interaction during ERT varied strongly. On the one hand, participants suggested that some teachers strictly expected silence in the online classroom, thus leading to participants having to turn off their microphones, which impeded interaction opportunities with both teachers and peers. On the other hand, other teachers would reportedly be more welcoming to interactions: for instance, the use of breakout rooms for peer interaction was mentioned in two focus groups. Moreover, participants indicated that certain teachers would organize additional one-on-one sessions with pupils if they expressed a need for further clarification of the subject matter.

However, the overall consensus among participants was that online classes typically involved lower levels of interaction compared to face-to-face classes. This was commonly attributed to two main factors: Firstly, online classes usually consisted of high amounts of teacher talking time. As one participant clearly described, teachers frequently failed to create opportunities for interaction with pupils during their online lectures:

> 2SP1: "When we have face-to-face classes, (…) the teacher says "read this, present it to the class, explain what this says" and so on. But during online classes, that's not the case. The teacher explains and we write it down. It's just writing, writing, writing. But in face-to-face classes, it's speaking, explaining, and so on."

Secondly, participants reported that all pupils, including non-migrant student peers, were less inclined to interact during online classes, for which diverse reasons were stated: for instance, having to talk through a microphone in order to engage in interactions made various pupils feel uneasy, and several participants admitted to frequently struggling to pay attention during the virtual classes, which resulted in them not taking up potential speaking opportunities. However, for one participant, classmates' hesitation to interact in the online classroom created more space for herself to engage in interactions:

> 3SP3: "The teacher asks a question and no one responds. And he's waiting for someone to give an answer. So, I have time to find the answer and to respond."

The second theme within the participants' discussions of interaction was communication breakdowns. According to many, this was a common occurrence unique to NAMS. One participant stated the following:

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> 2SP1: "The teacher sometimes doesn't understand what we really mean. For others, it's easy. They have been dealing with these subjects for years. But for us, this is all new and sometimes it's hard to understand and also to ask your specific questions."

However, although communication breakdowns occurred, many participants were reportedly reluctant to acknowledge their difficulties with understanding the teacher or expressing themselves. They often felt like doing so would interrupt the teacher or waste their classmates' time. Moreover, some pupils believed that negotiation for meaning was embarrassing. One participant described this as follows:

> 6SP4: "I don't dare to do so. No, because there's also other groups in the live sessions and it would get really embarrassing if I asked; what do you mean?."

Nonetheless, in contrast, two participants explained how they enjoyed helping other, non-migrant student peers negotiate for meaning, in instances in which peers would struggle to make sense of the concepts taught in class:

> 1SP3: "For instance, someone asks something and the teacher doesn't understand their question. Then I turn on my microphone and I explain. For instance, when the teacher doesn't understand the question but I do."

In general, rather than seeking clarification directly from the teachers to resolve any misunderstandings, participants tended to handle instances of communication breakdown in diverse ways:

- Firstly, some pupils would look up the meaning of words that led to communication breakdowns, either immediately, as "*I can type without interrupting him*" (1SP3), or at a later moment, since "*the teacher keeps on talking, so I would miss out on too much*" (1SP1).
- Secondly, others would email their teachers after communications breakdowns had occurred.
- Lastly, various participants indicated that they would save their questions that arose after communication breakdowns and postpone them until they had the chance to meet the teacher in physical classroom settings.

Overall, the conversations among the participants indicated that they commonly encountered a lack of interaction with both teachers and peers during ERT. This was often due to their own reluctance to participate in online discussions, as well as some teachers failing to provide sufficient opportunities for interaction. In situations where interaction did occur, many participants had a tendency to disengage or withdraw when encountering communication breakdowns.

6.3 Language learning

As we looked into participants' viewpoints of second language learning conditions during ERT, we also aimed to determine the participants' beliefs on language learning in general, and the way in which ERT provided opportunities for language learning in particular. When discussing these themes, the participants focused on interaction and input.

Overall, all participants agreed on the importance of interaction for language learning. However, even though both interaction with teachers as interaction with peers was said to be valuable, participants especially emphasized the significance of engaging in interactions with teachers. It was brought up in several focus groups that participants put in greater effort to ensure the accuracy of their language when talking with teachers, which they believe is beneficial to their Dutch proficiency development. This is explained by one participant as follows:

> 3SP1: "I mainly learn Dutch in the classroom rather than on the playground. Because, with friends, I can speak broken Dutch. But when I talk to teachers, I try to speak Dutch well."

Apart from interaction, participants also indicated the importance of rich input for language learning. In particular, one participant discussed the value of receiving input through different subject contexts for language acquisition:

> 6SP1: "You learn new subject matter, and with new subject matter come new words. So yeah, your Dutch can improve according to me."

We finally asked participants what effects ERT had had on their Dutch proficiency. Although some participants indicated that they more often experienced difficulty in recalling certain vocabulary, most pupils acknowledged that they had maintained their level of Dutch proficiency through ERT. Many believed they were able to sustain their proficiency because of various sources of Dutch language input. Firstly, participants attached great importance to listening to online synchronous lectures. Additionally, some participants reported that autonomously processing tasks and video recordings was especially valuable for language learning. As one participant stated:

> 6SP1: "I think tasks have a big impact. Because (…) you have to attentively listen to the videos and take notes. And when you watch those videos twice or three times, you will learn the language better than when you receive instructions from the teacher once."

Although some students reportedly utilized diverse sources of input to preserve their language proficiency, others felt that their Dutch language skills would have improved (more)

if not for the online classes. Two main explanations were provided for this conclusion: (1) lessons in the physical classroom reportedly consisted of more interaction with peers and teachers, which participants seemed to attach great importance to when it comes to second language learning, and (2) while more writing proficiency was demanded in the online classroom, in-person classes were perceived to provide more opportunities for speaking. One participant described his experience with language learning opportunities as follows:

> "I have trouble speaking in Dutch, not writing or studying. So, I find the physical classroom to be better than online classes. I can speak more in face-to-face classes than online."

All in all, the participants' recounts suggest that they maintained their Dutch language proficiency through diverse sources of language input. However, they believe their proficiency could have improved further if there had been greater opportunities for interaction in the ERT. This seems to indicate that participants place significant value on both interaction and rich input as crucial factors in sustaining and further developing second language learning.

7 Discussion

This paper presented findings from the qualitative analysis of data obtained through focus group discussions with 23 NAMS in six Flemish secondary schools. The study focused on NAMS' perceptions of language learning conditions in an ERT context. Through this analysis, we have offered a comprehensive examination of the perspectives of a growing student group in Flanders. In the subsequent discussion, we refer to the relevant literature in order to provide a broader context for our findings.

According to the Input Hypothesis stated by Krashen (1985), successful second language acquisition largely relies on the availability of comprehensible input. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis adds to this by stating that interaction is also a crucial element of effective language acquisition: namely, through interaction, incomprehensible input can become comprehensible to the language learner. In our study, we applied the hypotheses above to an ERT context by investigating NAMS' perceptions of these language learning conditions in said learning environment.

In terms of input in distance education and ERT in particular, various studies have indicated that the lack of non-verbal communication in the online learning environment resulted in incomprehensible input (Harsch et al., 2020; Saud Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020). This was also reported by the participants in the present study. Moreover, they explained that non-verbal communication is especially valuable for them, as it reportedly aids them in comprehending input in the language of instruction which they are

still acquiring. Our study thus adds to the literature by highlighting the disadvantage of missing out on non-verbal cues for NAMS specifically in comparison to their non-migrant student peers.

Additionally, this study contributed to existing research by not only emphasizing the possible difficulty NAMS may have in understanding input in online classes, but also the challenge in comprehending written input in the form of tasks. As previously stated by Seynhaeve et al. (2022) and Wu (2021), tasks made up a large part of instructors' teaching practices in ERT.

The participants in our study also discussed the extent to which they received and seized interaction opportunities during ERT. Some NAMS indicated that teachers made use of breakout rooms, which created opportunities for interacting with peers. This is in line with the study by Kohnke and Moorhouse (2022), who argued that the use of breakout rooms in online synchronous videoconferencing tools may promote student participation and interaction, which in itself can be beneficial to language learning. However, according to most participants in the present study, ERT generally consisted of less interaction than traditional face-to-face classes. Various participants attributed this to pupils' hesitation to interact in the online environment, which is in strong contrast to Manegre and Sabiri (2022): there, it was reported that virtual classrooms foster more student engagement than their traditional alternatives.

In general, as in various other research (Harsch et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2021; Moser et al., 2021), this study revealed that NAMS often found the input provided in ERT incomprehensible, and they experienced a noticeable absence of interaction. However, they reportedly undertook action independently through the use of various language-related coping mechanisms: they would replay video recordings, turn to alternative input sources or rely on translation tools in order to compensate the absence of interaction in the online environment. Adding to the various reports on the resilience of students in general (Thomas et al., 2021) and NAMS in particular (Emery, 2022; OECD, 2018), our study thus highlights migrant students' language resilience when it comes to their second language acquisition process.

Lastly, our study investigated NAMS' perceptions of their second language proficiency development through ERT. As stated by Lichtman and VanPatten (2021), "the principle data for the acquisition of language" can be found in comprehensible input (p. 296). Our participants seemed to agree with this claim to some extent, as they reported to have mainly used various input sources (like online classes, video recordings or tasks) to sustain their second language vocabulary knowledge. However, most participants believed that interaction was the primary necessary condition for language learning and development. This is in line with a previous publication by Harsch et al., which noted that language students attach great importance to interaction when it comes to second language acquisition. More specifically, our study revealed that participants particularly rely on learner-teacher interaction in order to enhance their second language proficiency, as they make more efforts to produce accurate target language output when communicating

with instructors. In sum, the participants indicated that their Dutch language proficiency was sustained through diverse sources of language input. Yet, they believed that greater opportunities for interaction during ERT could have further improved their proficiency. Consistent with earlier findings (Harsch et al., 2021; Saud Alahmadi & Alraddadi, 2020), our study suggests that NAMS primarily view interaction as a crucial factor in their online second language learning process.

Shortly after the interviews in this study were conducted, ERT-related measures in Flanders were lifted in May 2021. Schools gradually returned to in-person instruction, although hybrid or online practices continued as a temporary measure in some high-risk contexts, such as in schools with high infection rates. While at the present time COVID seems long gone, the insights of this study conducted in a COVID-context can be transferred to non-crisis related online classroom settings. Specifically, two recommendations can be made for teachers to support the implicit language learning of their students in online classes. Firstly, since a significant portion of teaching time reportedly involves teacher talk, teachers should prioritize making this input more comprehensible. Simple adjustments, such as ensuring webcams are turned on and their faces are clearly visible while presenting important content, can enhance the accessibility of non-verbal cues. Moreover, teachers should focus on using clear and accessible language, both in their lessons and in tasks. This can be supported through the use of visual aids or scaffolded instructions. Implementing these strategies may significantly enhance students' comprehension of the teacher's language input, thereby supporting students' language development. Secondly, based on NAMS' reports in this study, teachers should prioritize creating more interaction opportunities. In an online setting, this can be achieved by using breakout rooms to encourage peer discussions. Additionally, instead of teacher talk dominating the online lesson, teachers can integrate more understanding checks to promote student-teacher interaction. This approach not only facilitates active student engagement but also enables teachers to identify and address communication breakdowns more effectively. By adopting these strategies, teachers can create a more inclusive and supportive online learning environment that caters to the linguistic needs of their second language learning students.

8 Limitations

Although this qualitative study offers comprehensive insights into the perceptions of NAMS on input, interaction and language learning in ERT, there are certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the study's sample size is relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a larger population. Secondly, as teachers were responsible for selecting participants, there may be a sample bias: the responsible teachers may have chosen pupils with specific characteristics, such as a strong command of the Dutch language or a favorable disposition towards learning,

which could have impacted the study's conclusions. Thirdly, while this study provides valuable insights into the student perspective, it does not include the viewpoints of teachers. Incorporating both perspectives would allow for a more holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities of implicit language learning in an online setting. Thus, future research with larger, more diverse samples and a broader inclusion of stakeholder perspectives is needed to confirm and expand upon our study findings.

9 Conclusion

This study has provided us with valuable insights into the language learning experiences of NAMS during the challenging period of part-time remote teaching, which was implemented by Flemish secondary schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although ERT was a crisis-specific context, it offers important lessons for language learning in online environments more broadly. We have reported that, despite struggling with the comprehensibility of input and the lack of interaction during ERT, NAMS believed they sustained their second language proficiency during this crisis education period. Moreover, we believe that NAMS' ability to implement coping mechanisms related to language, which we referred to as "language resilience", contributed positively to their language acquisition process. These insights can inform future remote language teaching practices, emphasizing the importance of creating opportunities for meaningful interaction, providing clear and comprehensible input, and supporting learners' ability to adapt to digital learning spaces.

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Author contributions

Shauny Seynhaeve: conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft.

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Statement of interest

The author reports there is no conflict of interest to declare.

Statement of technology use

No AI-based generative technology was used in the preparation of this manuscript and the execution of the research that the manuscript reports upon.

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Appendix: Participant information

Speaker	Sex	Age	Mother tongue	Year of reception education	Year in school	Track	Field of study
1SP1	M	18	Twi, English	2018-2019	4	technical	Technical Sciences
1SP2	F	19	Arabic	2019-2020	4	technical	Technical Sciences
1SP3	F	18	Arabic	2016-2017	5	technical	Health and Wellbeing Sciences
2SP1	M	19	Turkish	2014	6	general	Economics and Sciences
2SP2	M	18	French	2017-2018	5	technical	Physical Education and Sports
2SP3	F	20	Persian	2018-2019	6	general	Humanities
3SP1	F	18	Polish	2016-2017	5	technical	Social Technical Sciences
3SP2	F	19	Tagalog	2018-2019	5	technical	Accounting and IT
3SP3	F	19	Arabic	2019-2020	4	general	Sciences
3SP4	M	17	Arabic	2019-2020	4	technical	Technical Sciences
3SP5	F	19	Arabic	2019-2020	4	technical	Technical Sciences
3SP6	F	17	Arabic	2018	4	technical	Entrepreneurship and IT
4SP1	F	17	French, Mandingo	2019	3	technical	Business
4SP2	F	17	Arabic	2019-2020	4	general	Sciences
4SP3	F	16	Arabic, French	2018-2019	3	general	Sciences
4SP4	M	19	French, Pulaar	2019-2020	4	technical	Electro-Mechanics
5SP1	F	20	Thai	2015-2016	6	technical	Social Technical Sciences
5SP2	F	20	Thai	2016-2017	6	technical	Social Technical Sciences
5SP3	F	20	Persian	2017	6	technical	Social Technical Sciences
6SP1	F	17	Persian	2018	5	general	Humanities
6SP2	F	19	Polish	2018	6	general	Humanities
6SP3	F	17	Arabic	2017-2018	5	general	Sciences and Maths
6SP4	F	18	Persian	2016-2017	5	general	Economics and Sciences

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