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Distance Education and Emergency Remote Teaching: An Analysis of the Italian School System Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

On 27th February 2020, the outbreak and rapid spread of COVID-19 in Italy forced schools and universities to stop their face-to-face activities. Within two weeks, institutions and teachers had to rearrange the way they used to deliver classes, moving the teaching and learning into a completely virtual environment. Clearly, the time teachers, students and their parents had to adapt and familiarise with this change was not much and the teaching and learning's quality has inevitably suffered. The main objective of this dissertation was to investigate the experiences of students and teachers with Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) – which is erroneously referred to as *Didattica a Distanza* (Distance Education). This work provides a background overview on the history and development of Distance Education (DE) throughout the years, focusing on its main strengths and weaknesses and pinpointing the substantial differences between DE and ERT. Moreover, particular attention is given to the teaching of Foreign Languages at a distance, as well as to the thorny topic of distance testing and evaluation. The study presented in this dissertation reports the opinions of students and teachers on ERT and confirms what expected about its poor quality due to the lack of preparation, organisation and interaction. However, following an analysis of the beneficial aspects of online teaching, this overall experience suggests that the integration of online teaching into face-to-face lessons – the so-called Blended Learning – could be the future of teaching, bringing together the benefits of online and in-presence teaching and trying to eliminate the disadvantages of them both.

Education is not the filling of a pot, but the lighting of a fire

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"Technology is just a tool.
In terms of getting the kids working together and motivating them,
the teacher is the most important."
Bill Gates

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the year 2020, Italy and the entire world have been facing a dramatic challenge posed by the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The epidemic broke out at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China, and because of the strong contagious nature of the virus and consequent rapid spread, it quickly reached Europe and Italy, in particular (Cheng, X. 2020). Italy, in fact was the first European country to present cases of COVID-19 on February 20th and also the one that had started registering the highest rate of deaths. During the first weeks of March, many other European and non-European countries had begun recording clusters of infected people. This led to the imposition by governments of a complete lockdown and of the largest quarantine in the history of mankind (Cecconi, M. et al. 2020). The first sector that was closed in Italy, immediately after February 20th, was the one of education, cancelling classes of all level and type of institution: from kindergartens to universities. Therefore, the Italian government, in order to save the academic year, decided to follow the example provided by the Chinese Ministry of Education, expressed by the concept of "*School's Out but Class's On*" (Cheng, X. 2020). In practice, the "*School's Out but Class's On*" idea envisages the suspension of lessons in the physical classroom moving the teaching and learning to a virtual environment.

The Italian Ministry of Education's first guidelines dated March 17 (Nota MIUR, 2020) suggested, during the suspension of classes in public schools and universities, the implementation of Distance Education[1] (DE). However, this was stated to be optional, given the situation Italy was facing and the short time available to organise a completely different and, in many cases, new method of teaching. According to these guidelines (Ibid.), the primary aims of the Distance Education methodology were to maintain the sense of community and belonging among pupils and students, and to help face the isolation and demotivation that one might experience during a prolonged period of quarantine. Moreover, thanks to this methodology, the academic year would be safe, and

[1] In Italian the term used is *Didattica a Distanza (DAD)*

the learning guaranteed. The Ministry of Education, in defining the meaning of Distance Education, highlighted the importance of maintaining the same teaching objectives, though moving the learning to a virtual setting and, therefore, adapting the teaching, as much as possible, to this different channel. Furthermore, they also made it clear that Distance Education needs one or more moments of interaction between instructors and learners, in order to give them feedback on the homework they carried out autonomously and to assess their learning as well as the effectiveness of the tools used in the teaching process. Another important point made by the Ministry of Education (Ibid.) regarded the importance of keeping the teaching as inclusive as possible, in order to give everybody the possibility to attend online classes. This referred of course to students with a physical, mental or learning disability, but also to those who either do not own a digital tool, such as a computer, a tablet or a mobile phone, or do not have a connection to the Internet. Regarding the first issue, many schools, thanks to a public investment of about 80 million euros, have made available to families, computers and tablets loaned free of charge, because, as stated by the Italian Minister for Education at the beginning of April 2020, there is the "need to reach all of our students. No one must be left behind"[2] (MIUR website).

Such a situation of emergency, if taking into consideration also the psychological aspect of it, is clearly a difficult one for everybody. As reported in many newspaper articles, professors are well aware of the fact that many students are having a hard time, not only because of the isolation and the deprivation of the old routine that the quarantine imposes, but also because many of them have lost members of their families, or are struggling because their parents are losing their jobs. Therefore, the general idea seems that this type of distance teaching should be at a distance but not distant.

Pragmatically speaking, though, it appears understandable that this tentative Distance Education system started by many institutions and educators, even though it allows students not to lose the academic year, presents many shortcomings, mainly because of the little time teachers, families and students have had to adapt to this new method. Many teachers did not have time either to familiarise properly with the online tools and platforms or to change their programmes in order to make them suitable for online teaching. In fact, at the end of the last academic year, there still was a high number of educators who sent their pupils a lot of homework, leaving the parents the role of

[2] Translation from the Italian: "Abbiamo bisogno di arrivare fino all'ultimo dei nostri studenti. Nessuno deve rimanere indietro" (MIUR website).

instructing their children. This, too, was called Distance Education. On the other hand, it is also true that "traditional" Distance Education might result indeed more distant if compared to what has been happening in Italy and the rest of the world in the first months of 2020. Because of social distancing rules, physical proximity is to be avoided, but on some levels, it might be argued that this global emergency brought together students, teachers, families and institutions in a way that has never been experienced before.

What it is argued in this dissertation is the fact that what in Italy has become famous as Distance Education, in the attempt to define the new methodology implemented in the second part of the 2019/2020 academic year, shares few characteristics with the actual Distance Education, which scholars and researchers have been writing about in the last century. As argued by Hodges et al. (2020), there is a difference between Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and online Distance Education.

> "Many active members of the academic community (…) have been hotly debating the terminology in social media, and 'emergency remote teaching' has emerged as a common alternative term used by online education researchers and professional practitioners to draw a clear contrast with what many of us know as high-quality online education." (Hodges et al., 2020)

In order to explain this thesis, in the first part of this dissertation, a review of the literature surrounding Distance Education will be presented. The focus will be primarily on the history of this methodology and on the different technologies used to deliver it, starting from the postal service and arriving at the use of the World Wide Web, and passing through mass media devices, such as the radio and the television. Furthermore, attention will be drawn to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which are, nowadays, an important example of online Distance Education, reaching every year millions of learners worldwide. Moreover, advantages and disadvantages of this delivery method will be outlined, suggesting also the benefits and shortcomings from a cognitive point of view. Secondly, particular attention will be drawn to DE and Foreign Language (FL) teaching. Pros and cons of implementing a distance learning approach for the teaching of foreign languages will be outlined, and the main online resources that can be used in the process will be described. In addition, the topic of assessing in a DE environment will be discussed. Finally, returning to the main objective of this dissertation, there will be the description of a survey carried out through the means of a questionnaire among Italian lower and upper secondary school teachers and pupils, and university professors and students. An analysis of the answers received from the

questionnaires administrated will be conducted in order to show how Distance Education differs from Emergency Remote Teaching. Moreover, in the light of what has emerged from the analysis of the survey conducted, it will be suggested that the integration of online lessons into face-to-face teaching – thanks to the so-called Blended Learning – might be a smart move to improve the quality of the teaching in Italy, making it up-to-date with the requirements of the digitalised and globalised world we live in and enhancing its effectiveness.

CHAPTER 1. Distance Education: Development, Advantages and Disadvantages

1.1 An Overview of the Development of Distance Education throughout History

In this first section of chapter one, an overview of the history of Distance Education (DE) will be outlined, including possible definitions proposed by scholars in the last years and the main characters participating in DE. Moreover, the various technologies and pedagogical approaches implemented in Distance Education throughout history will be described.

1.1.1 Distance Education: Definitions and Participants

Many are the scholars who have attempted at defining Distance Education. According to Keegan (1995) DE results from the separation of instructor and learner which "frees the students from the need of travelling to a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained". Moreover, Greenberg (1998) defines contemporary Distance Education as "a planned teaching and learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning". Similarly, Bontempelli (no date) describes DE as characterised by the physical separation of the instructor and the learner. This means that the learner, according to their possibilities, can choose the right (for them) time and space to begin the learning. Finally, Anderson and Dron (2011) also suggest that Distance Education's primary feature is "the temporal distance between learners, teachers, and institutions". In practice, classrooms are no longer the only places where the learning happens. On the contrary, "anybody from anywhere if they have the required technological equipment and the appropriate materials can build their own environment to carry on their own educational and self-learning process" (Garito, 2013).

The participants of a Distance Education process are teachers, learners and a distance learning system administrator. The teacher's role in this kind of learning environment is to prepare the teaching material, follow the students' activities throughout the course, provide support for the students and assess their preparation (Trajanovic et al. 2007). Recent studies have also pointed out that the teacher-student relationship in every kind of learning, both offline and online, is the most important factor affecting students' performance (Yao, 2020). This means that, even though technology has an increasing relevance in the teaching process and provides the students with a higher degree of

autonomy, what really is key to the learning is the effective face-to-face communication between students and teachers and a real-time constructive feedback. Therefore, it can be argued that, when designing teaching material, the instructor should keep in mind that the distance learning student should not notice the absence of a physical classroom (Trajanovic et al. 2007). The students' task, on the other hand, is that of using the teaching material provided and the online tutorials, completing homework assignments, tests and examinations within the given deadlines. Finally, the distance learning system administrator's role is to process and publish educational material, administrate users and maintain the system (Ibid.). However, this last role, in the case of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), is usually played by educators themselves, with all the issues this double role might raise.

1.1.2 Generations of Distance Education

Even though Distance Education, given its highly topicality, appears as a recent invention, it is, conversely, a two-century-old methodology born at the beginning of the 19th century. Scholars (Trentin, 1999; Bontempelli, no date; White, 2006; Anderson & Dron, 2011) have been writing about the possibility of dividing the different types of Distance Education into three separate generations in terms of the technology used to reduce the distance. The first generation of DE technology includes the employment of the postal service, as well as of the railway service and of the printing system that made possible the preparation of the support materials. In the first years of the 1800s, in England, Isaac Pitman started the first ever postal correspondence course in stenography, and in the next years, other countries followed his example (Bontempelli, no date). In Germany, for instance, Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langenscheid founded the first DE course in Foreign Languages (FLs). Towards the end of the 19th century, in 1873, in the area of Boston (USA), a society was established to encourage studies at home (Karsenti, 2013). The society provided women belonging to all social classes with educational opportunities and about ten thousand members received an education through postal correspondence. This new way of teaching, that allowed the gap between upper-middle class and low class to narrow, arrived in Italy only a few years later, but it certainly helped significantly the postbellum reconstruction of the country after WWII. From 1951 until the mid-90s, the renowned *Scuola Radio Elettra* (SRE) instructed via postal correspondence more than a million Italian and non-Italian electronic technicians (Paolinelli, 2017). The founders of SRE were the Italian Vittorio Veglia and the Polish

engineer Tomasz Carver Paszokowiski who had the idea to start this business after Veglia's journey to the USA, where DE had already a consolidated position. *Scuola Radio Elettra* offered thirty to fifty-lesson-long courses at a low prize, with no age limitations, sending paper materials and kits of electric components directly to the aspiring electricians' homes. At the end of the course the school gave the students a certificate allowing them to start working immediately. It also offered internships at the Torino headquarter labs, tutored by experts coming from the *Politecnico of Torino,* one of the most prestigious Italian universities (Ibid.).

The second generation of Distance Education is defined by the mass media, namely radio, television, and cinema. At the end of the 19th century and with the beginning of the 20th century, the development of other kinds of technologies, such as the radio and the television, led to the development of another type of mass Distance Education. In the first years of the 1900s, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), in its radio broadcasts, started offering courses as a supplement to school lessons (White, 2006). The example set by the BBC was followed almost immediately by Radio Canada and the University of Iowa, allowing primarily the education of farmers who, thanks to this option, did not have to leave their jobs (Bontempelli, no date). Subsequently, with the quick spread of television, many were the programmes instituted by national broadcast companies all over the world. For example, in 1975, the BBC broadcast the first television language course in German called *Kontakte,* which is considered as a milestone in broadcast language teaching (Innes, 1982). The course is described by scholars as highly innovative because it combined radio and television programmes with support materials and the possibilities of taking a final test at the University of Cambridge. Similarly, a few years before, the Italian broadcast company RAI (*Radiotelevisione Italiana)*, in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Education, offered the first course in Italian language addressed to illiterates. The course was broadcast from November 1960 to May 1968 and was called '*Non è mai troppo tardi'*[3]. The programme was 484-episode long and was hosted by the famous teacher Alberto Manzi, who is known, nowadays, as '*Il Maestro degli Italiani'*[4]. In fact, thanks to his TV show, millions of people learnt how to write in their own language and succeeded in getting a primary school certificate (Baldoni & Marengo, 2010). Alberto Manzi's classes were mainly watched by illiterate adults who could not go to bricks-and-mortar schools, either because

[3] "It is never too late".
[4] The Italians' teacher.

their jobs did not allow them to or because of their age. The programme successfully sided with public school against the widespread illiteracy and it can be argued that the television was the tool that helped the unification of Italy from a linguistic point of view (Ibid).

The third and possibly the fourth generation witness the introduction of interactive technologies with the extensive use of the Web, of Interned-based real time technology and videoconferencing. In the course of the last century, the continuous development of new communication technologies influenced the development of Distance Education, too. With the spread of computers and with the birth of the World Wide Web, DE sees the beginning of what is known as e-learning. E-learning indicates the kind of education happening on the net. Scholars also suggest that this net refers both to the technological environment in which the learner acquires information and knowledge (the Net), and the social dimension created by the technology itself, which should be putting in contact individuals with the same learning objectives (Bontempelli, no date). The majority of the educational processes should happen through the interaction between participants in a kind of learning community, which ought to foster the going beyond isolation and the enhancement of the relationship among individuals in the group (Trentin, 1999). It should be pointed out that none of these three generations has been substituted by the next one, rather it can be suggested that they all coexist and are sometimes used together. Clearly, the world we live in is globalised and dynamic, this meaning it keeps changing and Distance Education is no exception, and other generations can be expected (Saba, 2002).

1.1.3 The Pedagogy behind Distance Education

Anderson (2009), drawing his attention to the pedagogy behind the technology used, proposed that the two "are intertwined in a dance: the technology sets the beat and creates the music, while the approach used defines the moves" (Ibid.). It can be argued, though, that it may be possible to dance without music, but it might be not very effective to dance without knowing how to move. This leads to the difference advanced by Balboni (2015) between 'catalyst' and 'aid'[5], where the former indicates the technology as something necessary for the teaching. That would be, for example, the case of the use of the interactive whiteboard during a lesson on art history, when lacking a paper textbook: it would be purposeless talking about a painting without being able to show it to the class.

[5] Translation from: "*Catalizzatore" e "supporto"*

In the same situation, but with the presence of a paper textbook that shows the painting we are talking about, the interactive whiteboard becomes an 'aid', a support to show the painting and its smallest details, rather than an essential tool. In the case of Distance Education, it might be said, to maintain Anderson's dance metaphor, that technologies and teaching approaches, rather than being one the music and the other the moves, are dancing partners. Their role in the dance can switch from leader to follow, and vice versa, depending on the use the teacher wants to make of them. New teaching approaches can be designed to fit the existing technologies as well as technologies can be created to be adapted to existing teaching approaches. It may also be important to point out, as claimed by Pallof and Pratt (2000), that "technologies do not teach students, effective teachers do", meaning that technology alone is not enough, what really makes the difference is the preparation of the teacher and the design of the lesson. According to Anderson and Dron (2011), the three major approaches born within the technological eras are the Cognitive-Behaviourist approach, the Social-Constructivist approach and the Connectivist approach. The Cognitive-Behaviourist approach is considered to belong to the first generation of Distance Education technologies. It appeared in the latter half of the 20th century based on behaviourist theories (Ibid.). It suggested that the learning was the result of a series of intense repetition sessions made of stimuli and responses, followed by the confirmation or the correction (Balboni, 2015). The most famous example of this approach could be seen in the *Army Specialized Training Program* (ASTP) created by the psychologist B. F. Skinner in 1943, where he implemented his notion of learning as the development of new behaviours or changes in behaviours that are acquired as the result of an individual's response to external stimuli (Anderson & Dron, 2011). Regarding Distance Education specifically, the Cognitive-Behavioural approach saw the almost total absence of social presence because the learning was thought to be an individual process. Therefore, the focus on "individualized learning resulted in very high levels of student freedom (space and pace) and fitted nicely with technologies of print packages, mass media (radio and television), and postal correspondence interaction" (Ibid.). The Social-Constructive Approach is considered to be, chronologically speaking, the second one and the theorist behind it was the psychologist Lev Vygotskij. In this approach the theory refers to the psychological notion that Vygotskij called *Zone of Proximal Development* and that Bruner defined S*caffolding*; it is the area of learning progress an individual can carry out partly alone, employing their own knowledge and capabilities, and partly thanks to the support of a "more knowledgeable other", a *magister* (Balboni, 2015). Kanuka and

Anderson (1999) claimed that in Distance Education "the educator is a guide, a helper, and a partner where the content is secondary to the learning process; the source of knowledge lies primarily in experiences". In the Social-Constructivist approach, as suggested by the name itself, social interaction is an essential feature. The last and most recent distance-education pedagogy is called Connectivism (Siemens, 2005). This approach is based on the idea that learners are literate and have access to powerful networks. Therefore, it is suggested that the learning process can be triggered by exposing students to networks and providing for them occasions of interaction through the Net. The teacher's role in this setting is that of designing learning paths, providing the students with new knowledge resources and supporting the interactions among individuals.

1.2 Massive Online Open Courses and Italian Telematic Universities

In this second section of chapter one, Massive Online Open Courses (MOOC) and two famous Italian Telematic Universities, namely The International Telematic University UNINETTUNO and *Università Telematica Pegaso* will be presented, describing the tools used and the main teaching approaches implemented.

1.2.1 MOOCs

One of the most popular and recent emerging technologies in the field of Distance Education is to be found in Massive Open Online Courses. MOOCs are a rather new kind of e-learning classes, which consist of short video lectures, computer-graded tests and online discussion forums (Kim, 2016). MOOCs usually also include traditional pedagogical resources, such as PowerPoint presentations, in which the lecturer explains the main concepts, and roundtable discussions. The rest of the work is more autonomous or carried out in collaboration with peers. The uniqueness of MOOCs is that they work on an open network learning model, which allow the participants to learn outside the physical classroom in a completely virtual environment, proceeding on their own pace and from wherever they are in the world (Viswanathan, 2012). In fact, MOOCs hold the potential to make educational resources accessible to everyone, beyond geographical and social boundaries. Even though research shows that the participants from developing countries, such as Africa and Asia, are relatively few, MOOCs could potentially benefit those students for whom travel costs and tuition fees for face-to-face education are too high (Hone & El Said, 2016). In fact, Massive Open Online Courses offer courses that can reach large numbers of learners of any age group for free or for a lower cost. The

term MOOC was coined by D. Cormier in 2008 to describe a twelve-week course created in the same year by G. Siemens and S. Downes form the University of Manitoba, Canada (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014). The course was on 'Connectivism and Connected Knowledge' and its key role was "for people to experience what it means to be part of a social, technical system of learning where the teacher's voice is not an essential hub but, instead, a node in an overall network" (Cormier & Siemens, 2010). After this experimental course, many universities in North America started following the model and embraced this innovative delivery mode. A study conducted in 2013 (Karsenti, 2013) reported that more than 20 million students over 200 countries have enrolled in a MOOC and Kim, in 2016, claimed that students who had signed up for at least one course were about 35 million (Kim, 2016).

Recently, for what concerns the teaching approach used, there is a distinction between "connectivist MOOCs" (also known as cMOOCs), which follow the pedagogical principles explained in the previous section, and "traditional MOOCs" (also called xMOOCs). The aim of cMOOCs is to encourage learners to create, share and build upon each other's final products, such as videos, blogs, forums and wikies. The idea is that of creating a network of people cooperating, working together and learning from each other (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014). Students are required to truly commit to the programme, developing learning objectives and producing course content, otherwise there cannot be cooperative learning and peer interaction, which are the main aspects this type of MOOC is based on and tend to foster. XMOOCs, on the other hand, follow a more traditional teaching approach, that is mere knowledge transmission, seeing the learners as empty glasses to be filled with information. This type of MOOC is more suitable for large numbers of participants since it is a less interactive kind and aim at a more automated feedback (Karsenti, 2013).

The most used and renowned online platforms used in MOOCs are Coursera (coursera.org), edX (edx.org) and Udacity (udacity.com). These platforms are similar to the well-known Moodle, but contrary to it, they do not have a maximum of class size: they can, in fact, accept unlimited registrations. These platforms offer specialisations, certifications, degrees on various subjects and they collaborate with universities and professors from all around the world. They are made available from any device and lectures can be either streamed or downloaded and watched offline.

Generally, it can be agreed that MOOCs' primary objective is that of providing free education on a large scale, in other words they aim at the democratisation of

education. That is why participation is unlimited, open and accessible for potentially everyone, who is in possession of a technological device and an Internet connection. These are also the main advantages of Massive Open Online Courses, as the name itself suggests: they are for everyone and they are open and online, meaning that they are accessible from anywhere at any time and either free or for a very low price. Moreover, they give students the possibility of interacting with each other, as mentioned before, overcoming geographical distance. However, it has been demonstrated (Yeager, et al. 2013) that, even though MOOCs give thousands of learners the opportunity to interact with each other in discussion forums and wikies, the large majority of the participants do not take advantage of this option. Moreover, Hone and El Said (2016) stated that only about 10% of the many students embarking on this learning journey finish the course they enrolled for. Scholars have been investigating the main factors affecting learners' retention. It may be suggested that, primarily, the great freedom that is given by these courses is also the main aspect that seems to undermine their completion. Following the study conducted by Greene et al. (2015), it resulted that students who enrol for a MOOC with a previous experience in this kind of education were less likely to drop out, as well as it was the case with more mature learners. Moreover, Aleraimi et al. (2015) discovered that intention to continue using MOOCs is highly influenced by, as already suggested, perceived openness, perceived usefulness and perceived reputation. In fact, as it was for postal correspondence courses, many are the people and the institutions that question the real value of Distance Education, and MOOCs are no exception (Karsenti, 2013). Regarding the main issues surrounding MOOCs, it is also found that the lack of real communication and interaction between students and instructors typical of DE is one of the most mentioned. Most Massive Open Online Courses use, in fact, the common teaching strategy of "individual learning" (Li, 2020). In this kind of model, "students have access to learning materials and benefit from flexible quiz schedules but have limited or no interaction with their peers" (Ibid.). Furthermore, another problem pointed out by Kim (2016) is the depersonalisation of education. Evidently, in order to instruct millions of students at the same time, the kind of approach and the consequent methods and techniques implemented are the same for everybody, and little differentiation is therefore applied. This is possibly the most problematic point, because it is widely known and agreed that, from a cognitive perspective, every student has a different way of acquiring knowledge, and if the course does not include different kinds of techniques, the acquisition of many students might be more problematic.

In pedagogy, this notion was suggested in the 80s and 90s especially in the works of H. Gardner and K. Willing. In 1984, Gardner published "Frames of Minds: The Theory of Multiple Intelligence": this important psychological and neurological study, that analysed intelligence as the complex result of the interaction among at least seven different types of intelligence, was also key to pedagogical studies. In fact, these intelligences, which are present in every individual, are, though, present in different combinations and with different dominances, depending on the individual's background, culture and formal education. In addition to this, Willing, in 1993, proposed a model of four types of learning styles. According to his model, there are students who are more independent from the class environment and have no problems in working autonomously, carrying out the tasks assigned in an analytic and methodical way. Conversely, other students, are more dependent from the teacher's input, the classmates and the social nature of the learning. For these students, therefore, it might result more difficult to learn from traditional MOOCs, for example, where the lessons are mainly teacher-centred, and the learning is seen as an individual process. Other aspects that undermine the reliability of MOOCs are the much time one needs to commit, in order to obtain successful results. It should be reminded that many students who decide to enrol in a Massive Open Online Course do it because they are already working but lack a higher education degree and want to enlarge their curriculum (Kim, 2016). In addition, some MOOCs are designed assuming too much knowledge causing demotivation in the learners who lack also the basic knowledge, which might, conversely, be taken for granted. In other cases, on the contrary, the courses are too basic, and they are not at the level of world leading universities, going back to the above-mentioned problem concerning the value and reputation this type of instruction has. Finally, it needs to be pointed out that not all students are perfectly suited for this type of learning and more mature ones are, possibly, the most likely to find success with Distance Education given that a high degree of motivation and autonomy are required (Valentine, 2002).

The limitations of MOOCs do not only concern students, but also professors have to face some problems. The instructor's burden in the teaching is at least doubled because the preparation behind one lecture is beyond that in face-to-face classes. Research suggests, in fact, that effectiveness of Distance Education is based on preparation because lessons should be designed in order to take advantage of the technology presented and this requires a lot of time (Ibid). It has been calculated that a lecturer, before starting a MOOC class, spend more than a hundred hours on recording online lecture videos and on

preparing learning materials. In addition, they spend around ten hours per week on the course, including group discussion activities and forums (Kim, 2016). Moreover, as it is for the physical classroom, professors need to design their lesson in a way that is engaging and motivating for the students in order to limit the dropouts that seem to be typical of these courses.

Hence, in the success of MOOCs and, in general, in every kind of DE course, the key element appears to be preparation. Distance Education can be considered a success only if it follows a thorough preparation and design of a course that takes into account different cognitive styles, that takes advantage of the technologies available and that offers engaging and motivating material providing interaction between students. Thus, it may appear evident that it is unfair to associate the online teaching implemented in 2020 by most countries around the world, during the COVID-19 outbreak, to Distance Education, because it lacks the necessary preparation, essential to its success.

1.2.2 Italian Telematic Universities

As it has been claimed throughout the previous sections, formal education, and, higher education in particular, takes place not only in the bricks-and-mortar classroom, but also, and increasingly, anywhere else, thanks to technology and the creation of virtual settings it allows. One's home can be easily, now more than ever, become the space where the learning happens. "Anybody from anywhere if they have the required technological equipment and the appropriate materials can build their own environment to carry on their own educational and self-learning process" (Garito, 2013). In this section, two Italian famous telematic universities will be described from both a technical and pedagogical point of.

The International Telematic University UNINETTUNO is a 15-year-old Italian online university recognised as such in Europe and some other Mediterranean countries, since April 2005. It offers Bachelor's degree courses, Master's degree courses and PhDs. In this university, many professors from all over the world teach in virtual synchronous and asynchronous classrooms in Italian, Arabic, English and French (UNINETTUNO University's website). The courses of studies offered for the Bachelor's degrees are on Economics, Law, Engineering, Cultural Heritage, Psychology and Communications Science. For specialising degree (master-level), there are courses on Economics, Engineering, and Psychology. Finally, many Master's courses are available on various disciplines in partnership with globally recognised universities. The pedagogy at the basis

of the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO is of a connectivist kind, aiming at interconnecting learners with their peers and instructors and providing dynamic content enriched by other existing contents on the Web (Garito, 2013). The student is the centre of the educational process and they are constantly accompanied by the figure of the telematic tutor, who has the important task of guiding the learner through the intricate network of materials, tools and digital resources, facilitating the learning and communication processes. The knowledge, in fact, is delivered through various means: there are video lessons and the so-called intelligent library where all the video-lessons are stored, hyperlinked and from where they can be easily retrieved; there are guided exercises and research on the Internet; there is individual study, interactive dialogue between professors and students, as well as collaborative learning where the students plays the role of the learner and the teacher at the same time, in the attempt of solving a common task. And finally there are virtual laboratories in which the new knowledge can be put into practice, following the essential 'learning-by-doing' concept explained in the famous quote allegedly by Confucius, but surely made famous by Benjamin Franklin: "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, *involve me and I learn*". In UNINETTUNO pedagogical approach, video-lessons play a major role. They are recorded by professors coming from the best universities of Italy and of the world, posted online and made available to all the participants at any time. Students, through the digital teaching platform of UNINETTUNO, have the possibility of accessing a special area, called 'online tutoring' and interact with an expert tutor who can guide them in the site and in the learning. Alternatively, synchronic online meetings can be planned, thanks to which the students can exchange views and clarify doubts directly with their professors.

As it was the case with MOOCs, professors who teach through the Internet need to learn a new way of explaining the content and of organising their lessons, in order to present motivating and engaging material that "triggers a critical and reflective learning process" (Garito, 2013). Educators need to be trained for this kind of teaching, not only in the use of the technology and the software used in DE, but also, they need to be instructed in shifting the way in which they organise and deliver material (Palloff and Pratt, 2000). Distance Education is not something that can be improvised, and preparation is to be considered as the most important aspect. In fact, as Hodges et al. (2020) claim, effective online learning is the result of thorough instructional design and planning because these aspects have a solid impact on the quality of the instruction. Distance

Education can be defined as such if the "learning is recognised as both a social and cognitive process, not merely a matter of information transmission" (Ibid.).

One major advantage of hypertextual technologies, such as the ones employed in the Telematic International University UNINETTUNO, is the fact that they favour a new type of learning since there is a significant similarity between how hypertext works and how human mind neural networking works (Marcus, 2001). Furthermore, apart from video-lessons and the Web in general, another Distance Education technology used in UNINETTUNO University is the television. In fact, a satellite television network, UNINETTUNOUNIVERSITY.TV, broadcasts 24/7 university lectures transmitted in the European area as well as in North Africa and in the Middle East, combining the use of second, third and fourth generation of DE technologies. This demonstrates, as said before, that different generations of DE technologies coexist and are implemented together with the common aim of democratising the knowledge.

The other Italian online university that will be described in this section is *Università Telematica Pegaso.* This one, contrary to the UNINETTUNO University, offers degree courses only to Italians. It has been established in 2006 and the degrees released have the same legal value as any other bricks-and-mortar Italian University. The basis on which *Università Telematica Pegaso* is founded are 'Intelligence, Independence, Interaction', through which it aims at creating a complete interconnection between the university and the student (*Università Telematica Pegaso*'s website). The pedagogical model employed is the 'Lifelong Learning' model which sees the instructor as a guide through knowledge and information, but it is the learner that, then, having the cognitive tools to do it, keeps learning on their own. The degree courses offered by *Università Telematica Pegaso* are Bachelor's and Master's degrees on Law, Engineering, Tourism, Economics, Sports science, Education, Fashion Design, Cultural Heritage, Art, and Psychology. The students are constantly monitored and assessed, even though the learning happens one hundred percent in a virtual environment. Apart from the professors, tutors and coaches are always available for the students' questions and doubts, both about the learning itself and the technical issues. Equally to the Telematic International University UNINETTUNO, also *Università Telematica Pegaso* offers different channels through which the knowledge and the information are made available: TV learning and Social learning are two examples of highly technological and interactive tools that the students can use.

1.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Education

Distance Education (DE), as already defined in the above sections, is that kind of learning happening when two of its main characters, namely the learner and the teacher, are separated either physically or temporarily, or both. This type of instruction, as any other kind, presents advantages and disadvantages. Firstly, the one advantage that is widely recognised as such is flexibility: of time, place and pace (Machado et al. 2019). In fact, in DE the students can organise their work accordingly to their schedule and do not have to carry out the learning following a pre-determined timetable, as it is in face-to-face education. The students can autonomously manage their time and place of learning, according to their needs as long as all the tasks are completed in respect of the given deadlines. This fact allows, for instance, all those people who have a full-time or a part-time job and do not have time to attend normal lessons. Secondly, in Distance Education nowadays, where the material is mainly uploaded online and the video-lessons are stored in virtual libraries, the learner can attend the same lesson more than once and go through the same contents as many times as they need. In this way, the content can be revised many times and through forums and online discussions possible questions and doubts can be clarified. Another advantage of DE is that it allows learners to have lower costs for their learning. In fact, prices for online courses are usually cheaper than the ones for bricks-and-mortar universities and institutions. Furthermore, learners do not need to commute in order to go to class, saving both money and time. Thirdly, another benefit of online Distance Education, in particular, regards computer literacy. Learners, in fact, even those who have never had the chance to familiarise with technologies are encouraged to use them a little every day, losing the "fear" of the computer and improving their skills. Motivation for the subject and for widening one's knowledge, especially in this case, might play a key role, because it can be the push that allows the student to overcome their problems with technology. Finally, another advantage that can be pinpointed has to do with Stephen Krashen's ideas on knowledge acquisition. Krashen's theories are linked specifically to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), but it might be argued that they could also be connected to acquisition in general. Among the five hypothesis he outlined, the Affective Filter (AF) hypothesis seems to be quite relevant. The AF hypothesis suggests that the acquisition is endangered if it happens in a stressful environment where the learner feels anxious or if they are afraid of losing face and making mistakes. These situations of embarrassment can cause the Affective Filter to be built impeding the new

information to reach long-term memory. The fact that Distance Education's primary characteristic has to do with lack of physical proximity might suggest that it allows the learner to feel free of experimenting and putting into practice the new knowledge through online tasks, protected, in a way, by the presence of the screen.

Alongside the above-mentioned advantages there are also a few disadvantages to point out. Firstly, flexibility, which has been listed in the previous paragraph as one of the most relevant benefits of Distance Education, can also become a roadblock to the completion of a DE course. The learner who is not used to study autonomously may not develop the skill soon enough and may damage the entire learning process. Moreover, students are all different cognitively speaking, and they might present difficulties in work independently, as it was explained in the model Ken Willing proposed in 1993 and prefer a more dynamic environment for their learning. In fact, as it has been pointed out in the case of MOOCs, this kind of teaching and learning is not suitable for all the people. In general, more mature students seem to have the right amount of motivation and the highest degree of autonomy that allow them to complete a Distance Education course (Valentine, 2002). DE students will succeed through this means only if they have a few characteristics, such as "tolerance for ambiguity, a need for autonomy, and an ability to be flexible" (Ibid.). In comparison to face-to-face learning situations, Distance Education requires the learners to be more focused, to better manage their time, and to be able to study autonomously. Moreover, it is also true that not all the subjects can be effectively taught via this medium.

Secondly, and maybe most importantly, Distance Education lacks social interaction. Apart from the fact that the traditional classroom experience is something that is unique and cannot be replaced by a virtual environment, this aspect may also affect the learning from a cognitive point of view. It is suggested that the group class can provide the learners with numerous occasions of live discussion and debate, whilst an online forum can only try to substitute face-to-face interaction, but it lacks school conviviality (Machado et al. 2019). It might be argued that debating in class is something that benefits both the educational and the personal growth of the student because it allows them to call into question their ideas and learn from the collaboration with their peers. Moreover, a lesson in a virtual setting makes almost impossible situations of competition, which might be beneficial for some students.

Thirdly, a course, to be effective and complete, should present various activities of any kind, differentiating both the method and the technique implemented, mainly

because, as already claimed before, students have different cognitive styles and need the delivery modes not to be always the same in order to find the one that better suits their acquisition process. Furthermore, differentiation in any course is fundamental, and Distance Education is no exception. In fact, thanks to variation, students are constantly engaged, and they find pleasure in the originality of the task, activity or presentation. The pleasure of learning and of the variation is, in fact, widely agreed to be fundamental as the fuel that starts the engine of the acquisition, which is motivation. It has been demonstrated that three are the causes behind our motivation to act, but only one produces real acquisition (Balboni, 2015). The sense of duty leads people to complete the task, but it does not lead to acquisition; the need of knowing something may help, but it presents shortcomings, because the student may not find interesting and necessary every task they are presented with; the only factor that is essential and that guarantees the acquisition is pleasure. Therefore, if the activity is new and engaging, it will avoid boredom and will favour the acquisition. Moreover, another disadvantage of Distance Education is that it is aimed at a large number of learners and, because of this, it might skip an essential part of the teaching design, which is the so-called "analysis of needs". According to the psychologist Jerome S. Bruner, who formulated this theory, the instruction should be concerned with the experiences and contexts that make the students willing and able to learn, making the acquisition meaningful. In addition, another limitation that can be found in Distance Education has to do with feedback, because, again due to the fact that these courses are for a lot of students, feedback may be delayed or "incomplete". This could create a feeling of demotivation in the learners because they may feel left alone. Feedback is also essential for the students to understand their mistakes and get a comment on how to improve.

Finally, from a more practical point of view, it is true that some employers do not accept online degrees or do not seem to give them the same value. There are still some people who see a social stigma attached to Distance Education and prefer to employ someone with a degree gained at bricks-and-mortar universities or institutions, rather than online.

To conclude, even though disadvantages of Distance Education appear to be more than the advantages, and this might confirm doubts surrounding the real value of DE courses, it is also true that they have given, and keep giving millions of people the chance to be instructed. In the last couple of centuries Distance Education has allowed illiterate adults to learn how to read and write, has given the possibility to unemployed people to

learn a job and to rebuild a destroyed country after the WWII, and, more recently, it has suggested the idea for Emergency Remote Teaching that during 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has helped save the academic year of millions of students and pupils.

CHAPTER 2. Distance Education and Emergency Remote Teaching of Foreign Languages: Advantages and Disadvantages, Testing and Evaluation

In this second chapter, a brief overview on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories will be presented, focusing on the most important factors either beneficial for the acquisition or affecting it. Then, an analysis of advantages and disadvantages of online Foreign Language (FL) teaching will be carried out, also suggesting a few differences between "traditional" distance FL courses and Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) of Foreign Languages, witnessed and implemented during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, attention will be drawn to the widely debated topic of Foreign Language evaluation in a context of Distance Education.

2.1 Second Language Acquisition and Learning Theories: A Brief Overview

The human ability to produce and understand language in order to satisfy our communication needs might be defined as our species' most valuable skill. All species own a specific communication system thanks to which they can be in contact with other individuals of the same kind, but human language is the most complex of them all. We not only use it in order for our species to endure the struggle of existence, but we also use it creatively talking about the past, the future, about our feelings and thoughts and also about imaginary scenarios. Another unique characteristic of humans is that of being able to learn more than one language: so "not just 'lingualism', the ability to acquire and use a language, but 'multilingualism', being able to learn and use many languages throughout our lifetime" (Slabakova, 2016:4). One of the most important questions about language acquisition which research has tried to answer is "How is knowledge of language acquired?". According to the pivotal work on language acquisition carried out by Noam Chomsky in the 1950s, language has been treated as a biological feature of humans and, since then, linguistic studies have been mostly of a generative kind, seeing human language faculty as a specific characteristic of our species. In 2005, Chomsky stated that there are three essential elements influencing the acquisition and development of language within an individual. These three factors are: genetic endowment, experience and principles not specific to the faculty of language (Chomsky, 2005). With genetic endowment, Chomsky refers to an innate biological predisposition to language which is also known as Universal Grammar (UG). According to generative linguists, then, the UG

contains a design of all the rules a speaker will need in order to generate grammatically correct sentences. To the idea of the UG, Chomsky himself also adds another concept, the one of the well-known LAD (Language Acquisition Device) that sees the individual as an active subject in the learning, predisposed to learning and born with a language acquisition device, precisely. The LAD, according to Bruner, must be sided by the LASS (Language Acquisition Support System), which is embodied by the child's educators, for what regards the L1 acquisition, and by the FL teachers and classmates, for what concerns the FL learning (Balboni, 2015). The second factor influencing the acquisition is the environment, meaning that language acquisition depends on a copious amount of comprehensible input made available by the LASS to the individual either acquiring or learning a language[6]. Comprehensible input is often regarded as one of the most crucial factors in the success of language acquisition and learning. The input needs to be abundant and continuous in order for the acquisition to happen. It should be varied in registers and topics, always close to the learner's level and followed but real communication, allowing the individual to practice what they learnt and question their hypotheses about the language. The input is fundamental for the generation of hypotheses on the target language that the LAD produces and that are either confirmed or corrected by prompt feedback.

Many debates have accompanied chomskyan theories about language acquisition and possibly the most famous one was the "nature-nurture debate" (Mitchell, et al. 2013). In this debate, Chomsky's theories, which see the genetic endowment at the basis of human learning, clashes with B. F. Skinner's behaviouristic view. Skinner saw language as one of the many other human skills we learn and develop, and according to his studies we learn through a process made by repeated trials, errors and rewards. Therefore, this viewpoint put emphasis on the second factor proposed by Chomsky – experience – ignoring the presence of a natural predisposition to language and saw the acquisition as something learnt primarily by imitation of our family and acquaintances. It might be argued that this theory applies generally to many species, but that for humans and for the complexity of our language, its acquisition and learning needs to be the result of a more complicated process. However, it is generally agreed that, apart from the innate predisposition to language, there are aspects of language development, including which

[6] In linguistics, there is a difference between acquisition and learning. *Acquisition* refers to that process a child goes through when learning their native language(s), whilst *Learning* refers to the process of studying a foreign language.

one we learn as our native language, that must result from an interaction between innate and environmental factors. For example, if a child is born in Spain from Spanish-speaking parents but is adopted into an English-speaking family, they will grow up as native speakers of English. In this case, the child's genetic endowment or LAD allows them to learn a language but which one they acquire is determined by the environment they grow up in – or, in other words, by their LASS.

Chomskyan theories, then, suggest that hypothetically one should be able to learn as many languages as they need or want to, given that one has the time, the circumstances and the motivation to learn it. As mentioned in the previous chapter, motivation plays a fundamental role in the learning process. Dörnyei (1998) claims, indeed, that "motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process" (Dörnyei, 1998:117). The social psychologist Robert C. Gardner and his associates define motivation as a complex construct made of three components: "desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction and satisfaction with the task" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993:2). Moreover, they also proposed a distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation, where the former sees an open orientation towards the target language community and the latter reflects the belief that language learning will bring some tangible benefits to the individual. Together they have been proved to be powerful predictors of second language learning success.

Motivation is, as said before, the fuel of acquisition, but some scholars also believe that, the engine and how it is structured matters. Even though there are many disagreements on this topic and many researchers think that variations in performance are to be attributed to the quality of the LASS, it might be argued that some individual characteristics could also play an important role in favour, or not, of language acquisition. For instance, Language Aptitude, presented by Skehan (1998) as a talent specific for language acquisition that is not teachable, might be one of these biological characteristics beneficial for SLA. This idea is partly supported by psycholinguistics, that describes our brain as bimodal, meaning that the two hemispheres, the analytic one and the holistic one, work together in the acquisition of language and are both essential in this process. However, it is also true that, even though the individual's brain should be taken into consideration as a whole, he or she might present preferences in the use of one hemisphere in respect to the other. This left or right-hemisphere dominance may show a different aptitude towards language learning: holistic students will prefer the communicative

nature of language and might result more fluent, although less accurate; whilst analytic students will prefer the grammar and the reflection upon it, focusing on accuracy rather than fluency, resulting less quick in the learning. Nonetheless, if the LASS provides varied and differentiated activities, both types of students should eventually succeed.

Furthermore, psycholinguistics has also pointed out that learners' attitude towards the target language may play some part in explaining success or lack of it. This concept is to be linked back to the idea of integrative motivation, where a positive attitude towards the target language and the corresponding culture and people is usually a predictor of achievement, though accompanied by active engagement and learning effort (Mitchell, et al. 2013).

Finally, anxiety has been shown to be another important aspect affecting language learning performance and retain. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, as stated in Chapter 1, draws the attention to the emotional sphere of learners.

> "The Affective Filter Hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of Second Language Acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter – even if they understand the message, the input will not reach that parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the Language Acquisition Device. Those with attitudes more conducive to Second Language Acquisition will not only seek and obtain more input, they will also have a lower or weaker filter. They will be more open to the input and it will strike 'deeper'". (Krashen, 1982:31)

Moreover, numerous studies have suggested that language anxiety, that is "a propensity of an individual to react in a nervous manner when speaking in the second language" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993:5), has a negative relationship with acquisition success. This type of anxiety is said to be a consequence of low self-confidence and might result in a general unwillingness to interact in the target language, confirming what claimed by Krashen in his Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Therefore, to sum up, the elements that are key in SLA are a high motivation, a positive attitude towards the target language, language aptitude and a low Affective Filter. Together, they are strong predictors of language learning success. However, if the learning process happens in a situation in which the learner's motivation is low; in a condition in which language aptitude is not supported by the LASS with varied activities that engage the bimodality of our brain and help balance the hemisphere dominance; and

if the learning takes place in an uncomfortable atmosphere activating the Affective Filter, the second language acquisition will not be successful.

Together with motivation, language aptitude and attitude, and low language anxiety, another important aspect in foreign language learning – if not the most important one – is interaction. Interaction is widely accepted to be at the basis of modern FL teaching approaches, such as the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach developed in the late 1960s. This approach, firstly introduced in Britain, became the most implemented worldwide and aims at making Communicative Competence (CC) the goal of language teaching. Communicative Competence may be simply described as the competence to communicate where communication implies, first of all, the knowledge and correct use of the foreign language grammar (lexicon, syntax, phonology), but it also means knowing when to speak, when not, what to talk about and, more in general, how to interact socially and culturally. Therefore, in order to develop the CC, it is essential to interact with other native or non-native speakers of the target language (Canale & Swain, 1980). Complementing and integrating the CLT approach and confirming it, the Interactive Approach needs to be mentioned. The Interactive Approach is supported by both Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis. The comprehensible input, as previously stated, is essential in order for the learner to formulate hypotheses on the structure of the language and on its use. However, students also need to be provided with the opportunity to practise what they have learnt and question their hypotheses through interaction, so that gaps between the learner's own production and their interlocutor's can be noticed and new knowledge of the language can be absorbed. The process of noticing is possible thanks to feedback that reformulate the learner's own utterance in the correct form, in the hope that this will encourage them to notice and modify mismatches between their interlanguage production and the target language correct form (Mitchell, R. et al. 2013). Then, interaction is imperative in second language learning since without practising and strengthening communication skills, the learning is likely to be less efficient, if not happening at all. Moreover, synchronous feedback provided to the speaker is a key element of the interaction, because, as already said, it can help correct the learner's errors.

In designing FL lessons, teachers should be taking into account all these aspects, if they want their classes to be effective and successful for the student's learning.

2.2 Foreign Language Teaching and the use of Technology

Modern foreign language teaching is a field that has changed over the decades, accompanied by the changes of acquisition hypotheses and theories. Many have been the approaches and methods designed and implemented over the years, moving from very teacher-centred approaches – such as the Grammar-Translation approach – to more learner-centred ones, such as the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the CLT approach is still the most implemented worldwide and, its main objective is the development of the Communicative Competence – which implies the development of linguistic competence, extralinguistic competence and socio-pragmatic and cultural competences. Regarding the development of the cultural competence, Brown (1989) explains:

> "Learning a foreign language always entails learning a second culture to some degree, even if you never actually set foot in the foreign country where the language is spoken. Language and culture are bound up with each other and interrelated. (…) Every person is part of a *culture*. And everyone uses the language to express that culture." (Brown, 1989: 65)

Therefore, in order to teach the culture and the language that culture is interrelated with, it is argued that one of the most effective methods is to use authentic materials. Authentic materials are those texts – written, audio or visual – that are made for native speakers of the Foreign Language, but that are turned into teaching materials by the FL instructor, though with neither changing their authentic core nor removing its essential natural appeal (Martari, 2019). The implementation of authentic materials in the teaching process is not only beneficial for motivational purposes, but also because it enlarges the student's horizons and help them think critically, showing them the countless interpretation of the world there can be.

Teachers of Foreign Languages, before technology has started becoming part of our every-day life, might have found it difficult to retrieve authentic materials, because the foreign country was the only place where it was possible to find them. Nowadays, we are lucky enough to get to the other part of the world with a click, and we can get access – even though only virtually – to thousands of information and authentic material. Consequently, it seems clear that as technology has an impact on our culture and on our way to think of the world, it must have an impact also on the way we think of education, becoming an integral part of the learning experience (Ahmadi, 2018). According to many scholars (Evans, 2009; Riasati, 2012; Shyamlee & Phil, 2012; Alsied & Pathan, 2013;

Favaro & Menegale, 2014; Gilakjani, 2017; Ahmadi, 2018) the integration of technology into the teaching of Foreign Languages should be considered mandatory, because it opens the world to the learners, it keeps them motivated offering an infinite variety of materials, and it engages them, fostering their active participation and their autonomy. Researchers and experts of FL teaching, during the last century, also started employing technologies and the Internet not only as a store of information and materials, but also as the main supplier of knowledge (Spina, 1998).

> "The picture of a teacher who is a walking encyclopaedia, has been forgotten today. They do not know everything, they cannot know everything, and they do not even need to know. They only need to be the ones, who teach their students how to use technology for learning, regardless of where it occurs, and help them discern the genuine from the fake" (Duse & Duse, 2016).

Therefore, as seen in Chapter 1, the development of technologies encouraged the design of foreign language courses entirely mediated by a computer and guided by expert teachers, leading not only to the integration of technologies in face-to-face lessons, but also to FL courses delivered completely online.

2.3 Online Distance Teaching of Foreign Languages: Benefits and Shortcomings

When one decides to start studying a Foreign Language through the means of Distance Education it might be because they live too far from the institution they enrolled in, because they are already working and they need their study time to be flexible or because they prefer the DE approach primarily due to language anxiety – the fear of interacting in the Target Language (Pichette, 2009). In fact, in a search for anonymity, DE students might tend to choose a type of learning that can save them from embarrassment and situations that might consequently harm their self-image, role that is usually played by the Affective Filter. However, it might be important to point out that some of the main characteristics of Distance Foreign Language Education may be favouring the learning of a FL and some others, on the other hand, may be hindering it.

For instance, when learning Foreign Languages at a distance, students have often described the activities proposed highly motivating because of the way through which they are presented. According to a study recently conducted by Osuna-Acedo and Gil-Quintana (2020) on sMOOCs (Social Massive Open Online Courses) the great variety of contents and the way in which these contents are presented thanks to the Web are the

most important aspects of online learning for 89% of the students who participated in this research. It is claimed that the students learn through a great exchange of meaning produced by texts, sounds, videos, hyperlinks and forums (Ibid.). In general, in fact, 21st-century DE means online teaching and learning, therefore the kind of tasks and assignments learners have to deal with are to be carried out mostly on the computer, through videos, audios, chat rooms and interactive exercises. Such activities are generally perceived as engaging and motivating mainly because they are never the same and they often present real-life and problem-solving tasks. Moreover, research has shown that live video lessons, through the means of online platforms such as Skype, Zoom and Google Meet, have an immediate and beneficial application on language learning, increasing confidence and motivation on the learner simply because it allows the participants to see each other and it makes face-to-face communication at a distance possible (White, 2006). On the other hand, Weissberg (1999) argued that learning at a distance "does not reproduce the performances we usually accomplish, but rather invents another realm of perception" (Weissberg, 2020:14). The kind of interaction that happens in online chat rooms or in videoconferencing is, thus, different from face-to-face communication because there are "different sets of 'mutual monitoring possibilities' that these technologies make available" (Jones, 2004:23), and the ways in which we can be present, as well as the ways in which we perceive the other people's presence are varied. For example, student-to-student or even teacher-to-students communication mediated by a computer, even if synchronous, inevitably hampers non-verbal interaction, because looks and gestures are not always noticed or correctly interpreted.

Furthermore, it is claimed that motivation is even more needed when learning a Foreign Language at a distance, because of the individuality of the process. Distance Education, in fact, requires the students to be autonomous and independent, to be able to organise their study and to respect deadlines. Many students find that the learning of FLs at a distance needs an even higher degree of self-motivation and independent work-skills because the learner, even if they will usually find the activities motivating, will not receive motivation either from the group class or the teacher (Blake, 2008). It might be argued that Distance Education is more suitable for university students or adult students because, in most of the cases, they have chosen to study Foreign Languages and it is not something imposed by the school system, meaning that their self-motivation to succeed in the learning will be surely higher than any other type of learner. This also applies to language attitude: if a person decides to start an academic career in languages, being it in

presence or online, it might be assumed that their attitude towards the target language will be positive because their goal is that of getting a degree, succeeding in what they are doing.

Regarding language aptitude, though, as mentioned in above, things are slightly different. Students have different cognitive styles and they learn differently, where the cognitive style regards the acquisition processes, whilst the way in which we learn knowledge depends on how we accommodate information in our mind (Balboni, 2015). Among the different ways of learning, there are the analytic/holistic and the theoretical/practical styles where the student tends to prefer either a more reflective kind of approach to the target language or a more global one. In the first case, the learner will be preferring grammar analysis and studies on the language structure to the actual practice of the language, while in the second case the student's attention will be drawn to the communicative purpose of the language, thus to fluency rather than accuracy. However, since the actual acquisition happens only by using both these approaches – for the brain functions bimodally – the teacher should favour activities that are both reflective and intuitive. The role of the instructor, then, should be that of differentiating the kind of activities they plan, so that the learner does not get too comfortable with their learning style, fact that could affect their learning as a whole. In the case of Distance Education, it might happen that, because of technical issues or because of the very nature of online teaching, the learning activities are only or mostly of one kind, penalising students with different learning styles. Clearly, the issue of differentiating is a problem present also in more traditional learning settings, but in the case of DE it might be even accentuated by the lack of physical proximity, body language and, most of all, interaction.

For example, classroom management, which is sometimes an underrated aspect in teaching, has indeed a relevant impact on teacher-to-students and student-to-student interaction. The way in which people are sitting in a classroom says something about the kinds of activities the teacher is going to propose, and it may encourage or not the type of interaction the teacher would like to have. If there are going to be group discussions, for instance, the desks will be gathered together so that this disposition will support this kind of activity. Similarly, if the class is going on a reflection of a grammar point, a horseshoe formation of the desks might be preferred in order for the instructor to have a direct eye contact with the whole class and understand immediately if everything is clear or if somebody needs help (Riddell, 2014). Furthermore, as mentioned above with regard to Communicative Competence, communication happens and is successful certainly

through the right formulation and correct use of sentences, but also through gestures and facial expressions, that together with verbal language, or sometimes even alone, help clarify the message or avoid pragmatical misunderstandings. In Foreign Language teaching, instructors use a lot of non-verbal language because it helps the students better understand the meaning of new words, phrases or pragmatical uses. In addition to this, non-verbal communication also helps the teacher and the students provide immediate feedback when interacting with each other. On the contrary, in distance teaching and learning environments, proximity and eye contact, which are important factors in the learning process, are limited (McKnight, 2000). Instructors are not always able to observe the emotions of the students and cannot always notice moments of anxiety. This might cause distress to both students and teachers, who could consequently perform differently than they might have done in a traditional classroom setting. Clearly, even if the Distance Foreign Language class is broadcast synchronously and participants see each other, the aspect of classroom management lacks completely, and the non-verbal communication is severely limited.

In addition, it is widely accepted that in the Foreign Language classroom, linguistic interaction plays an important role in Second Language Acquisition. Even though the Internet and modern technologies have reached a high level of efficiency and they try to substitute 100% face-to-face interaction, it is also true that there are some characteristics that cannot be replaced. Greenberg (1998), for instance, defines contemporary Distance Education as a carefully designed learning experience that uses various technologies in order to reach learners at a distance and it is planned to foster learner interaction. However, "many FL professionals hold dear the idea that the classroom locus, the physical presence of all participants being in the same place at the same time, affords students an inherent advantage for language learning – no matter what pedagogy is employed." (Blake, 2005). In fact, in the teaching of Foreign Languages, sense of community and belonging are fundamental as well as human interaction and school conviviality, and FL Distance Education is no exception. "While this lack of sense of community affects all type of classes, it is particularly troublesome in FL instruction where the learning occurs [primarily] through interaction." (Gonzalez-Lloret & Nielson, 2009). In both traditional and connectivist MOOCs on FLs, for instance, where pedagogical approaches are more of an individualistic kind, it has been shown that lack of human interaction seems to be one of the primary explanations for dropouts and the main reason behind students' demotivation (Li, 2020).

Furthermore, in the case of online asynchronous classes, because of their very nature, there is often a significant time lag in interactions, and immediate feedback is practically impossible. This delay can be extremely fruitless for students, whose attention to interaction and prompt feedback are fundamental, especially in a FL classroom where the acquisition depends, as mentioned above, on feedback and noticing. Feedback is, in fact, another essential element in the acquisition of a FL. Students need feedback on their interlanguage in order to make adjustments to their language production. Feedback can either be pre-emptively provided, which means it is given before the learner's performance, or it can be reactive, that is, it occurs after an error. Reactive feedback can be explicit, when it is given in the form of an overt correction, or implicit, when it is a reformulation of an incorrect statement. This last option is the one that often allows learners to notice a gap between their interlanguage and the target language, hopefully leading them to correct possible mismatches. Scholars have pointed out that the right time to provide feedback is not always clear (Gonzalez-Lloret & Nielson, 2009; Riddell, 2014). In fact, a teacher cannot know in advance when exactly feedback will be necessary, but they should give it when the learner is ready for it. However, feedback, both from the teacher and from peers, should be provided promptly and frequently in order to help the student revise their output. What happens in online Distance Education is that, many times, the lessons are either asynchronous, making immediate feedback more difficult, if not impossible, or, in the case they are synchronous, they might host too many students. In this case, the best learners can wish for is automated feedback or peer review. In addition, if the number of the students enrolled in an online FL course is large, it might happen that, sometimes, feedback – even if thorough and personalised – is not produced at a favourable time and this might make the trainee feel left alone and it might cause demotivation (Machado, 2019).

Therefore, even though the activities proposed in online Distance Foreign Language courses are highly motivating because of their interactive and varied nature, and even if the Internet allows face-to-face synchronous communication, real interaction, sense of community and prompt, personalised feedback are often lacking, endangering the learning process as a whole.

2.4 Online Distance Education vs Emergency Remote Teaching

Following the outbreak and rapid spread of COVID-19 pandemic in the first months of 2020, lockdowns and social distancing measures have been imposed in over

109 countries across the world, in order to prevent the spread of the virus and slow down the number of infections (Mahaye, 2020). In consequence to these drastic, but necessary measures, the majority of businesses and institutions, including schools and universities of any kind, had to temporarily close. Many countries, Italy among the first ones, decided to implement what has erroneously been called Online Distance Education[7], in order to maintain a certain degree of normality and to keep the learning going. As suggested in the introduction of this dissertation as the main aim of this paper and as it is clearly stated by Distance Education experts and scholars (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al, 2020; Toquero, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020) what has been developed and implemented in the first months of 2020 in the attempt of substituting face-to-face education cannot be called Online Distance Education. In fact, even though this new approach might share some characteristics with DE, the online learning offered in response to a global emergency, as it is the case of COVID-19 pandemic, differs from the carefully designed online Distance Education, largely described so far in the previous chapter and sections of this dissertation – and it also should be named differently scholars affirm. Experts (ibid.) state that a better term should be Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), because the use of the same terminology to refer to the two similar, yet distinct types of learning would be unfair to online DE.

> "Using the right definition is important because (…) when things are settled and go back to normal, what people will remember will be bad examples from a time of crisis, and the years of efforts it has taken to prove the effectiveness of distance education can vanish all of a sudden" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020:ii)

In fact, what has happened with ERT was a quick shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching, but the simple implementation of modern technologies and online platforms for the communication and the exchange of information and materials does not classify as online Distance Education. As profusely explained in the previous chapter, DE consists in thorough planning of activities and interactions, recognising the learning as both a cognitive and social process, not just a simple exchange of information. Gonzalez-Lloret and Nielson (2009) state that a Distance Education course cannot be defined as such if it consists in the translation of a face-to-face course with the lesson notes copied onto PowerPoint slides. "Ideally, an online course should provide students with learning

[7] In Italy the term used by newspapers and the government itself is *Didattica a Distanza (DAD)*

experiences that are not possible in a traditional face-to-face classroom." (Ibid:171) In addition, they also point out that in order to successfully teach a course online, teachers and professors should have a special training in the use of technologies and online platforms as well as in their field. It has been observed that schools and universities that offer interactive online courses employ teams of curriculum designers, graphic designers and computer programmers in order to create their courses and the whole process can take more than one year to be ready and available to everybody. With ERT, on the other hand, it took schools and teachers two weeks to plan online courses: the effort is admirable, but we cannot expect the quality of the teaching and the learning to live up to Distance Education.

Mainly because of the short time institutions, teachers and students had to prepare for this situation of emergency, the organisation of classes delivered online was recognised lacking many essential elements. Of course, it is not the aim of this dissertation that of finding someone to blame for this dearth, but it needs to be admitted that the educational system of Italy and, in general, of the large majority of countries affected by Coronavirus have been found unprepared and vulnerable to external threats, being them natural disasters or pandemics (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). The putting into practice of Emergency Remote Teaching as surely been useful, but it also showed the need to better train our teachers making them able to successfully manage situations like this, taking full advantage of the platforms and tools made available by the online learning and it has also highlighted the importance of an improvement of digital literacy among students and instructors.

2.4.1 An Observation of the Implementation of Emergency Remote Teaching of English

During the months of March, April and May 2020, I carried out an online internship at an Upper Secondary School[8], virtually shadowing the English Teacher. This internship gave me the opportunity to observe at first hand ERT from the teacher's perspective. The lessons were synchronous and broadcast via Google Meet, which is a video-conferencing service developed and offered by *Google*, which during COVID-19

[8] The technical school ITET Luigi Einaudi in Bassano del Grappa (VI). A Technical School (in Italian *Istituto Tecnico)* is, in the Italian school system, a school that offers both a wide theoretical education and a specialization in a specific field of studies (e.g.: economy, humanities, administration, law, technology, tourism, agronomy), often integrated with a three/six months internship in a company, association or university, from the third to the fifth and last year of study.

outbreak started offering advanced features in order to support schools and the growing demand for such services. The service, contrary to other platforms, such as *Zoom*, is free, allowing unlimited calls, hosted by one person and welcoming up to 100 participants. This application, which can be downloaded onto any devices, has been chosen also because it is connected to the Classroom service, another feature offered by the Google LLC that has made the exchange of materials, tests and homework rather easy and immediate. Clearly, many were the issues of a technical and connection nature hampering the flawless progress of the lessons. Unstable Internet connection was one of the main hindrances both students and teachers had to face, thing that seriously affected the quality of classes. In my observation, I could notice that, on average, ten minutes per lesson – which were usually twenty or thirty-minute long – were spent trying to fix technical issues, such as camera and microphone malfunctions, or trying to get a connection good enough to allow a clear teacher-to-student communication. In fact, the poor Internet connection usually made the interaction more difficult, especially when using the Foreign Language, limiting the use of English to the correction of homework and listening activities. The teacher's main goal during the FL lesson seemed that of making the learners understand what their task was, therefore, English was only the content of the class rather than being also the means of instruction. Following this pattern, the FL input was very limited, and when provided with listening activities, for example, it was often hampered by technical issues: most learners could not hear the recording properly, if not at all. Therefore, given the lack of comprehensible, in all senses, input, the attention was primarily drawn to reduce the physical distance and to fight isolation caused by quarantine rather than on actual teaching and learning of new content, which is argued to be one the most important aspects of ERT. Scholars (Bozkurt and Sharm,2020; Toquero, 2020), in fact, claim that, in a situation of crisis, what people need is empathy and care. Pupils and students have not chosen this type of learning, but if they want to pass, they need to, nevertheless, attend and participate. Therefore, instructors should be focusing on teaching how to share, collaborate and support rather than on the simple transmission of knowledge because, when people are experiencing a time of psychological pressure what they need is support rather than "being bombarded with lectures like a *locust wave* while sitting in front of a computer" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020:iii). Nonetheless, even though the teaching was not up to the usual standards because hindered by the situation of emergency, the assessment process was still happening following the same pattern it had

had during face-to-face lessons. The assessment in DE and ERT environments will be dealt with in depth in 2.5.

The design of the English lessons I observed was more or less always the same and had the same structure it would have had in a physical classroom. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher tried to understand if all the students were present calling their names one by one and waiting for them to answer, thing that was made difficult by the aforementioned connection problems and by other technical issues, such as tools malfunctions or lack of appropriate devices. The vast majority of pupils kept their microphones off in order not to disturb with external noises, given the fact that they were all attending from home and they were usually sharing their studying space with their siblings or parents. Moreover, almost all the pupils kept the camera off, unless specifically asked by the teacher or if they were asked questions. In general, though, even when asked directly, pupils tended to leave their camera disactivated and, consequently, their participation in class was extremely passive. It needs to be reminded, once again, that in the case of Emergency Remote Teaching, learners are not choosing to study at a distance, but they are forced to by the circumstances. Their involvement in the learning process is the same as it had been in face-to-face classes, or if anything, it has decreased, because of the psychological impact of quarantine and the resulting isolation and lack of human and social interaction. Bozkurt and Sharm (2020) indeed affirm that "while Distance Education has always been an alternative and flexible *option* for learners, Emergency Remote Teaching is an *obligation"* (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020:ii), and this needs to be borne in mind when studying strategies and approaches, because pupils' priorities and needs might be completely different from the school system's or the teacher's. Moreover, the respect of deadlines, which is one of the student's task in Distance Education (Trajanovic et al. 2007) was not a very common practice among pupils. Very often, even though the homework was communicated orally at the end of the lesson and then written on the electronic class register, the pupils did not complete it or completed it only partly. The explanations given to justify these lacks were of various kinds: some did not find the instructions, some had technical issues, some did just part of it, some others simply forgot to do it. In addition to this, when the teacher wanted to correct the exercises she had given as homework, many times pupils said to have unstable Internet connection avoiding being asked to participate, and this sometimes felt like an excuse, as if they were taking advantage of the situation to withdraw from their duties.

Among the activities proposed by the teacher, the majority was mainly grammar-centred and less or no space was left for actual interaction in the Foreign Language, partly because the type of approach used did not include it and partly because the video-conferencing kind of communication employed did not allow it. Especially regarding the teaching of FLs, the use of a different programme, such as *Zoom* for example, could have helped make pair and group interactions a regular practice. *Zoom*, in fact, allows the creation of the so-called *Breakout Rooms* that are virtual rooms into which the host can divide the people, either randomly or choosing the participants one by one. The host have total control over these rooms and can enter and exit them as they please, participating if necessary or just listening to the interactions. In a few occasions, pupils were asked to work in pairs or little groups preparing, as a homework, short videos on a topic chosen by the teacher, implementing a role-play technique, typical of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach. However, being this activity carried out outside of the virtual classroom, the teacher did not have any control over the creative process, losing an important part that would result helpful for the evaluation. The teacher, after watching the videos, provided a general feedback to the pupils during the following lesson, without being too specific but only underlining the strong points and those aspects that needed to be improved. It might be argued, though, that the lack of a complete feedback did not help motivate the pupils for the next tasks keeping the participation in class and the effort in the performance of a task at a minimum.

Confirming what mentioned above and stated by White (2006), sometimes the simple fact of seeing each other was beneficial for participants' motivation. In fact, those virtual classes in which pupils activated the cameras and kept it on for the entire duration of the lesson were more interactive and the degree of participation was greater. However, this factor is not dependent on the type of activities proposed rather on the internal and individual dynamics of each class group. Usually, those who showed more interest and attention, actively participating were last-year pupils who felt the pressure of the final exam approaching. Contrary, first-year pupils were very shy and did not participate much, possibly and mainly because they spent together as a group only a few months before the lockdown, thing that did not give them the opportunity to bond and to feel confident behind a screen as it was the case with last-year pupils.

2.5 The Assessment of Foreign Languages at a Distance

In this section, the attention will be drawn to the thorny and frequently discussed issue of the assessment of Foreign Languages in a Distance Education context and, in particular, some observations will be made on how assessment has been dealt with during Emergency Remote Teaching implemented during the lockdowns caused by the Coronavirus pandemic.

2.5.1 Formative and Summative Assessment

First of all, it is important to notice that assessment can be conducted for formative or summative purposes (Gipps, 1994; Novello, 2014; Dolin, 2018), so, the way in which the teacher collects information on the improvements made by the learner are more or less the same, what changes is the kind of feedback given. Summative assessment is most frequently used and possibly the easiest one to elaborate, and it aims at verifying the learning at the end of a given period, such as at the end of a Learning Unit[9], course or year. Rather than being interested in leading the learner towards the next step in the learning, the summative assessment provides little information on the level of the learner and no information on the actual competences developed or the difficulties still present. This type of assessment, which is usually expressed in numbers or letters, is useful for the school to compile statistics and for the parents to immediately understand the trend of their children. On the other hand, formative assessment is a constant practice, a process used by instructors that gives students a feedback in order to adjust ongoing teaching and learning and to improve students' attainment of instructional outcomes (McManus, 2008). Unlike summative assessment, formative assessment is not always required by the school system and it is, therefore, often not produced. However, it might be argued that this type of feedback is the most important one from a learning perspective because it enhances it. Formative assessment, in fact, accompanies the learning process, and it constantly verifies the achievement of students and their difficulties. Moreover, formative assessment allows the teacher to change their methods and techniques if these are not helping the acquisition, because it also provides a feedback on the type of activities implemented. Finally, being a constant observation of learners and their performance, formative assessment removes

[9] A Learning Unit is the organisation of teaching through which new knowledge is made available. Each Learning Unit starts from linguistic, pragmatic and cultural objectives. Usually it lasts a few hours and it is part of a larger thematic block. A Linguistic Unit follows three larger phases – then divided into the 5Es in language learning (Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate) – that are the global, the analytic and the conclusive phase.

from assessment the stress it typically creates on students, because they become used to it. Learners would, ultimately, form a habit of receiving a constant feedback and, in this way, their performance might even be better because not affected by the anxious environment testing often generates.

2.5.2 The Importance of Assessment in the Teaching of Foreign Languages

As previously mentioned, learning a Foreign Language is a great cognitive effort that involves both brain hemispheres, requires a high degree of motivation and needs constant feedback to the output produced, in order for the learner to verify the hypotheses made on the target language. Therefore, tests and feedback play fundamental roles in the learning process and assessment should be considered as an integral part of education. It is argued that when students attempt to learn something, their retention is much better if they test themselves, meaning that they try to recall information from long-term memory. Furthermore, "the benefits of testing are even larger when it is combined with feedback" (Dunlosky & Rawson, 2015:32) where feedback means that the teacher provides the students with a review of the correct answers. Often, though, assessment is perceived by teachers as an obligation and as a source of stress and anxiety by the students. What it is argued by experts on the topic is that assessment should be the result of an interpretation carried out by the teacher who needs to take into consideration both the test outcomes and the personal and academic path of each individual (Porcelli, 1992). In addition, assessment should not be perceived as a negative experience but rather it should be considered – because it is – a powerful means of communication (Novello, 2014). Language Acquisition is characterised by a number of phases, each one essential for the learning to be successful. If one of the steps is missing, the whole process could be jeopardised. It is fundamental then, to include assessment in the learning process so that it is no longer perceived as something imposed but as a moment of growth and further motivation, for both teachers and students. Moreover, not only should assessment be part and parcel of the teaching process, but it should also be the starting point when designing a Learning Unit. In fact, when language teachers design a Learning Unit, they should have in mind from the beginning the objectives they are going to assess at the end of it, together with the needs of their learners, so that the whole planning

will be directed towards that end (Porcelli, 1992; Novello, 2014). A language Learning Unit is made of five steps, namely Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate, of

which assessment is the last one (Bybee, 1997). Hence, it results obvious that if what needs to be assessed is clear from the beginning, it will be easier for the teacher to plan all the previous phases accordingly. The first step is called the Engage phase, in which the learner's prior knowledge and knowledge of the world are elicited, and, through questions, images and videos students are mentally engaged, and their interest is captured. This phase usually features activities that activate the right hemisphere – for the directionality of the learning – which will arouse learners' curiosity and produce motivation, both essential for the acquisition of new knowledge. Following the Engage phase, there is the Explore phase. This step consists in analysing and investigating a text that can be presented in various forms and explores the new language usages or grammar points. The third phase, the Explain one, urges the student to find scientific explanation for their findings, verifying the hypotheses made and systematising the language into tables, schemes or graphs. The fourth phase is the Elaborate one, that provides the students with opportunities to practise what they have been learning. During this step there will be a creative employment of the language through role-plays and real use of the FL. Finally, in the Evaluate phase, learners are provided with opportunities to test what they have been studying and the instructor can, through the data gathered, prepare a feedback that can be either summative – the most common one – or formative, or both.

Especially in the teaching of Foreign Languages, assessment should be planned and conducted for formative purposes. Language testing is a very debated and crucial topic mainly because of its complexity. It is complicated firstly because language itself is complicated. As already mentioned, language is made of many elements, namely linguistic, extra-linguistic, pragmatic, social and cultural elements, that all need to be taken into consideration when teaching and assessing a FL. In fact, the knowledge of a language cannot be assessed with a simple written exam because that is just one of the skills FL learners have to acquire, but not the only one. Therefore, the variety of tests that can be created are plenty and each needs its own specific parameter to be appropriately evaluated. Moreover, complex is the human mind and it is not always that simple to understand what processes are happening in it. Many factors may be affecting one's performance and sometimes external or personal circumstances might endanger it; in that case the performance would not be reflecting the real competence of the learner. For example, in a stressful situation, such as an exam itself, the learner can, unconsciously, activate a self-defence mechanism and this might hindrance their full expression. In the

same way, during the evaluation, the personal and emotional sphere of the instructor can enter and change the perception of the subject they are assessing (Porcelli, 1992).

Generally, in order to facilitate the assessment process, Novello (2014) suggests some of the key elements that should be at the basis of evaluation, which are familiarity, fairness, and authenticity. Familiarity refers to the type of tests given to students that needs to be known to the learner prior to the actual examination. In fact, if the people who are taking a test know and have practised with that kind of test before, they will have better results than those who have not had drills or mock exams. If the learner has not familiarised with the type of test given, this might deeply affect their performance, diminishing up to 50% the possibilities of success.

Fairness is another important aspect of assessment because one result does not say much about the competence of a learner. The day of the test, the learner might have not been feeling well, he or she might have had bad news and perform poorly or simply they might have not understood correctly what they needed to do. Of course, these circumstances may affect the final result, but it is essential to give learners more than just one chance to prove their skills, so that external conditions do not determine the evaluation and the assessment can be said to be fair. This point returns to the concept of formative assessment, in the sense that evaluation should be constant, and it should represent the result of the learning process, including personal growth and skill development, rather than the outcome of a single performance.

Finally, authenticity means that the kind of tests given should be reflecting real-life situations, so that the learner can find a meaning in what they are doing. Furthermore, preparing authentic assessments creates variety and arouses curiosity in the learner who will take pleasure in doing the tasks and will feel motivated in continuing the learning.

2.5.3 The Assessment of Foreign Languages at a Distance: Online Distance Education and Emergency Remote Teaching

If assessment is a thorny topic in education and in particular in the teaching of Foreign Languages, it surely is even more controversial in Distance Education where some essential aspects of it might be missing. In fact, the cornerstone of assessment so far described sees it as a great means of communication between teachers and students implying a relationship between the two, a knowledge of the learner that goes beyond the result of a test. In order for an assessment to be valid, the teacher should consider the learner as a student, surely, but firstly as an individual with specific cognitive styles,

strengths and weaknesses. In a "traditional" online distance course, it often happens that, due to the great number of participants or because the lessons are asynchronous, teachers do not have a direct relationship with their students and communication is not as frequent. The two most common assessment methods applied in MOOCs, for example, are machine-graded multiple-choice quizzes or tests and peer-reviewed written assignments. Both these methods, it is claimed, come with significant problems of management and rigor (Karsenti, 2013). Students who enrol in a MOOC, therefore, cannot expect to receive an individual formative feedback on their assignments from the teacher, but the best they can hope for is a correction from other students. Clearly, this situation can work, even if with difficulties, with many subjects, but in the learning of Foreign Languages, MOOCs seem not to be a valid option.

Assessment of students learning in online environments cannot be simply moved from a traditional face-to-face classroom to the virtual setting, but it needs to be "re-conceptualised" (Perera-Diltz & Moe, 2014). Online communication technology allows many assessment tools, for example, discussion boards, forums, wikies, student-generated multiple-choice quizzes, and flipped classrooms. However, if taking into consideration once again the learning of FLs, the opportunities of testing and evaluating all the skills and competences are limited. As pointed out by Novello (2020) online DE allows the testing of some skills, but it drastically reduces the opportunities to work on all of them thoroughly. Nevertheless, in a planned online foreign-language distance-education course, all the skills should be given the same amount of attention and various strategies need to be designed and implemented.

Regarding an emergency remote teaching context, on the other hand, where "contact" hours[10] are fewer and where lessons are shorter, choices need to be made. For instance, the listening and writing skills, which are often neglected in face-to-face education, can be easier to develop and assess in an online setting, whereas reading and speaking might be more difficult to teach and evaluate. On the bright side, though, ERT allows, almost paradoxically, a more bespoke kind of teaching and, therefore, a more personalised kind of evaluation can be generated, because teachers have known their students since before ERT was needed. They can, therefore, prepare assignments that are tailored to meet each learner's needs. However, as already said, the short time institutions had to organise ERT did not give teachers enough time to rethink their teaching. In fact,

[10] The time spent synchronously in a virtual classroom.

the types of assessments created for Emergency Remote Teaching should be different from the one implemented in class, because from a distance it is practically impossible to have a full control over the learners, as it has always been necessary in the Italian traditional school system. Moreover, the government did not leave precise instructions on how to carry out the testing and assessment and left teachers free to try the systems they preferred. This has obviously created confusion and stress especially among students who had to constantly adapt to different types of tests, which were not always clearly explained or easy to complete. Often, the obsession with controlling the students' every move, trying to prevent any possible cheating, led teachers to create more difficult tests rather than change the type of assignments. For instance, in the case of FLs, it could have been more useful to organise flipped classrooms, group projects, essays and presentations rather than grammar tests. That way, without changing their teaching drastically, instructors could have carried out the evaluation anyway, assessing the actual competences of learners and their improvements in the FL, rather than penalising them because of the lack of organisation of the test delivery mode or because the students' technological skills were too basic.

In conclusion, the learning of Foreign Languages might not appear as easy as the one of other subjects, because it includes various aspects, such as the linguistic, pragmatic and cultural elements of a language, as well as the psychological and neurological spheres of the learners and their degree of motivation. Moreover, for the learning to be successful, it is important to include in the teaching a well-planned time for the assessment, because for the learners of FLs it is essential to receive a feedback on their language production. Especially thanks to constant formative feedback, students can improve their skills and fully develop the Communicative Competence. In many cases, though, assessment is perceived by teachers as an obligation and students do not understand it to be a moment of growth but rather a time to be judged. This happens in particular if assessment is carried out only to produce a summative feedback where the personal history of the learner is not taken into account and where the moment of the evaluation is not considered as the powerful means of communication it actually is. Moreover, the issues of assessing FLs in a face-to-face teaching context are even more complex when dealing with Distance Education, because, often, the teacher-student interaction is made difficult by the asynchronous delivery mode or by the large number of students attending online courses.

Finally, in the case of ERT, teachers did not have time to change their assessing methods and it resulted in a very confusing situation mainly for students, who had to face more difficult tests, because cheating was made easier by the distance, and who did not always understand what they were supposed to do. Obviously, this has been a situation of emergency, and everyone did their best to deal with it, but now it seems clear that improvements need to be done, because we need to be ready for whatever the future may hold.

CHAPTER 3. Emergency Remote Teaching in Italy during COVID-19 pandemic: A Survey among Upper and Lower Secondary School Teachers and University Professors

In this chapter, first of all, an introduction to the Italian school system will be provided followed by a thorough analysis of a survey conducted among Lower and Upper Secondary school teachers and university professors. The methodology used and the results obtained will be described and discussed focusing mainly on the advantages and disadvantages teachers and professors have noticed in their own experience with Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Overall, even though, strengths and weaknesses of Distance Education (DE) and ERT appear to be similar, throughout the chapter, the substantial differences between the two teaching methods will be once more highlighted and suggestions for further improvements will be offered.

3.1 A Brief Introduction to the Italian School System

In Italy, formal and compulsory education starts at around 6 years of age, ends at 16 – even though the large majority continue studying until 19 – and it is organised as follows (see *Table 1*).

Cycle			Duration	Exam	Pupils' Age
	Pre-primary cycle	Kindergarten	3		3
Compulsory education	First cycle	Primary School	5		6-11
		Lower Secondary School (LSS)	3	School leaving examination	11-14
Compulsory education	Second cycle	**Upper Secondary School (USS)**	5	School leaving examination	14-19
	Higher education	**University**	3+2		<19

Table 1 - Italian School System

Children aged 6-11 go to Primary School[11] where they are taught basic knowledge on a range of subjects including at least one European Foreign Language, namely English – compulsory in every public primary institution. From 11 to 14 years of age, pupils go to Lower Secondary School (LSS), also known as middle school[12], where they further

[11] In Italian: *Scuola Primaria* or more commonly *Scuola Elementare*
[12] In Italian: *Scuola Secondaria di Primo Grado* or more commonly *Scuola Media*

develop their competences on the subjects studied at primary school and where they are introduced to another European Foreign Language, in addition to English. Finally, pupils aged 14-19 attend Upper Secondary School (USS)[13] - also known as High School – that is divided into three big categories: *Liceo* (Lyceum), *Istituto Tecnico* (Technical School) and *Istituto Professionale* (Vocational School). The education offered by a *Liceo* provides pupils with specific knowledge and prepares them for higher education. *Istituto Tecnico* offers both a wide theoretical education and a specialisation in a specific field of studies (e.g. law and economics, humanities, administration, technology, tourism, agronomy, etc.), often combined to an internship in a company, association or university, from the third to the fifth and last year of study. *Istituto Professionale*, on the other hand, offers a form of secondary education oriented towards practical subjects (e.g. agriculture, gastronomy, technical assistance, handicrafts, etc.), and enables the students to start looking for a job as soon as they have finished their studies, sometimes even sooner, as some schools offer a diploma after three years instead of five – although it might be considered a lower level of preparation. At the end of LSS and USS pupils must take an exam and, if they pass it, they are awarded a school-leaving certificate. After high school, for those who intend to, there is university or other higher education institutions. Universities, both bricks-and-mortar and telematic, award degrees, whilst other institutions can only issue certificates or diplomas.

Following the quick spread of Coronavirus at the beginning of 2020, all the aforementioned institutions had to temporarily stop their face-to-face activities in an attempt to reduce the infections. Consequently, an Emergency Remote Teaching programme was implemented – erroneously referred to as Distance Education. In fact, as already claimed in the previous chapters, online Distance Education shares with ERT only the delivery method, since both make great use of online asynchronous and synchronous communication programmes. However, ERT rarely takes advantage of all the programmes and resources the Internet has to offer – contrary to what online DE has been doing for decades – and simply translates a face-to-face course to an online environment. Despite all the obstacles teachers had to face when implementing ERT, there were also some positive aspects to it: both sides will be described in the next sections when reporting and analysing the results of the survey conducted for this dissertation.

[13] In Italian: *Scuola Secondaria di Secondo Grado* or more commonly *Scuola Superiore*

3.2 Emergency Remote Teaching in Italy: A Survey among Teachers and Professors

In this section, a survey conducted among Italian LSS and USS teachers and university professors in the first months of 2020 will be described and discussed. Particular attention will be given to the advantages and disadvantages of ERT reported in the survey as well as to the teaching of Foreign Languages. In the discussion, some suggestions for improvements will be offered.

3.2.1 Purpose of the Study

During March and April 2020, a survey has been carried out among Italian LSS and USS teachers and university professors in order to better understand the way ERT influenced their teaching. Particular attention was given to the teaching of Foreign Languages being, together with laboratory lessons, the subjects that are most affected by lack of physical proximity and social interaction in DE courses (Greenberg, 1998; Blake, 2005; Gonzalez-Lloret & Nielson, 2009). Furthermore, attention was also drawn to the advantages and disadvantages of this new methodology trying to understand, if possible, ways to improve it, getting inspiration from the DE long experience in the field of online teaching.

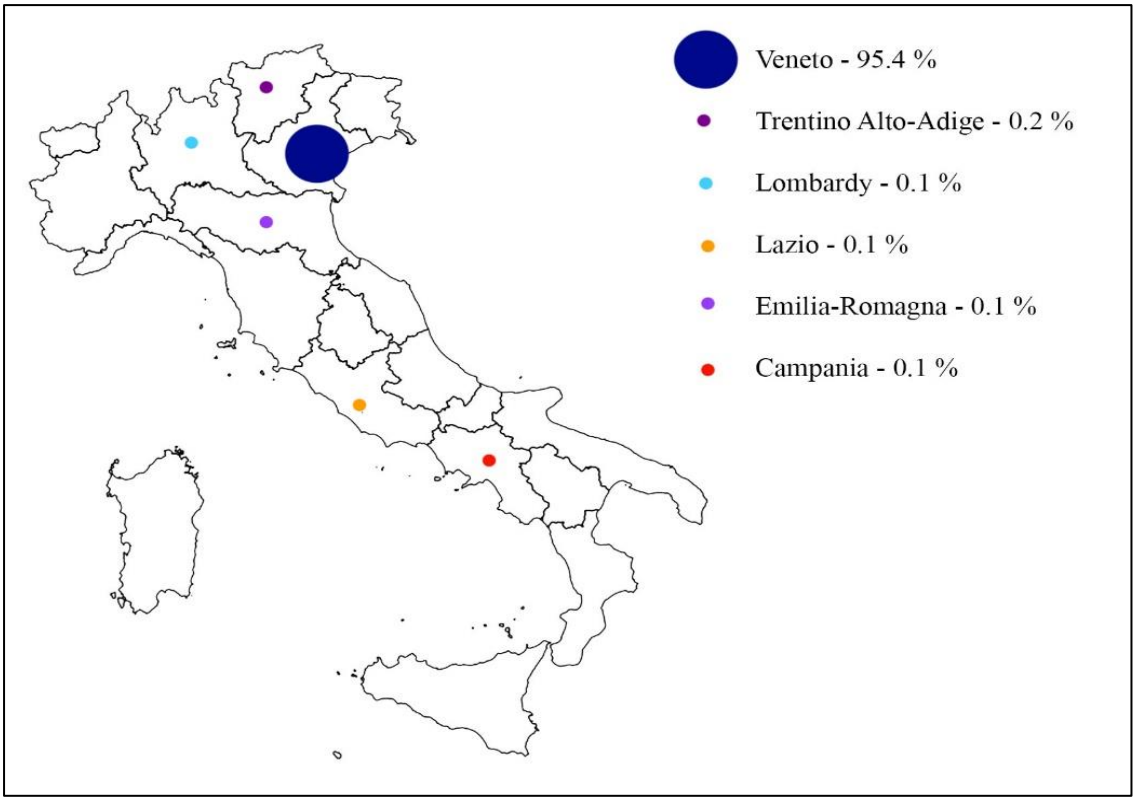
3.2.2 Methodology

For this survey, an online questionnaire was designed, aimed at LSS and USS teachers and university professors of all subjects working within the Italian education system. The questionnaire was made of 25 questions organised into four sections. In the first one, there were questions about demographic information of the participants, such as age, gender and specifics of their jobs. In the second section, questions moved on to exploring teachers and professors' experience with ERT, the programmes used, and their perception of the students' motivation. Moreover, a special section for foreign language instructors were also included, so that negative and positive aspects specific of FL teaching could be highlighted. Finally, a fourth section was added to better understand educators' opinions on the future of online teaching. The questionnaire was written and answered in Italian, but all the data will be translated into English for the sake of this study. Participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire anonymously and they were invited to involve in the research fellow colleagues.

In total, 148 responses were submitted by teachers and professors. The questions were mainly multiple-choice and short-answer questions, but there were also long-answer questions from which it was expected to receive more detailed opinions on ERT. Throughout the questionnaire, though, the terminology used to refer to ERT was *Didattica a Distanza* (Distance Education), since that was the name generally used by the government itself and consequently by newspapers, students and instructors. However, in this analysis, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) will be used, instead, since it might be considered the most accurate term.

3.2.3 Results

To the teachers' questionnaire the responses received from LSS and USS teachers and university professors are 148. The majority of the respondents (60%) were aged 36-55, whilst around 40% were either younger than 36 years old or older than 55. As it is commonly expected among educators, the large majority (75%) of the participants were female, whilst the remaining 25% were male. The questionnaire was interested in discovering the opinions on ERT of teachers and professors working in any Italian public institution, in all the peninsula. However, most of the responses submitted were from instructors living and working in the north of Italy. In fact, 146 out of 148 people come from northern regions, namely Veneto (142 ppl), Trentino Alto-Adige (2 ppl), Lombardy



Map 1 - Teachers and professors' region of origin

(1 pers.) and Emilia-Romagna (1 pers.). Only two respondents are from the centre and south of Italy, namely Lazio and Campania (see *Map 1*).

Regarding the professional experience of the participants, the questionnaire investigated, first of all, which subjects they teach, how long they have been teaching for, the type of school they are currently teaching in and whether or not they have been giving online classes. The majority of the participants (64.5%) teach human disciplines, such as Italian language (L1) and literature, history and philosophy, Foreign Languages, namely English, Spanish, German, and Italian L2, law and economics and geography. On the other hand, the remaining 30.8% of the respondents said to be teachers of ICT (Information and Communications Technology), PE (Physical Education) and natural sciences, such as mathematics, science, physics and chemistry. Among the surveyed there were also eight people who were Special Education Teachers. For what concerns the years of experience as teachers and professors, the vast majority of the respondents (70%) have been working in education for less than twenty years, whilst the remaining 30% have twenty-year experience and more. Furthermore, as shown in *Figure 1,* most of the participants teach at Upper Secondary Schools (57.4%) and Lower Secondary Schools (34.5%), whilst only 8.1% are university professors of either Bachelors' or Masters' degrees.

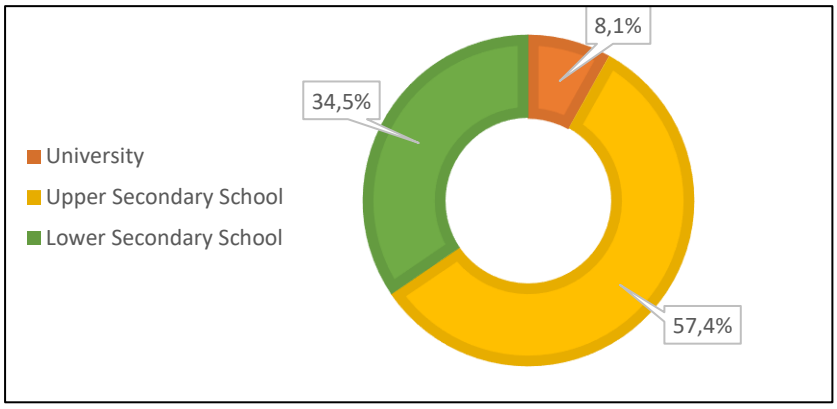


Figure 1 - Type of school

An overwhelming majority (98%) responded affirmatively to the question: *"Are you giving online lessons?*", whilst only a few people answered that they were not giving any lessons online.

The second section of the questionnaire dealt with the experience of teachers and professors with ERT. Firstly, they were asked the delivery method chosen for their online classes. 4.1% answered they chose to only provide students with asynchronous lessons, whilst the majority of the surveyed chose to prepare either synchronous (47.3%) or both asynchronous and synchronous classes (45.3%). Only five people (3.3%) said they preferred to give their pupils homework without any virtual classes. Secondly, the

questionnaire moved on to investigating the types of online programmes instructors have been using for their online lessons. The answers are reported below divided into three different charts: in the first one (*Figure 2*) the data collected regards the type of communication platforms used to deliver the lesson in a synchronous way. The most used one appears to be *Google Meet* (65.5%), followed by *Zoom* (19.6%), *Skype* (12.8%), *Microsoft Teams* (12.1%) and *WebEx* (2%). The second chart (*Figure 3*) shows the three most used asynchronous communication platforms, namely *YouTube*, *Kaltura* and *TedEd*. *YouTube* allows teachers to either upload their own video or to use videos already online; *Kaltura*, among other services, allows the teacher to record their lesson and its visual components, offering a video that provides students with both a PowerPoint presentation and the lecturer's explanation of it. Lastly, *TedEd*, is a *YouTube* channel that offers the possibility to create short animated educational videos, as well as offering ready-to-share videos.

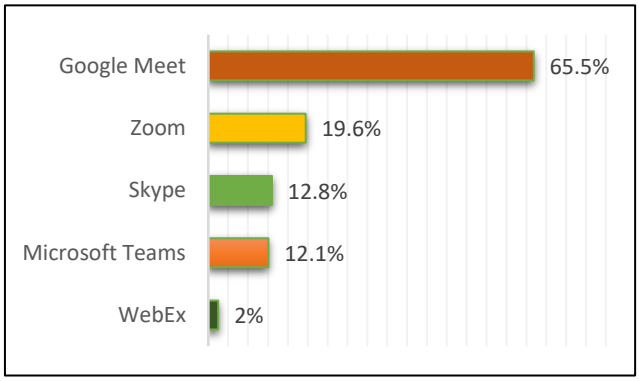


Figure 2 - Synchronous Communication platforms

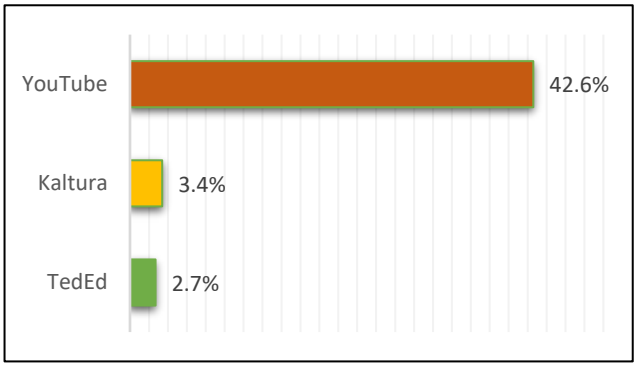


Figure 3 - Asynchronous communication and content-sharing programmes

In addition, *Figure 4* reports the most used web services which enables the sharing of files and homework, such as *Google classroom, Google Drive*, the *Online Attendance Register* and *Moodle*. The latter are online platforms normally used respectively by Secondary Schools and universities for the teacher-student communication, the use of which has become even more useful in the case of ERT.

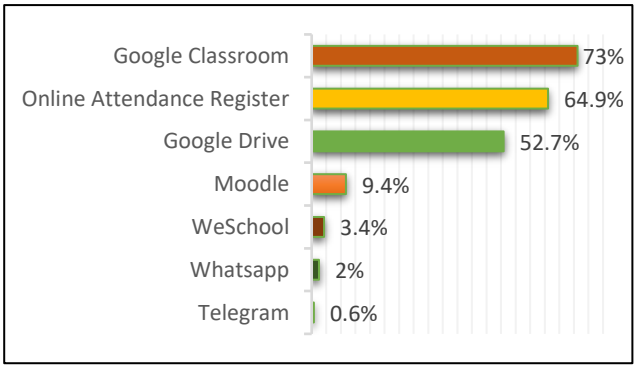


Figure 4 - Web Services and platforms for sharing files and homework

Finally, educational technologies, such as *Kahoot, Padlet,* and *Wooclap* were also mentioned as online tools implemented to make the learning more enjoyable and more collaborative in an exclusively virtual environment. For instance, *Kahoot* is a game-based learning platform that allows the creation and sharing of trivia quizzes and learning games on whichever subject. It creates virtual rooms, to be accessed through a PIN, or individual challenges that can be sent directly to each student, thanks to which they can practice at their own pace. *Padlet*, on the other hand, is a web free living page that becomes a sort of an online bulletin board. Both the teacher and students can add information on the *Padlet* as if it were an interactive blackboard. It is very useful for brainstorming or to present summarised information.

Furthermore, another interesting point investigated in the questionnaire concerned the teachers' degree of adaptation to this relatively new teaching method. Most of Italian high schools have never used online teaching before, so one might expect middle and high school teachers to have more difficulties in implementing ERT. However, the survey shows that to the question "*Are you having difficulties in using online programmes?"* 47.6% responded negatively claiming being comfortable using the aforementioned programmes. Moreover, 42.2% of the respondents said they sometimes found online programmes difficult to use, whilst only 2% had big difficulties in using them. It could be suggested that issues in the use of such programmes might not only be linked to how much practice teachers have had before this emergency, but also it might be age-related. As shown in *Figure 5,* people aged 25-35 did not struggle as much as 56-65 years old, and people finding these programmes very complicated to deal with are present only in

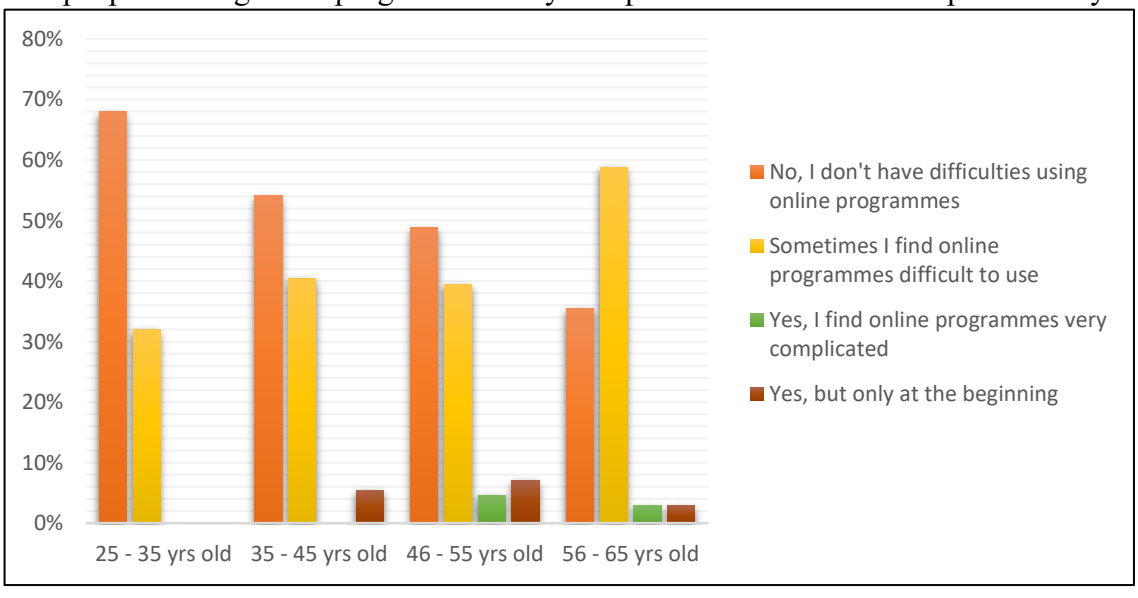


Figure 5 - Answers to the question *"Are you having difficulties in using online programmes?"*

the oldest age groups (the green bar in *Figure 5*). In the case of university professors, who allegedly have had more experience with online teaching – because it is included in the very structure of higher education – the majority seem to have, as expected, no difficulties in using online programmes even if belonging to the older age group.

Moreover, the respondents to the questionnaire were also asked whether they changed their teaching approaches and their testing and assessing methods, adapting them to the new method or not. 50.7% of the surveyed affirmed they only partly changed their teaching approaches adapting them to online teaching, whilst 45.3% said they changed them completely. On the other hand, only 4.1% did not change anything, possibly because either they did not find it necessary or they did not know how to do it.

Similarly, 69.4% claimed to have totally changed their way of testing and assessing pupils, whilst 25.2% said to have changed it only partly. Contrary, 4% of people affirmed to not have changed their testing and assessing methods at all. Regarding testing and evaluation, participants were also asked to give an opinion on online assessment, wondering whether it reflected or not the students' actual learning. According to a large majority (75.3%), online testing does not help in the real evaluation of learners' competences, or – if it does – it helps only partly. Conversely, 19.2% believe that tests carried out online, both oral and written, reflect the student's actual learning. Moreover, only a little percentage of the respondents find online testing sufficiently efficient, whilst 1.4% are not sure of the quality of online testing, possibly because they had not prepared any test yet and seen how they work in practice.

Other two important aspects of online teaching investigated in this study were participation and inclusion. Teachers were asked to evaluate their students' participation in virtual classes. In general, the participation was judged sufficient and as active as one may expect, given the circumstances. 24.3% of the participants also noticed that students' participation was more active than expected. On the other hand, 19.6% judged their pupils' engagement with the class not enough and surely lower than expected. Overall, though, it was claimed that the degree of participation depended on the group of students, their age group and on the topic presented. Furthermore, for what concerns inclusion, many teachers and professors find online lessons to be inclusive enough (40%), whilst a lower percentage of the participants think these classes are either partly inclusive (30%) or not at all (15%). Only 5% of the surveyed find online lessons very inclusive.

Nonetheless, a narrow majority of the respondents (55.4%) believe that online

lessons cannot effectively substitute face-to-face lessons, whilst 41.2% think they could be only partly efficient replacements. Only a few people (2%) find online lessons not good enough to replace face-to-face ones, whilst 1.3% would teach online lessons only in the case of another emergency.

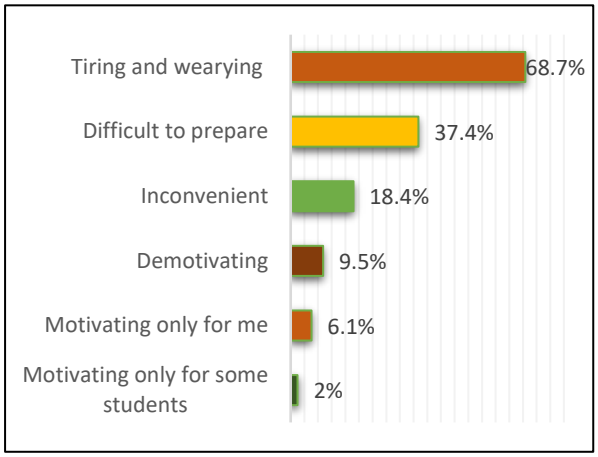


Figure 6 - Negative Descriptors

The questionnaire, then, moved on by asking teachers and professors to choose, from a list of adjectives, the ones that according to them best describe online lessons in a case, of course, of Emergency Remote Teaching. Overall, the chosen descriptors are negative and see online teaching as something tiring and wearying (68.7%), difficult to prepare (37.4%), inconvenient (18.4%) and demotivating (9.5%) or motivating only for either the teacher or some students (see *Figure 6*). On the other hand, some responses show a positive attitude towards online lessons with 26.5% of the teachers and professors claiming that this method is motivating for both them and their students, 12.9% saying online classes are convenient and 5.4% finding them easy to prepare (see *Figure 7*).

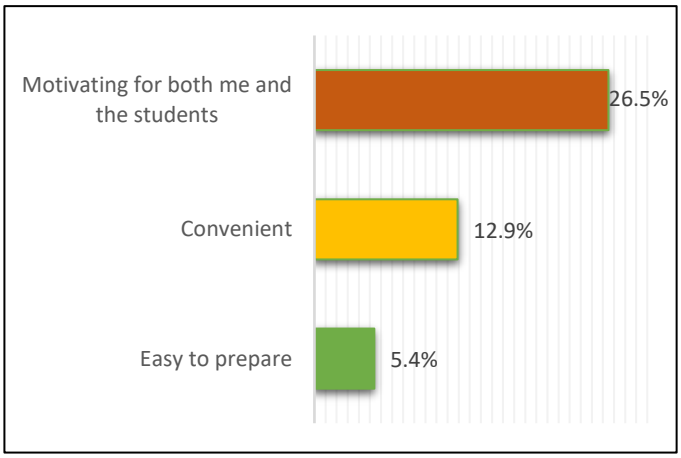


Figure 7 - Positive Descriptors

To the question, "*Are you comfortable teaching from behind a screen?"*, most of the respondents (67.5%) seem to be comfortable or rather comfortable in this situation, whilst only 4.7% claim to feel very comfortable teaching through a computer screen. Conversely, almost 30% of the teachers affirmed to feel uncomfortable giving lessons from behind a screen.

In the third section of the questionnaire, attention was drawn to Foreign Languages, in order to pinpoint the difficulties and advantages noticed by teachers and professors of these subjects, having in mind the fact that, as previously claimed, the

teaching of FLs might be considered as one of the most affected by ERT because of the lack of social interaction typical of DE (Greenberg, 1998; Blake, 2005; Gonzalez-Lloret & Nielson, 2009). In total, 49 out of 148 people were teachers or professors of Foreign Languages, therefore the following data refers to those 49 answers. First of all, the participants were asked to select which sentences best describe the teaching of Foreign Languages at a distance. Overall, ERT for FLs was rated worse than face-to-face teaching (see *Figure 8*). In fact, 79.6% of the respondents claimed that online lessons are not as effective as face-to-face lessons and not only are less effective but also, they are worse than before because they do not allow interaction and communication as face-to-face lessons do. On the other hand, some people (12.2%) think that online lessons are better because it is possible to create more interactive content and design more motivating activities. Similarly, a few (4.2%) also claimed that online lessons create an environment where the learning is even more effective than before, whilst 20.4% said that online lessons are as interactive and communicative as face-to-face ones.

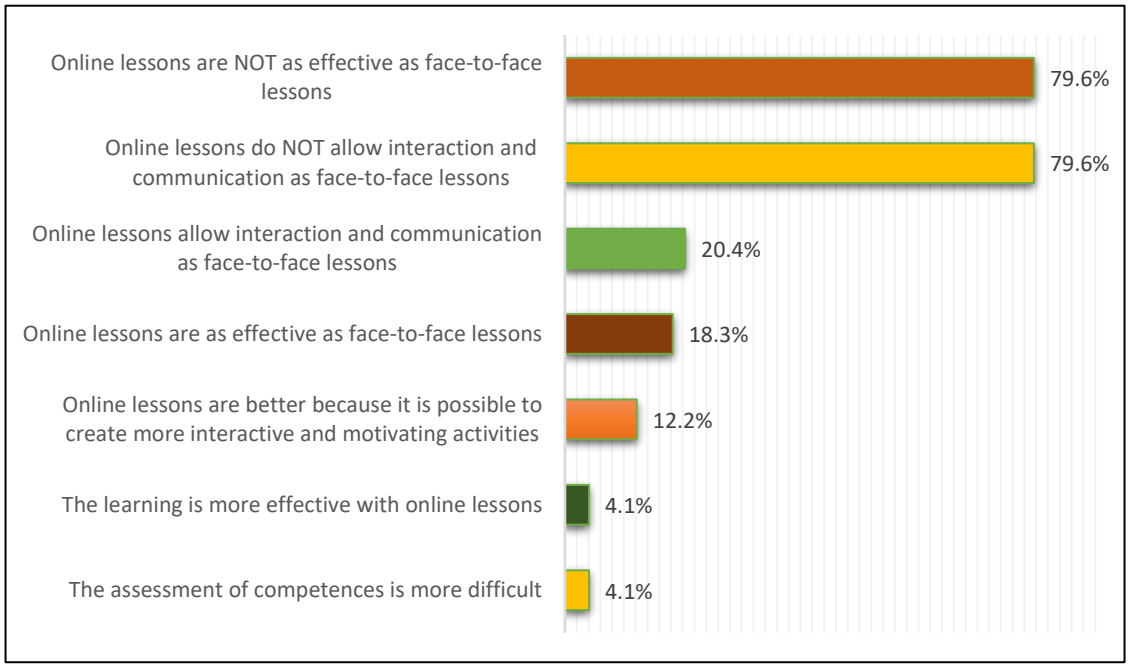


Figure 8 - Opinions on ERT of FLs

In addition, FL teachers and professors also listed some of the advantages and disadvantages of ERT specific of Foreign Languages. First, 83.3% of the respondents said that online lessons are beneficial because it is easier to get direct access to online material, to share it with the learners and to assign a big variety of interactive exercises and real tasks that are motivating and always different. Moreover, online lessons allow teachers to differentiate and customise the work according to the student's needs – which is highly beneficial for the learning. Second, 21.6% mentioned, as an advantage, the fact that,

through online lessons, students learn to be autonomous and to use technologies properly, which will be useful for their future and in the workplace. Third, 19% of the teachers surveyed also pointed out as a benefit, the fact that online lessons are less noisy, and it is easier for learners to focus and for teachers to give a lesson. Concerning specifically the teaching of Foreign Languages, respondents also mentioned how good online lessons can be to improve listening skills. A few were also the opinions stating that there are no advantages in Emergency Remote Teaching of Foreign Languages.

On the other hand, concerning the disadvantages of ERT according to FL teachers and professors, lack of interaction appears to be the aspect that seems to be affecting the learning the most. In fact, 89.2% claimed that lack of interaction penalises group and pair work, speaking activities, role plays and kinesics. Moreover, 32.4% said that poor internet connection also endangers the success of online lessons, also because sometimes it is used as an excuse by pupils who do not feel like actively participating in the class. In fact, teachers also reported that often cameras are turned off on purpose, sometimes in order to avoid disconnection or software crash, and sometimes just because students feel more comfortable that way, thus causing a loss of control of the dynamics of the class group. In addition, according to many FL teachers, it is difficult to evaluate students and provide them with prompt feedback, because preparing online lessons requires a lot of time, leaving little time for a thorough evaluation process. Furthermore, ERT has been described as not inclusive enough because some people might not feel comfortable using technologies and a student's poor technological skills might affect their other competences, as well as their motivation.

Finally, in the fourth and last section, all the 148 respondents were asked to share their opinions on the future of ERT. To the question "*Would you keep doing online lessons in addition to face-to-face lessons, at the end of the emergency?"*, 37.2% responded negatively, whilst 27.7% said they would. The remaining appeared less sure about what they would prefer, though having an overall positive attitude towards it. In fact, 25.7% said they would probably want to have online lessons in addition to face-to-face ones, whilst 9.5% said they would probably prefer to go back to not having them at all. Moreover, the overwhelming majority (91.2%) of people believe that, regardless of the Coronavirus emergency, educators should be trained to teach online. Conversely, only 8.8% think there is no need for specific training, possibly because they either felt

comfortable with the new methodology or because they think online teaching will not be necessary again in the future – not on a large scale at least.

As a conclusion to the questionnaire participants were invited to list three advantages and three disadvantages of Emergency Remote Teaching. The most recurrent answers for what concern the advantages were:

SR. NO	ADVANTAGE	TIMES MENTIONED
1	"Teachers learn how to use new technologies and new ways of teaching"	26
2	"Online there is a huge variety of engaging activities and it is easier for students to get access to the provided materials"	20
3	"Students learn to be more responsible and to work autonomously making great use of technology and online programmes"	18
4	"It is convenient for both students and teachers since there is no need for leaving the house: people do not have to waste time and money commuting"	15
5	"The learning can continue even if there is an emergency, or even if one is sick"	13
6	"Online lessons can be recorded and therefore re-watched if missed or to better understand the teacher's explanation"	13
7	"Flexibility"	12
8	"The teaching can be more bespoke"	9
9	"It is easier to monitor the students' progress and homework"	8
10	"It is easier for the teacher to organise the work"	7
11	"There are NO advantages"	5
12	"It is good for testing some competences"	2

Table 2 - Advantages of ERT according to teachers

On the other hand, the disadvantages pointed out by the teachers and professors were:

SR. NO	DISADVANTAGE	TIMES MENTIONED
1	"It lacks interaction, non-verbal communication and it is distant"	59
2	"It is more difficult to control the class and the students' participation – which often lacks – and it is difficult to give and receive a feedback"	36
3	"It is not inclusive because not all the students own the needed devices, some students like it better this way, whilst some other are penalised by this method (they have not chosen)"	27
4	"The tests do not verify the actual competences of the students. Moreover, it is difficult to control them during tests and to assess them properly and objectively, given it is much easier to copy"	18
5	"Poor internet connection and technical issues are often a big obstacle to the success of the lesson"	17
6	"It requires a lot of preparation work on part of teachers and heavy workload for students"	15
7	"The learning is less effective, and it is exclusively individual" (which might work for some, but not for everybody)	13
8	"It is not suitable for all the subjects, such as lab lessons, FL lessons, practical lessons"	9
9	"It requires too much time spent in front of a screen"	6
10	"It is demotivating"	3
11	"The way things are now, teachers need training"	2

Table 3 - Disadvantages of ERT according to teachers

3.2.4 Discussion

A huge majority of the participants to the questionnaire claimed they have been giving online lessons, whilst a few were the respondents who affirmed they did not

manage to organise them. It is possible that the reason why they could not continue the teaching using online programmes may be related to the fact that their subject could not be taught at a distance. It was, for instance, the case of Special Education Teachers who did keep in touch with their pupils – using programmes such as WhatsApp – but only for psychological support, rather than for school-related issues. In a situation of emergency, as the one we have all found ourselves in, psychological support is what might be argued to be the most needed kind, especially among youngsters (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). It is possible that this was indeed what the Italian Minister of Education meant when she said that the learning should happen at a distance but it must not be distant (Ministry of Education, 2020), meaning that ERT should be focusing more on the emotional challenges a lockdown may provoke in younger generations and their families, caring for their mental health more than worrying about the syllabus. Clearly, nobody is denying the importance of education, but it is widely agreed that in stressful situations and environments no real learning can happen, as explained, for instance, by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, in a situation like a global epidemic – as well as when returning to normality – it might be claimed that pupils and students' mental wellbeing should be taken into consideration as much as their formal education.

Regarding the teachers' degree of adaptation to ERT, as reported in the previous section, most of the respondents did not have many issues using online programmes. As shown in *Figure 5,* difficulties in the use of online programmes might be related to the age group of the respondents rather than to their amount of experience with them. In fact, the age group 56-65 had more problems compared to their younger colleagues. This may be due to the fact that younger generations have born and grown into these technologies and they are faster to adapt and to familiarise with new devices and online platforms. The survey showed, indeed, that the youngest age group (25-35 years old) never had issues with this method, possibly because they know how to deal with potential problems more easily and more quickly than their older colleagues. However, professors who have had more experience and more training with it, even belonging to the older age group, claimed to have had less difficulties in using online programmes. All in all, respondents did not have many difficulties – or not at all – in using online programmes for ERT and the majority of the teachers and professors surveyed believe that, when the emergency will be over, online lessons might be combined to face-to-face ones in a way that will make

learning more effective and accessible. Maybe educators, even though forced into this method by the circumstances, and even though noticing many disadvantages to it, have also learnt to appreciate the convenience and the potential of Distance Education, and have a general positive attitude towards it. However, they seem aware of the need of implementing it properly and with the right training and preparation. They have also pointed out that providing learners with the opportunity of attending classes from their homes might be useful especially for working students or for pupils who fall ill and cannot go to school for a few days. Some might suggest that combining online interaction and education with face-to-face, traditional lessons – also known as Blended Learning (BL)[14] – could be the future of teaching. Blended Learning could be useful for those who need their education to be flexible, but at the same time it does not deprive learners of the opportunities to interact directly with their peers. BL could "offer students the best of both worlds" (Kaur, 2013:616) because they could easily have access to materials and online resources, since everything would be stored in online platforms, and they would be able to keep up to date with the tasks assigned – because many of them would be given online – even if they were unable to attend classes. At the same time, they could also attend the in-presence part of the lessons and, in this way, would not be sacrificing face-to-face contact – which is fundamental for motivation and specific learning styles.

Furthermore, if turning our attention to Foreign Language learning some more considerations should be made, because as explained in the previous chapters, Distance Education might be detrimental for an effective language acquisition since it lacks proximity and face-to-face interaction. According to Egbert and Hanson-Smith (1999) the "optimal conditions" for a successful FL learning are:

> "1. Learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience.
> 2. Learners are involved in authentic tasks.
> 3. Learners are exposed to and are encouraged to produce varied and creative language.
> 4. Learners have opportunities to interact socially and negotiate meaning.
> 5. Learners have enough time and feedback.
> 6. Learners are guided to attend mindfully to the learning process.
> 7. Learners work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level.
> 8. Learner autonomy is supported." (Marsh, 2012)

[14] Blended Learning (BL) is the combination of online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods. It requires the physical presence of both teacher and student, with some elements of student control over time, place, path, or pace, typical of Distance Education (Bonk & Graham, 2006).

In the attempt to recreate this "optimal" environment, many are the tools and modalities implemented by language instructors, both online and off, trying to design activities and homework that could resemble real life scenarios as much as possible. When previously in this section it was suggested that Blended Learning could provide students with the best of face-to-face and online education, what it means is that it tries to bring together the strengths of both. For instance, Blended Learning of FLs could consist in a first step online where new vocabulary is presented and practiced before class on the learner's own pace and time. In this way, students would go to class more prepared and confident to put into real practice what they have been exploring on their own. Then, a face-to-face lesson could follow, where the focus will be on interaction, pair or group work and real language in use. Finally, students can review, extend and consolidate the language practiced in their own time and at their own pace (Ibid.).

It is necessary to point out, though, that this delivery method can be effective if well designed and if students are given the time to adapt to this new learning environment with the support of educators through this change. Emergency Remote Teaching has been, as the name itself suggest, a sudden and drastic transition that brought with it many issues, as highlighted by the disadvantages listed in the questionnaire by teachers and professors, and cannot be used as an example for the future, but it could certainly be, with the due improvements, the starting point for future developments.

As pointed out by teachers and professors who responded to the questionnaire, the Internet provides both learners and instructors with an infinite variety of activities, videos, exercises and resources that, it might be suggested, should be taken advantage of, even in a situation of normality. Technologies and the Web have certainly changed our lives in different ways, introducing new dangers but also, if used correctly new infinite possibilities and positive improvements on our lives and learning. The whole concept of Distance Education has indeed developed thanks to the development of technologies and so it will keep doing. It is also true, though, that the newest generations – who were born into a digitalised world, for whom the world did not exist without technology and whose lives turn around technology – are very intuitive and they often teach older people how to survive in the virtual world. During this emergency, for example, many has been the occasions in which it was the student or pupil that taught the teacher how to use a tool or how to solve a technical problem and not the other way around. Therefore, learners appear to be ready for a change towards the digital even when it regards the education sphere.

However, the Italian school system is still a little prepared for this change from both a physical point of view – schools do not have the right equipment – and from a structural point of view – in many cases approaches and methods still see the teacher as the centre of the attention, considering the learner as an empty and powerless vase to be filled with knowledge, and not all the teachers are sufficiently trained. Educators of new generations need to be constantly up to date with new technologies if they want to speak their students' language. At the same time, young people, even if surrounded 24/7 by technologies, know how to use them only in part. They are masters at using social medias, online games and at solving problems, but it can be argued that they still need guidance in the labyrinth of online education. Teachers, then, need to be facilitators and directors of students' learning, as suggested by, respectively, Wilhelm Von Humboldt and Giovanni Freddi (Balboni, 2015). As this emergency has shown, educators need to learn how to use technology and need to, in turn, help students learn, reflect, and implement their knowledge, guiding them in their learning, shaping more autonomous learners and individuals, who know how to think critically and to discern a fake news among the multitude of information we are bombarded with every day.

Concerning the disadvantages mentioned in the questionnaire, the ones mostly repeated were lack of interaction and non-verbal communication. Moreover, contrary to what was the hope for it, many teachers claimed ERT to be distant. This might be due to the fact that it was, in fact, an emergency situation in which no one had the time to prepare for this and, therefore, the lessons were not organise in order to fill the physical distance, as well as the emotional one. Secondly, teachers and professors observed a difficulty in controlling the class and the students' participation. This might be a consequence of many factors: first of all, the lack of organisation of the lessons and lack of proximity with their peers might have led to a disengagement of the class from the learning; moreover, the uncertainty of the situation created uncertainty in the validity of the classes. Especially at the beginning of the emergency, in the first months of 2020, no one knew for sure what would have happened the next week and so learners might have not taken online lessons as seriously as they should, creating an uninvolved environment for both themselves and their teachers. Another point highlighted in the survey was that of lack of feedback. As it was said in the case of Distance Education, lack of feedback is an important disadvantage. Students need to receive a prompt and thorough feedback to their work because it fosters the learning and it also enhances people's motivation because they feel that the time they

spent on the assignment matters and they are encouraged to do more. Finally, another disadvantage mentioned, has to do with inclusion. ERT was said to be not inclusive, primarily because not all the students have got the required equipment to attend online lessons, or sometimes, they do, but they need to share it with their siblings and parents. Some others might not own an appropriate device at all, or they might not have a stable Internet connection, fundamental to attend especially synchronous lessons.

Furthermore, it was also pointed out that this teaching method might not be inclusive enough because many students do not feel comfortable learning from behind a screen and their whole learning could be affected by this. Usually, in fact, learners decide to enrol on a distance course either because they prefer that method to the more traditional face-to-face lesson, or because they need their learning to be more flexible. In the case of an emergency, though, where this method is imposed on both educators and learners, it might be suggested that they both need to be accompanied in this change and educated to it by experts on Distance Education. The sudden shift from face-to-face to remote teaching can be traumatic for students who need their learning to be cooperative and collaborative and it can be extremely penalising for those who are not hundred-percent autonomous learners yet. It is also true that, as previously said, this change could foster learners' autonomy and can be positive for their individual growth.

The other disadvantages are overall related to either technical issues, such as poor Internet connection, or to the state of emergency that made it difficult to successfully organise all the work without hitches. One important point to mention is that Distance Education can be very effective if well organised, but it might not be suitable for every subject. It is, for instance, the case of practical and laboratorial lessons that need students to be physically present in order for them to practice first-hand the content of the class. Hence, Blended Learning might be, once again, the answer to all these problems, because it would combine face-to-face lessons, where more practical tasks can be carried out, with online assignments and classes for more theoretical parts.

3.2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, an analysis of a survey conducted among teachers and professors has been carried out. Primarily, a brief explanation of the Italian school system was provided, followed by the description of the methodology implemented for this research. The results to the questionnaire have been thoroughly reported and discussed, focusing the attention to those outcomes that either clashed with the expectations or were

particularly interesting. For instance, the age of the respondents was taken into account because it revealed itself as a key factor determining the degree of adaptation of teachers to the online environment. In fact, the older generation of educators appeared less confident than their younger colleagues in the use of online tools. Another interesting point emerged in the analysis regarded the possibility of a future combination of the traditional face-to-face class and the online teaching in what is called Blended Learning. The respondents to the questionnaire showed positive attitude towards the idea of BL, because it could be a winning compromise that brings together the best aspects of both teaching modalities. Finally, advantages and disadvantages pointed out in the questionnaire were investigated, finding some similarities with the benefits and shortcomings of Distance Education presented in the previous chapters. Unsurprisingly, the advantages listed coincided with the ones of Distance Education as did some of the disadvantages. In fact, variety of the materials, flexibility and convenience were mentioned both in the DE discourse and in the ERT one as advantages, as well as lack of interaction, poor internet connection and lack of feedback were listed as disadvantages.

Overall, the results of the questionnaire matched the expectations showing a general discontent with ERT linked to lack of proximity and poor internet connections, things that have been observed also in the analysis of Distance Education. However, there was a positive attitude towards the possibility of keep doing online lessons even after the end of the emergency, meaning that instructors acknowledge the potential of Distance Education and, even though subconsciously, they recognise that, with the right training and the right preliminary organisation, the integration of DE into face-to-face education could be highly beneficial.

CHAPTER 4. Emergency Remote Teaching in Italy during COVID-19 pandemic: A Survey among Upper and Lower Secondary School Pupils and University Students

In this chapter, a detailed analysis of a survey conducted among Italian Lower Secondary school (LSS) and Upper Secondary school (USS) pupils and university students during March and April of 2020 will be carried out. First of all, the purpose of the study and the methodology implemented will be presented, followed by the results obtained. The data will be described in detail and duly discussed, providing possible explanations to the findings, comparing, at times, the results of this questionnaire with the answers given in the teachers' one. Particular attention will be given to the advantages and disadvantages of ERT reported in the survey as well as to the learners' opinions on the learning of Foreign Languages at a distance. In the conclusion, the most important points emerged from the analysis of this part of the survey will be summarised.

4.1 Purpose of the Study

During the months of March and April 2020, a survey was conducted among LSS and USS pupils and university students. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Italy, the government decided to start an Emergency Remote Teaching programme in order to allow a continuity in the learning. The survey was interested in understanding the experiences of pupils and students with this new methodology, the strengths and weaknesses they noticed and their opinions on the future of online teaching.

4.2 Methodology

As it was done for teachers and professors, the survey was conducted through the means of an online anonymous questionnaire, created with Google Forms. The questionnaire was aimed at lower and upper secondary school pupils and university students. The decision to involve in the study only these student groups, belonging to the higher levels of compulsory and non-compulsory cycles of education, lies on the respondent's degree of awareness and on their critical ability to answer questions on their own learning process. It appears clear that children would not have been able to properly answer questions that requires reflecting on one's learning and, therefore, their answers would not have resulted to be as useful as the ones received from older learners.

In total, 753 responses were submitted. The participants were contacted among friends and acquaintances who were invited, in turn, to share the link to the questionnaire with their friends. The majority of questions were multiple-choice and short-answer questions, but respondents were also given space to express their opinions more in detail in a couple of occasions, with the aid of long-answer questions. The questionnaire was written and answered in Italian, being the language spoken as a first language by the majority of people attending Italian schools – though, here, both questions and answers will be translated into English. As already said for the teachers' questionnaire, the terminology used to refer to ERT was the Italian *Didattica a Distanza* (Distance Education), since this was the term used by the government and by the news to talk about it, and, consequently by institutions and families. However, in this analysis, Emergency Remote Teaching will be used, instead, as it is the most accurate term to describe what happened in Italian schools in the past months – and that is partly still happening in this second part of the year.

The questionnaire was made of 29 questions and divided into two sections. In the first section, information about the learners' age, gender and region of origin was investigated. Moreover, details about which school they go to and which foreign languages they study were retrieved. In the second section, attention was turned to ERT, asking about students' experience with it, the tools used, their opinions on the learning of FLs at a distance and their impressions about the possible implications. Finally, the questionnaire investigated the learners' opinions on advantages and disadvantages of ERT.

4.3 Findings and Discussion

To the students' questionnaire, 753 answers were submitted by Lower Secondary school and Upper Secondary school pupils and university students. The number of responses came as a surprise, because such a reaction was not expected. Possibly, both time and topic were right, given that we were all facing the same kind of experience, we were all trying to adapt as fast as possible to the Emergency Remote Teaching programme, and everyone seemed to be eager to share their opinions on the matter. The following sections have been divided presenting each the outcomes and discussion of all questions included in the students' questionnaire. In some cases, more questions have been incorporated into the same section so that the discussion would result more complete.

4.3.1 Demographic information of the respondents

The majority of respondents (60%) were aged 15-19, whilst 29.6% were 20-25 years old; 7.3% were 11-14 years old; 2.5% were 26-30 years old, and only a few people were older than 30 (see *Figure 9*). Regarding the gender of the surveyed, the vast majority (70.1%) said to be female, 29.6% were male, whilst two people identified themselves as non-binary.

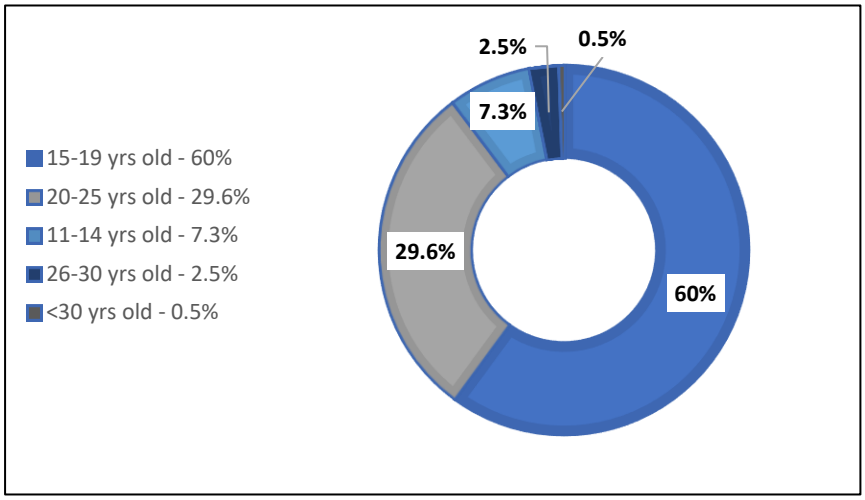
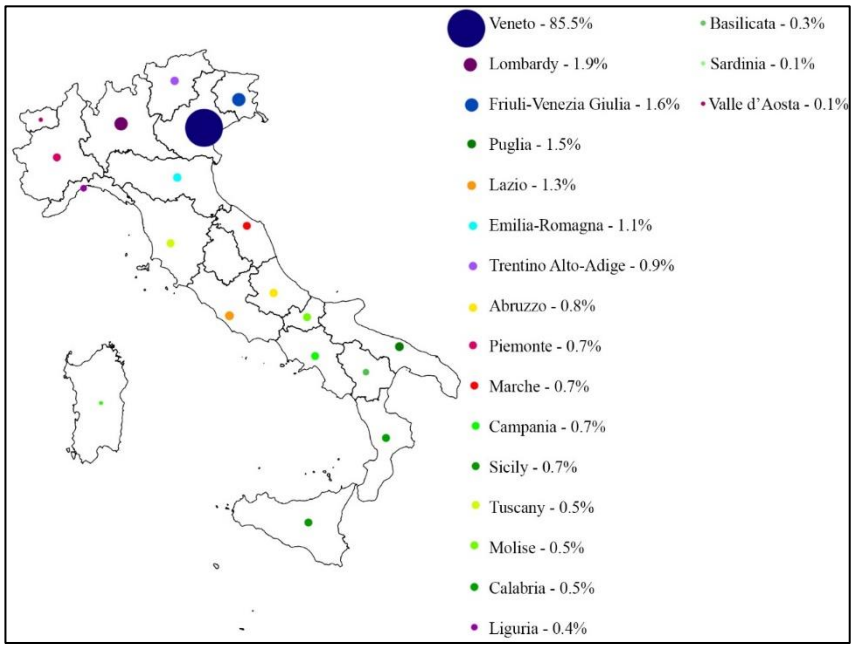


Figure 9 – Age of the respondents

Even though, the questionnaire was primarily shared with people living in the region Veneto – from whom the large majority of answers came (85.5%) – it eventually and unexpectedly reached students from almost every region of Italy, giving us a wider overview on the situation in our country (see *Map 2*). In fact, apart from the 646 people whose region of origin is Veneto, 50 people are from northern regions, 25 are from the centre of Italy and 32 people are from the South and the islands. Most of the respondents (62.3%) are upper secondary school pupils, 31.1% are university students, and 4.6% are lower secondary school pupils. The small number of questionnaires received from LSS pupils seems to confirm what said before about the degree of self-reflection of the learners. Even though, for this survey the attempt to



Map 2 – Pupils and students' region of origin

contact the same amount of people belonging to the different age groups was made, the questionnaire was then shared mainly by and among older learners, possibly for the reason just mentioned.

Furthermore, the questionnaire investigated the foreign languages studied by the participants. Unsurprisingly – given that it is compulsory in all cycles of education, but higher education – the overwhelming majority (632 people) affirmed to be studying English as a Foreign Language. In addition, more than a hundred people said to be Spanish, German, and Latin students; 72 people are studying French; 46 people Ancient Greek; 14 people Russian, and then, a few people are also students of Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Romanian, Portuguese and Albanian. On the other hand, 103 people are not currently studying any Foreign Languages (see Figure 10).

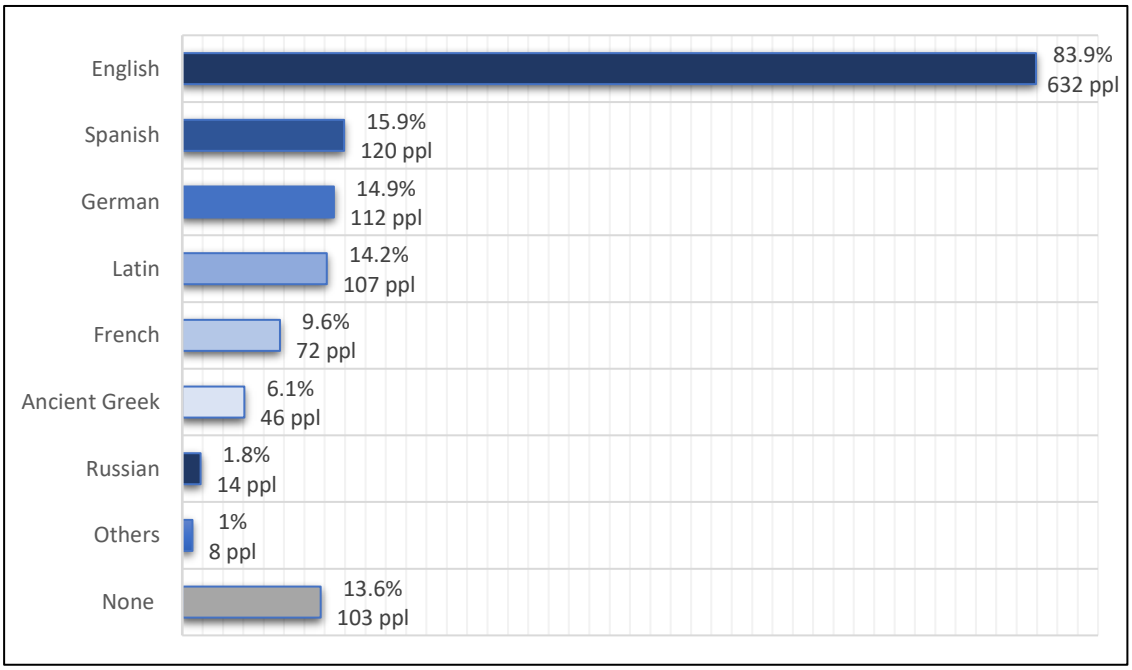


Figure 10 – Languages studied

4.3.2 Are you attending any online lessons offered by your school/university teachers/professors? If not, why?

Returning to the main topic of this study, participants were asked whether they were attending online lessons provided by their institutions. Almost all the respondents (98.7%) answered affirmatively – as it was the case with teachers and professors – whilst only 10 people said they were not attending any online lesson. When asked the reason why they were not having lessons at a distance, the majority answered being university students who did not have any modules left to attend and were writing their dissertation.

However, apart from those 10 people, also 54 answers to the question *"Why aren't you attending online lessons?"* were received even from people who responded affirmatively to the previous question stating they were attending online lessons. This is possibly because, especially in the case of middle and high school pupils, not all their subjects have been translated into an online course. In fact, 244 people out of 753 respondents said that their practical classes – including for instance Art, Physical Education (PE), and Lab lessons – were missing from the list of the online classes offered. In addition, also religion, scientific subjects – such as biology, chemistry, and natural sciences – maths, history, economics, and Foreign Languages were mentioned among those missing subjects. As an explanation to this dearth, pupils said that they were not attending some of the online lessons mostly because their teachers were not uploading them, either because they did not have a good internet connection, or because they did not want to teach online. Another reason mentioned had to do with the poor internet connection of the learner, which did not allow them to attend the lesson properly and, finally, some also said to prefer studying on their own, especially in the case of university students whose attendance is not mandatory and whose autonomy in the study is well established. 20 people also affirmed to not knowing the reason why online lessons were not provided by their institutions. This lack of information might be a consequence of the state of emergency in which online lessons have started and confirms the climate of uncertainty of this period. It might be argued, though, that it is of vital importance, especially if considering the delicate circumstances, to keep constantly in contact with students and their families and to make them part of the adapting process, so that they do not feel left out, but, contrary, they feel encouraged to continue their learning as comfortably as the situation allows them to.

4.3.3 How are your online lessons delivered? And which online communication programmes are used for lessons, homework and exams?

Furthermore, many of the people surveyed said to have been attending both synchronous and asynchronous lessons. In fact, almost half of the students claimed to be offered both live and recorded classes, whilst 345 people had only online lessons. Conversely, 40 people said to be having only asynchronous lessons. Participants to the questionnaire were also asked about the kind of synchronous and asynchronous programmes and platforms used for virtual classes, homework and exams, as well as which devices they used to attend online lessons. Concerning the synchronous

communication programmes, *Google Meet* was mentioned by the majority of the surveyed (431 people), followed by *Zoom* that was used by 190 people, *Microsoft Teams* (120 ppl), *Skype* (83 ppl), *WeSchool* (17 ppl) and *WebEx* mentioned by 12 people (see *Figure 11*). *Google Meet,* which is linked to the other services offered by Google, was mainly mentioned by middle and high school pupils, whilst *Zoom* by university students. This is hardly surprising, given that universities already used online platforms, such as *Moodle,* to keep in contact with their students and to share with them materials and assignments. Contrary to what might have happened with LSSs and USSs – which also needed a programme for the submission of homework and tests – the only thing missing, was a programme for the delivery of synchronous classes, that is probably one of the reason why universities preferred *Zoom*. In addition to that, *Zoom* might be described as having more functions and as being more useful for group works and for larger classes – since it allows to see on the screen up to 49 people at the same time – but it is more difficult to use if compared to the usability of *Google Meet*. Therefore, for younger learners and because of its other linked services, *Google Meet* seemed the best option for middle and high schools. Nonetheless, some were also the LSSs and USSs that chose *Zoom*, instead.

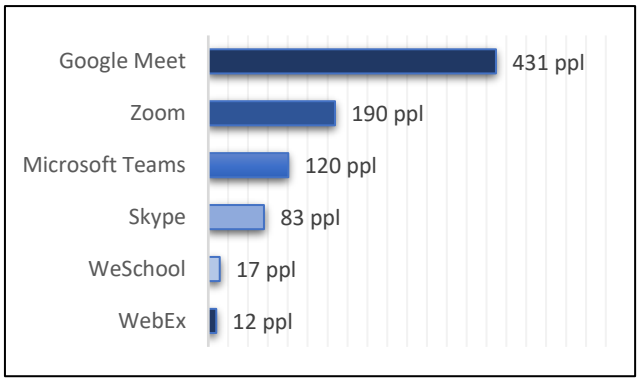


Figure 11 - Synchronous communication programmes

Regarding the asynchronous tools used, *YouTube* was the most used among the surveyed, mentioned by 130 people, together with *Kaltura,* used by 69 people. Moreover, concerning the platforms where homework, materials and tests were assigned, shared and submitted, *Google Classroom* appears to be the most used, mentioned by 506 people; followed by the *Online Attendance Register*, mentioned by 329 people; *Google Drive*, mentioned by 227 people, and *Moodle*, mentioned by 158 people (see *Figure 12*). In addition to these platforms, also *Telegram* and *WhatsApp* were used with the same purpose.

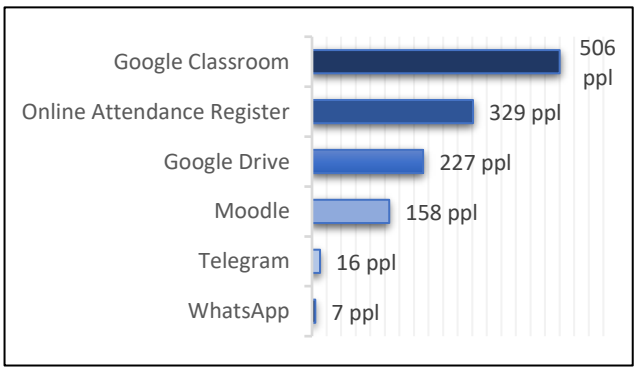


Figure 12 - Web services and platforms used for sharing files and homework

Contrary to the results obtained to the teachers and professors' questionnaire, no other educational technologies that would have made the learning more interactive and enjoyable were mentioned. Given the large number of the responses received by students, the lack of mentioning of programmes, such as *Kahoot* and *Padlet* might be relevant. Admittedly, this dearth might be ascribable to a bigger problem that has been present in the Italian school system since even before the emergency COVID-19 and that might also be related to the difficulties encountered – especially by teachers – during the implementation of ERT. Even though the digitalisation of education has been a priority in the last 20 years for both Italy and Europe, there have been some factors hampering this process. First and foremost, the unwillingness of educators to use technologies in their lessons has been a strong obstacle to this project (Gui & Gerosa 2019). Massive investments have been made in order to provide schools with ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), but instructors have been slowly adapting their teaching methods to these new aids and the process is taking more than expected. At the basis of this issue, as previously stated in Chapter 3, teachers are not properly trained for this shift and their difficulties might be related to not being accompanied through this change.

4.3.4 Which devices are you using to attend online lessons?

To the question "*Which devices are you using to attend online lessons?"* the majority of respondents (65.6%) said to be using a Laptop Computer, whilst only a few people (7.8%) used a Personal Computer (PC) (see *Figure 13*). Apart from computers, students also used their mobile phones (15.5%) – especially if they had to share the laptop with their parents and siblings who were also working or studying from home – and tablets (10.1%), that sometimes were lent by the school itself in order to help those families who could not afford to buy new devices in such a period of crisis. Of course, there was no exclusive use of one device with respect to the others, and sometimes students used both a laptop and their mobile phone or a tablet, according to their family's needs.

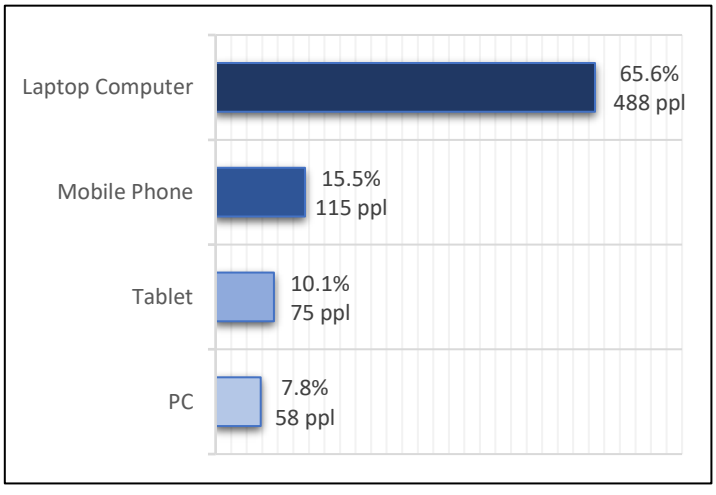


Figure 13 - Devices used to attend online classes

4.3.5 On average, how many hours of online lessons do you have per week?

On average, participants to the questionnaire claimed to have had 16 hours of online lessons per week, which is, more or less, half of the usual amount of hours. This is due to the fact that not all of the subjects, as stated above, are moved into the virtual classroom, and also the length of the lesson has been considerably reduced. Usually, face-to-face lessons are around fifty minutes long, whilst the duration of a class online, at the experts' suggestion, should have been much shorter than face-to-face ones, especially if asynchronous. In fact, the usual fifty-minute-long lesson was to be reduced to a twenty-minute-long one, if synchronous, so that the learner could remain in front of a screen without losing attention, get bored or too tired from the long time spent using electronic devices. In the case of asynchronous classes, especially for younger students – but the same discourse is valid also for MOOCs, therefore for older students – lessons should be even shorter than twenty minutes. Scholars (Castrillo & Martín, 2016) talk of maximum 5-10 minutes of video where information need to be concentrated and delivered in a captivating way, so that learners are engaged in the topic and their curiosity is aroused, fostering autonomous learning.

4.3.6 ***Did you find it difficult to use programmes for online lessons?***

As it was for teachers and professors, students were also asked about their degree of comfort using online programmes and platforms for synchronous and asynchronous communication. Overall, participants responded negatively to the question *"Did you find it difficult to use programmes for online lessons?"*, affirming to feel quite confident about utilising such programmes. The data shows that 362 people said they did not have problems when using online programmes; 228 people claimed to have had issued only at the beginning, when adjusting to the new method; 134 people still had some problems, at times, when dealing with uploading homework or finding materials to download; and 18 people said they had issues either because their or their teacher's poor internet connection, or because they were not told how to use online programmes properly. This discourse returns to what claimed in the previous chapter about young people and their confidence to use technology, especially if compared to adults. As already said, youngsters were born in a digitalised era, hence their familiarity with technology and online programmes is anything but limited. They surely need to be guided if technology is used in the educational sphere, but if they have to learn how to use a new device, for instance, they do not even bother to read the user's manual in detail – as older people tend to do – but

they tackle any new modern electronic equipment as if they had some sort of innate skill for doing so (Chiramel, 2016). In *Figure 14,* answers given by students and teachers are visually compared and it is possible to notice that, between the two, the ones who kept having problems the most were teachers, whilst students showed to be both faster to adapt and more comfortable with the implementation of technology in education.

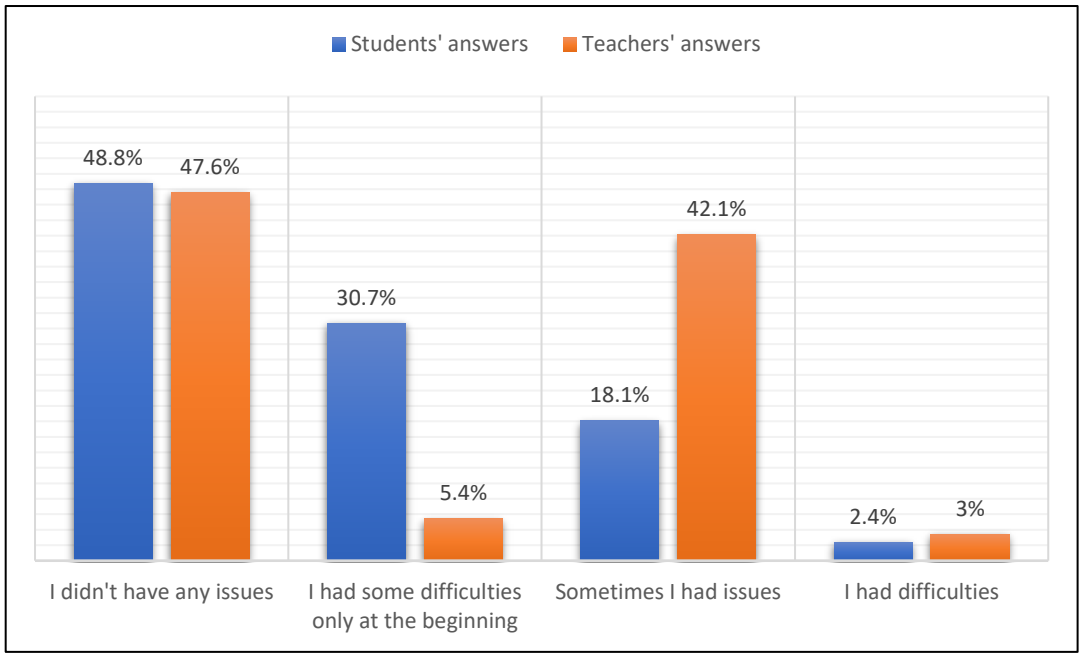


Figure 14 – Degree of adaptation with the new teaching method. Teachers and students' answers compared

4.3.7 On a scale of 1 to 5, how do you judge the organisation of online lessons?

Furthermore, pupils and students were asked to judge the organisation of the online lessons they were attending. Overall, answers show that the organisation of online lessons needs improvements, with 370 people claiming so. Nonetheless, participants to the survey have a general positive attitude towards the organisation of ERT. In fact, 273 people believe that online lessons are well or even very well organised. On the other hand, 101 people think that virtual classes are badly and very badly organised (see *Figure 15*).

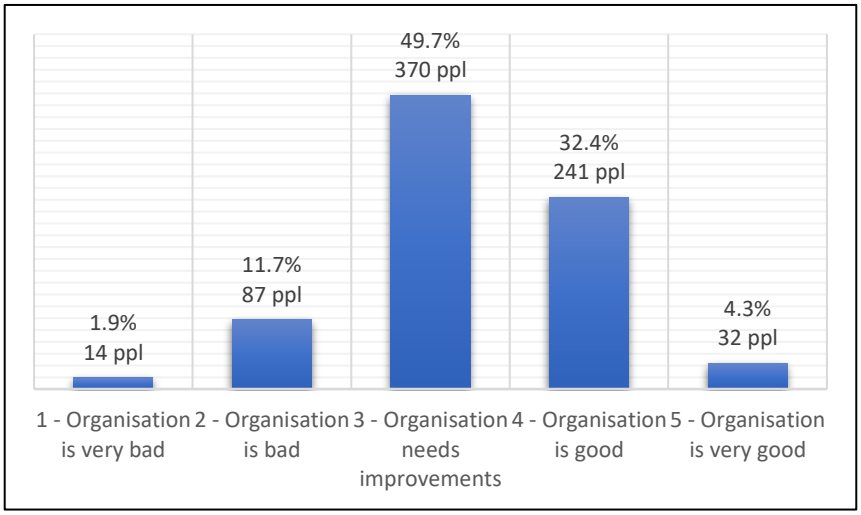


Figure 15 - Students' opinions on the organisation of online lessons

4.3.8 On a scale of 1 to 5, how do you judge the participation and inclusion of everybody during online lessons?

Regarding the participation and inclusion matter, students were asked to share their view on how much online lessons allow everyone to actively participate. All in all, responses were positive, given that 30% think that online lessons allow the participation of almost everyone and 27.2% think that they allow the participation of many. Moreover, 13.6% believe that everybody can actively participate in online lessons, seeing this method as an actual means of communication and interaction rather than something that separates and isolates people. On the other hand, 20.4% think that online lessons allow the participation of only a few people within the class and 8.9% believe that this method excludes people from actively participating in the class. This might be due to the fact that not everybody owns a strong internet connection so that if they need to simply listen to a lecture everything works properly, whereas if they have to participate, asking questions or interacting with their peers, their connection fails and the system crashes. Therefore, it might be argued that, even though not everyone has, luckily, experienced this inconvenience when attending online lessons, it is not possible to say that ERT is one-hundred-percent inclusive, because there will always be a percentage, even if a little one, that does not manage to participate as they wanted, or as they should.

4.3.9 On a scale of 1 to 5, how do you judge the preparation of your teachers/professors for online teaching?

To the question, "*How do you judge the preparation of your teachers/professors for teaching online?"* answers differ. As shown in *Figure 16,* 41% of the people surveyed find the preparation of teachers acceptable; 25.5% think their teachers' preparation is adequate; 23.1% believe that their preparation needs

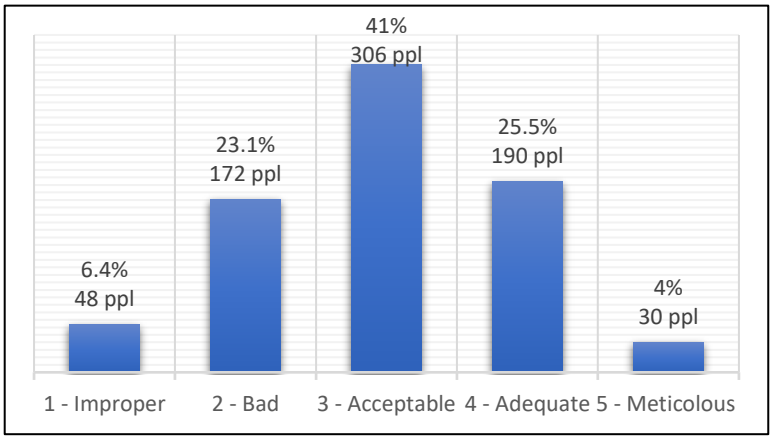


Figure 16 - Students' view on their teachers' preparation for teaching online

improvements since it is currently rated as bad, whilst 6.4% think it very bad and, conversely, only 4% find their teachers properly prepared for teaching online.

4.3.10 What do you think of online testing and online exams?

Moreover, students who participated to the survey were also requested to give an opinion on tests and exams carried out online. Regarding the degree of difficulty encountered when completing a test online, students have opposing views. In fact, 38.3% said that online tests were easier than before, whilst 38.3% did not notice any differences in the level of difficulty. At the same time, 23.4% found online tests and exams more difficult than before. This contrast might be linked to the lack of guidance – on the part of the government – on how to evaluate in a situation of ERT and to a resulting inconsistency in carrying out the evaluation process. In fact, in the first guidelines, apart from suggesting a continuous assessment, there were no practical instructions on how to carry it out (Nota MIUR, 2020). Consequently, each educator could decide their own way of testing and evaluation and depending on the methodology used, tests might have resulted more or less complex for the learners.

Regarding the marks, the students' statements sometimes clashed a bit with the logical consequences of the aforementioned impressions (see *Figure 17*). In fact, when tests are said to be easier, one might assume that marks will be better than before, and at the same time, when tests are said to be more difficult, the expectation is that marks will worsen. However, the trend shows that, apart from the central columns in *Figure 17*, the impressions do not match the actual marks, which, overall, are the same as before. Hence, it appears that marks, in general, have neither improved nor worsened.

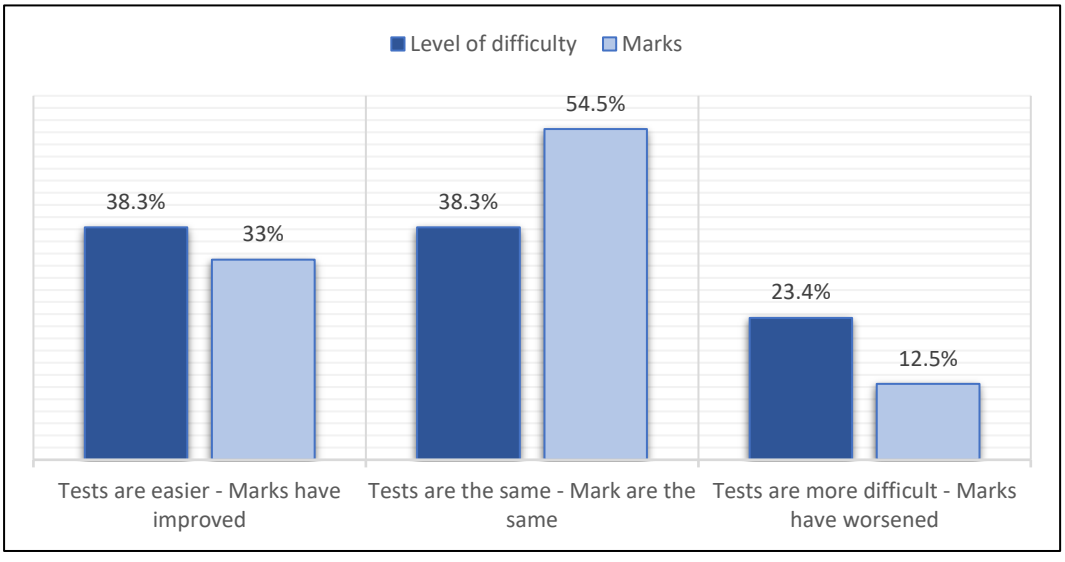


Figure 17 - Impressions on the level of difficulty of tests and exams compared to the actual grades

Concerning the feedback to tests and assignments, the Ministry of Education's guidelines – but most importantly decades of studies on teaching and learning – state that the learner needs to be immediately informed of her or his mistakes, of what to improve and of how to improve it. Otherwise, we can no longer talk about an evaluation process, but rather of some sort of punishment that nothing has to do with teaching, regardless of the way through which it happens[15]. However, results to the questionnaire show that, still, feedback on pupils and students' work is not always prompt and thorough, if not at all given. The majority of respondents (53.3%), indeed, said that they only sometimes receive a feedback to their marks, meaning that they are often only evaluated through the means of a number without any further explanations of it. In addition, 24.7% affirmed that they never receive a feedback to their marks, whereas 22% said to always receive it. These results might suggest that the feedback offered in a situation of Emergency Remote Teaching does not entirely depend on the way through which the teaching takes place, so it is not affected by the lack of proximity, but rather it might be linked to the teacher's own methods.

4.3.11 How would you describe online lessons?

To the question "*How would you describe online lessons?"* participants were invited to choose among a list of positive and negative descriptors. In this case, too, opinions differ, but, generally, if summed, positive descriptors have been chosen the most. In *Figure 18* and *19,* positive and negative descriptors respectively are listed showing how many times each one was chosen to describe ERT. Some of these descriptors will also be present later in this chapter as advantages or disadvantages of online teaching.

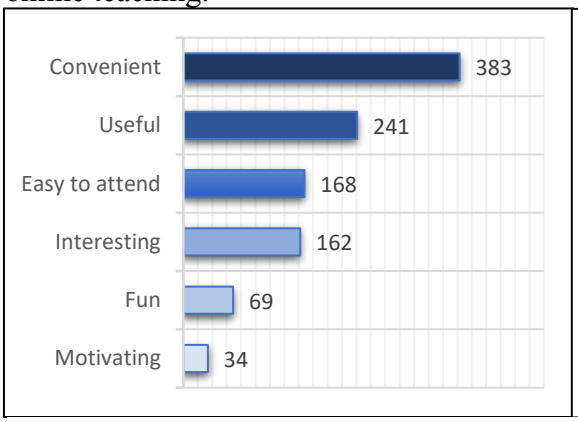


Figure 18 - Positive descriptors

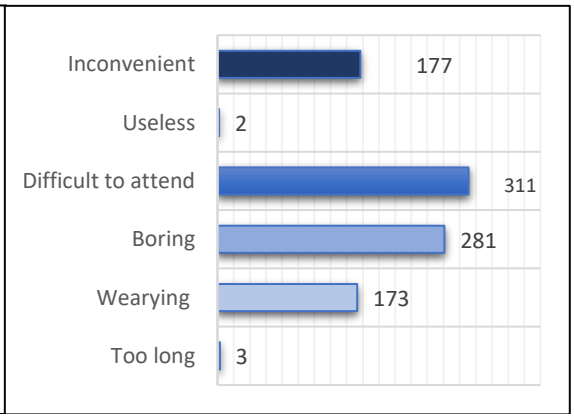


Figure 19 - Negative descriptors

[15] *"Se l'alunno non è subito informato che ha sbagliato, cosa ha sbagliato e perché ha sbagliato, la valutazione si trasforma in un rito sanzionatorio, che nulla ha a che fare con la didattica, qualsiasi sia la forma nella quale è esercitata"* (Nota MIUR, 2020).

The descriptors that are the most interesting to analyse especially, if we compare them with the answers given by teachers and professors are “motivating”, “convenient” and “wearying”. As shown in *Figure 20,* teachers’ impression on how motivating online lessons are for their students seems to mirror, in proportion, the students’ actual perception. In fact, the percentage of students who chose to describe ERT as motivating is close to the one of teachers, showing that they both agree on the little level of motivation that this type of online lessons provide. On the other hand, for what concerns the other two descriptors, the gap is important, showing a significant difference in the perception of ERT between students and teachers. In fact, whilst the majority of students (51.6%) would describe online lessons as convenient because it allows them to attend lessons from their bedroom maybe wearing their pyjamas and with everything they might need at hand, only a small percentage (12.9%) of teachers found ERT convenient. This might be due to the fact that, contrary to their students, teachers had to spend a lot of time preparing online lessons, adapting the work already prepared to the virtual environment and this is – even though necessary – anything but convenient. Similarly, for the descriptor “wearying” there is an analogous trend but reversed. The large majority of teachers (68.7%), in fact, found ERT extremely draining, whilst only 23.3% of the students would agree. For the reason just mentioned, students and teachers’ perceptions strongly disagree, given that many teachers think that the time and mental energies spent on designing online lessons was at least doubled and their implementation was far from relaxing. If we go back for a second to the discourse on Distance Education in Chapter 1, this fact should not surprise because research show that, in order to design an online course effectively, preparation is much beyond that of face-to-face classes (Valentine, 2002).

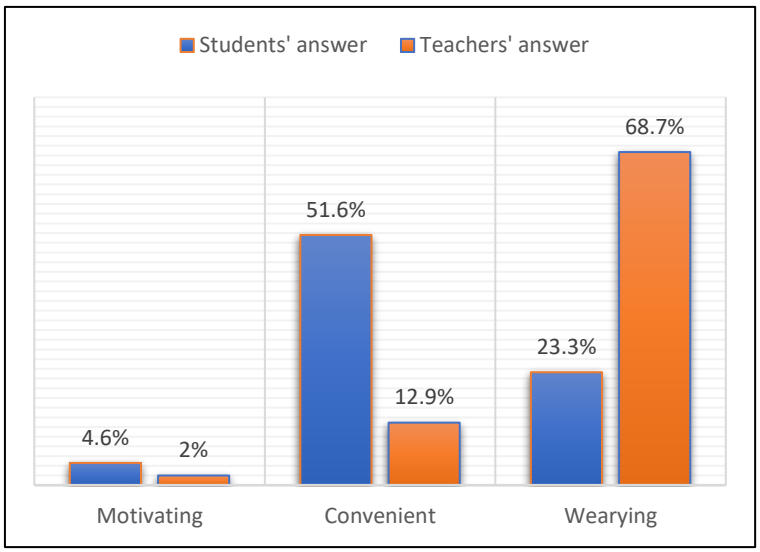


Figure 20 - Comparison between students and teachers' description of ERT

4.3.12 On a scale of 1 to 5, how comfortable are you in attending lessons from behind a screen? Does it allow you to or stop you from participating?

For what concerns the students' degree of ease with attending lessons sitting in front of a screen, the questionnaire wanted to investigate how comfortable students felt in this situation and whether they were encouraged to participate or not. On a scale of 1 to 5, many respondents (32.5%) claimed that they felt rather comfortable attending online lessons and in general people seem to have a general positive attitude towards this type of virtual interaction (see *Figure 21).* This is not surprising, given that students belong to the so-called Generation Z or e-generation that sees computers and electronic devices as integral part of their lives. Therefore, as previously stated, it might be argued that it should be a little discomfort for them to integrate technology in education, too (Duse & Duse, 2016; Kosinzky, 2017).

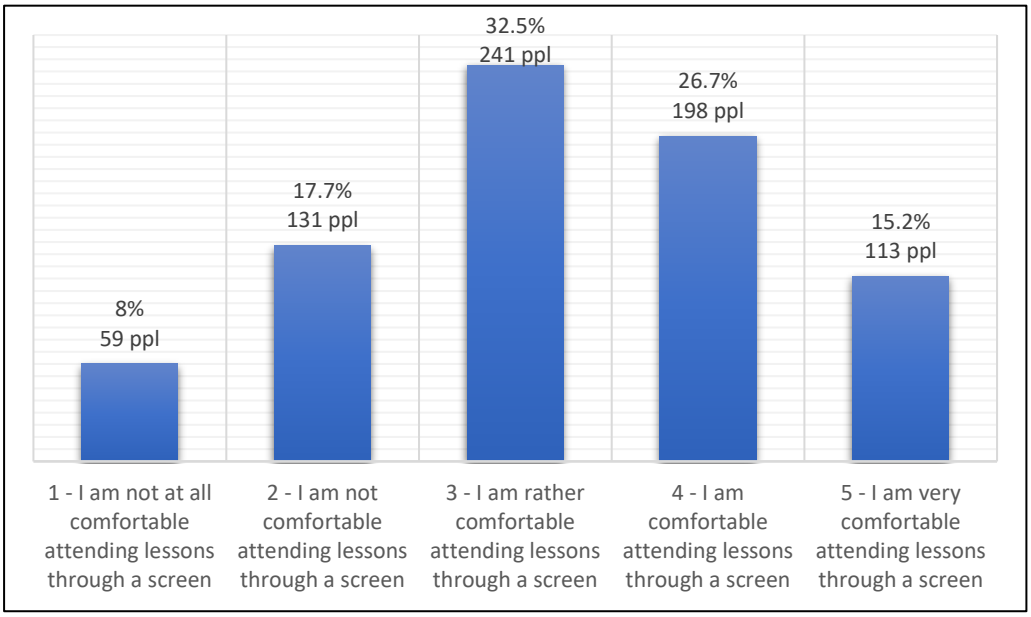


Figure 21 - How comfortable students feel while attending lessons from in front of a screen

However, when asked if they felt that this manner allowed them to participate to the lesson or if it stopped them from interacting, opinions are contradictory (see *Figure 22*). The narrow majority of the people surveyed (51%) claimed to feel comfortable attending lessons from behind a screen and this allowed them to participate, whilst 45% felt that the ERT method stopped them from participating and they felt anxious about it. The remaining 4% said they did not notice

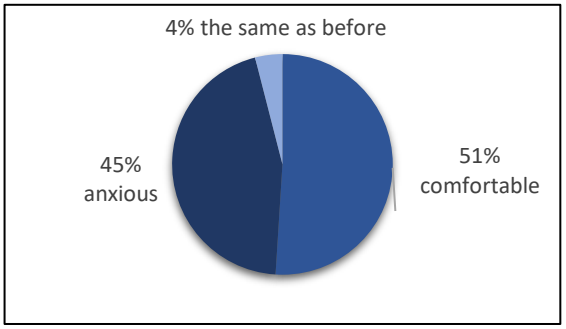


Figure 22 - Students' ease with attending lessons from behind a screen

any difference from face-to-face lessons. The fact that some people felt more comfortable than others when attending lessons from behind a screen is clearly related to individual psychological characteristics. As said for Distance Education, some people do prefer online classes because the kind of anonymity it gives allows them to protect their self-image in the case of possible embarrassment (Pichette, 2009). In fact, in many cases during ERT students kept their camera off and preferred using the online chat if they had to ask some questions, rather than turning their camera and microphone on. In some other cases, people who were shy in face-to-face classes and did not participate because felt the pressure of being judged by their peers and teacher, changed their approach in online lessons, because they saw in them a less formal environment and the protection of the screen allowed them to participate in the conversation without fearing embarrassment, even if that meant using only the online chat. However, it remains surprising that a high percentage of young people, who should feel very familiar with technology, affirmed to have felt anxious interacting by means of a computer.

4.3.13 What did you miss of face-to-face lessons? And what did you not miss of them?

Before the section concerning Foreign Languages, participants were asked to say which were the things that they missed the most of face-to-face lessons as well as the ones they did not miss at all. Unsurprisingly, as the 87.3% of the participants claimed, what students missed the most was the company of their classmates with whom they had always shared ups and downs of the intricate journey of formal education (see *Figure 23*).

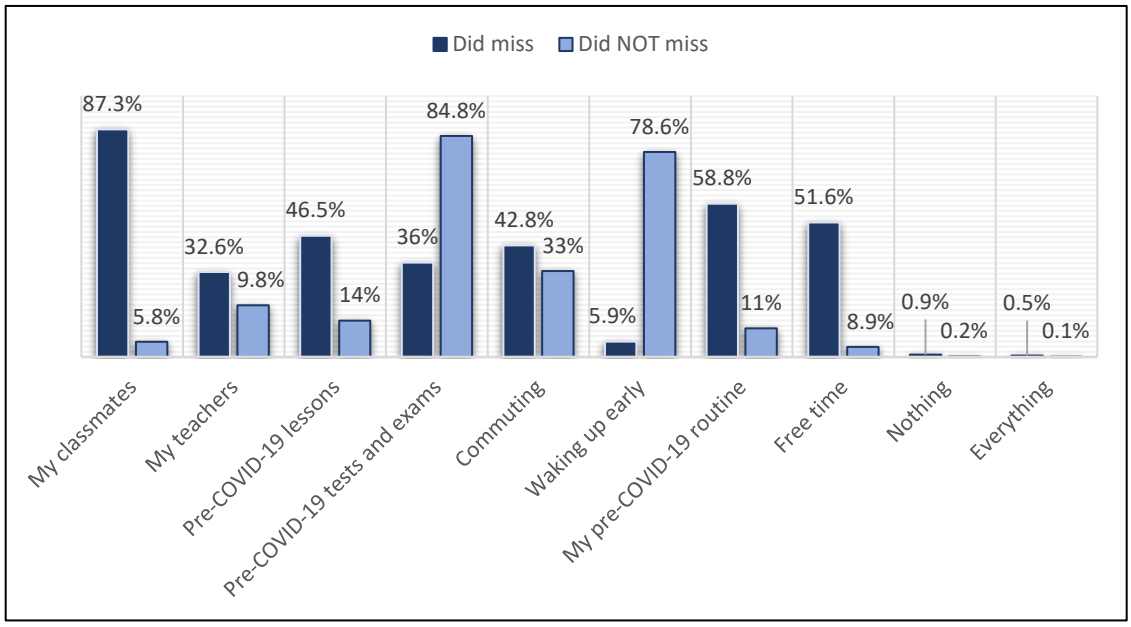


Figure 23 - Things students missed and did not miss about face-to-face lessons

Moreover, apropos of how deeply the situation of emergency has affected people's perception of their lives, the second most missed thing resulted to be the "pre-COVID-19 routine" – mentioned by 58.8% of the students surveyed – suggesting that even something like going to school becomes something to long for, when one is forced home for a prolonged time. It might surprise, though, that a high percentage of people also missed commuting (42.8%), possibly because, even if it can be stressful and time-consuming, it is a period in which students bond with each other and discuss their problems and their successes. On the other hand, answers made it clear that waking up early in the morning was not something people missed that much, confirming what said before about how convenient ERT is especially for students. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of respondents (84.8%) stated that they did not miss how tests and exams were carried out before COVID-19, agreeing with the previous data in which students found graded tasks easier than before and their marks slightly better. In fact, it was acknowledged by both teachers and students that cheating at tests was not only easier but also performed by people who did not usually do it. In addition, the majority of the surveyed (51.6%) also claimed to be missing their free time. This information is interesting if we consider the fact that the survey was conducted during months of lockdown and quarantine, period in which people could not leave their homes, but for running essential errands, such as doing the shopping or going to hospital. Therefore, it might be argued that, being forced at home 24/7, one should have enough free time, subtracted the already reduced hours of synchronous or asynchronous virtual classes. The only possible explanation to this data is that many students were assigned a lot of homework and independent study that did not leave them with much free time to spend in other ways. Even though this might have not been seen as a good thing at the time, it could also be argued that to have something to focus on, something that intensifies the sense of belonging, and that keeps one busy in a time of crisis and psychological pressure – such as a pandemic – may have helped to overcome such dark times.

4.3.14 If you study Foreign Languages…

The questionnaire, then, turned its attention to the learning of Foreign Languages (FL) in an ERT context. Students who affirmed to be studying FLs – in total 570 people – were asked to express their opinions on online FL learning by choosing from a list of statements the ones that they agreed with. The answers have been divided below into three figures, gathering together positive and negative responses on the same matter. For

example, in *Figure 24,* effectiveness of online lessons with respect to face-to-face ones is dealt with. The large majority of responses (62.7%) claimed that foreign language classes at a distance were not as effective as those delivered face-to-face. 34.6% did not notice much difference in the effectiveness of the learning and found FL online lessons as good as before. Only 2.7% felt like the learning was even more effective than with face-to-face lessons. The high number of responses ranking online lessons worse than before in terms of how effective the learning was might be related to lack of proximity and face-to-face interaction that, as explained in Chapter 2, is fundamental in the learning of a Foreign Language. In fact, as shown in *Figure 25,* the majority of participants (63.9%) think that online lessons do not allow interaction in the Foreign Language and real communication as face-to-face lessons do. On the other hand, 36.1% did not notice any differences, claiming that lessons at a distance provide learners with the same amount of interaction opportunities as before.

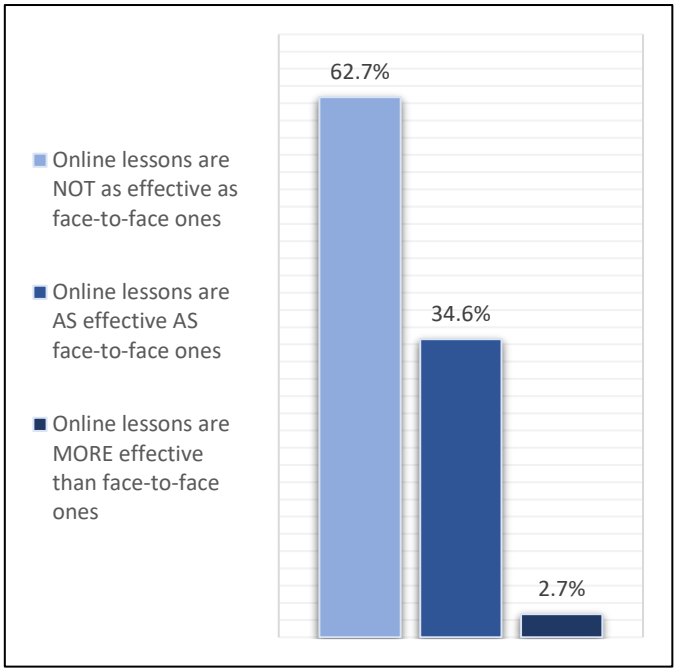


Figure 24 - Effectiveness of online lessons with respect to face-to-face lessons according to students

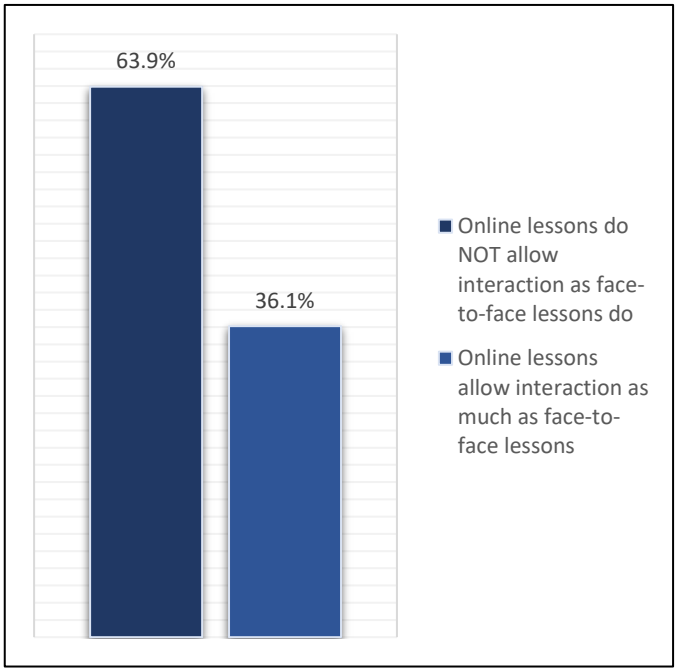


Figure 25 - Interaction in FL online lessons according to students

Moreover, contrary to what one might expect, the wide majority of students surveyed (81.4%) found

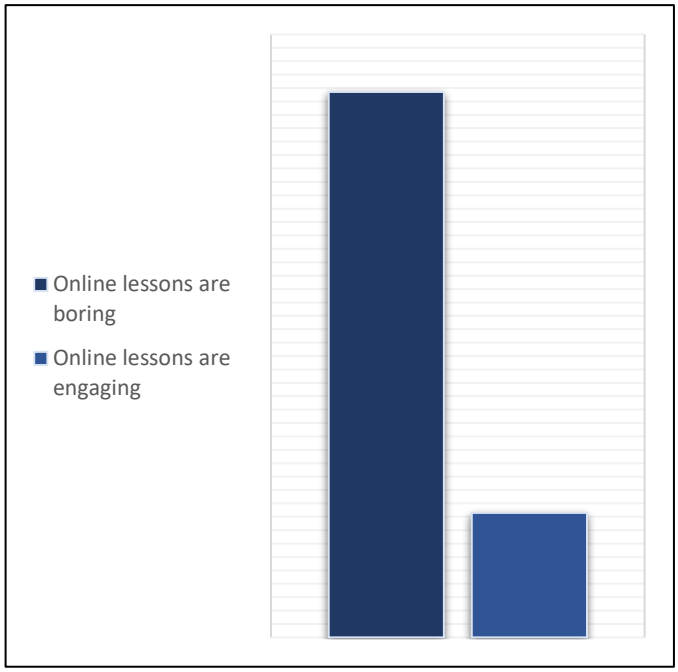


Figure 26 - Students' opinion on how engaging online lessons of FLs are

FL online lessons boring, whilst 18.6% think they are fun because they feature many different kinds of activities (see *Figure 26*). These results may sound at the same time surprising and not so much. It is surprising if we consider the literature on Distance Education and on online teaching of Foreign Languages, since variety of the activities is among its advantages, according to scholars (Osuna-Acedo & Gil-Quintana, 2020). In fact, online DE of FLs strength lies primarily on the kind of engaging, differentiated and often real-life like activities presented. However, of course, participants to the survey did not attend a DE foreign language course, but their experience refers to an Emergency Remote Teaching programme that, as profusely said in the previous chapters, is not the same thing. Foreign language instructors designing and implementing online DE courses have a completely different preparation from their colleagues, who found themselves forced into a similar way of teaching. Therefore, it is not that surprising if students did not find the activities and tasks presented engaging and fun, because who had to design them did not have enough time to prepare for this type of teaching.

4.3.15 According to your experience, which are three advantages and three disadvantages of online teaching?

Moreover, as it was done with teachers and professors, students were asked to list three advantages and three disadvantages of Emergency Remote Teaching. It was not a required answer, so many students did not respond to it. In total, though, 448 responses were given and submitted. It was designed as a long-answer question; thus, pupils and students were free to write anything they had noticed from their personal experience with ERT. However, in various occasions, the same answers were repeated. Therefore, answers were gathered in two tables, one (*Table 4*) completed with the most mentioned advantages and the other one (*Table 5*) with the disadvantages.

SR. NO.	ADVANTAGES	TIMES MENTIONED
1	ERT is more convenient than face-to-face lessons. "I can wake up later; I can have breakfast in my pyjamas, while attending classes; I don't have to commute; I always have all I need at hand; it is easier to attend classes this way"	143
2	"I can record the lesson and therefore watch or listen to it whenever I need; I can attend lectures even when they overlap"	37
3	"I manage to better organise my time; I learn to study autonomously; I learn how to use technologies properly"	33
4	People engage more. Even shy people participate more and ask questions. "I feel less anxious because there is a screen between me and the other people"	29
5	Flexibility	24
6	"There are less lessons throughout the week and they are shorter"	23
7	"I've got more free time"	16
8	"Lessons are less noisy and it's easier to focus and to talk one at the time"	14
9	"ERT requires less hard work; it is easier to copy during tests; my marks have improved"	13
10	"The learning can continue; one can go to class even if they are ill or if they are working students"	12
11	"I can turn the camera off when I don't feel like participating; I can get distracted and do other things while attending"	11
11	None	11
13	"Lessons are sometimes fun, interesting, interactive and motivating"	10

Table 4 - Advantages of ERT according to students

As it has resulted in the descriptors analysed above, Emergency Remote Teaching is described as more convenient for various reasons. First and foremost, because students

do not have to leave their homes to attend classes. For this reason, they can wake up later, allowing them to be less tired and more relaxed to tackle the day ahead and the different tasks assigned. Moreover, students do not have to commute and waste time and money on bus passes, also reducing the amount of pollution produced daily by the millions of cars with which parents take their children to school. Another interesting point emerged as the second most mentioned advantage has to do with the repeatability of lessons. This allows university students, for instance, to have overlaps without losing any essential part of the lesson they had to miss because, as for their colleagues who attended it synchronously, everything is in the recorded video lesson. The same discourse is valid for middle and high school pupils who, usually, had to ask their peers for notes and homework, if they missed a face-to-face lesson, whilst thanks to ERT, if the lesson is recorded, they can watch it on their own time. In addition, students acknowledged the fact that this emergency made them more autonomous learners, given that, if they wanted to keep up with the workload, they had to learn how to organise their time as well as learn how to use technology properly. Students also remarked that these aspects might prepare them for a potential future job, which, arguably, should also be the whole purpose of formal education.

Some of the advantages mentioned about Emergency Remote Teaching, clearly, correspond to the ones said about Distance Education, such as flexibility and convenience. Some others, instead, are typical of ERT, in the sense that they are not actual advantages for the learner, but they make her/his school life easier, even if not in terms of efficiency. In other words, the fact that the learning is perceived as easier because it is easier to cheat at tests could be seen as an advantage for learners, but this does not give them any advantages to their individual and academic growth.

A few students also pointed out, as a strength of ERT, the fact that online lessons are less noisy and it is easier to focus mainly because the synchronous communication programmes, such as *Zoom* and *Google Meet,* allow people to talk one at the time otherwise it would be difficult to understand what one is saying. This also allows teachers, according to the respondents, to truly listen to students' issues and to be more obliging and understanding, also considering the circumstances.

Finally, it is also interesting to notice that 11 people think there are no advantages to ERT, confirming the fact that this type of teaching is not suitable to everybody, and some people cannot learn without the physical presence of their teachers and classmates, who help them make the learning a meaningful process.

Regarding the disadvantages reported by pupils and students who responded to the questionnaire, *Table 5* below lists the most mentioned.

SR. NO.	DISADVANTAGES	TIMES MENTIONED
1	ERT lacks interaction, social relations, university life, human contact with teachers and classmates.	105
2	"Poor internet connection and technical issues might penalise the learning and testing"	71
3	"The learning is less effective"	43
4	"I spend too many hours in front of a screen: it's tiring and unhealthy"	31
5	"The heavy workload; Lessons are more difficult and longer; I have less free time"	26
6	"ERT lacks organisation"	17
6	"Lessons are boring"	17
8	"Some teachers are not prepared for teaching this way"	16
9	"I don't feel comfortable participating, asking questions"	13
10	"It is possible to skip class without getting in trouble; it is easier to get distracted and to skip or copy during tests"	10

Table 5 - Disadvantages of ERT according to students

The two disadvantages of Emergency Remote Teaching repeated the most times in the questionnaire correspond to the ones said about Distance Education. In fact, lack of interaction, social proximity, and human contact with teacher and classmates have been reported the most times as an important weakness of ERT. Similarly, as stated in Chapter 1, the cause to many of the dropouts from online distance courses are to be attributed to this very reason. People who feel the lack of someone to share their learning process with tend to lose their motivation, thing that leads to dropouts and learning unsuccess. Moreover, students have also pointed out that an important disadvantage has to do with lack of social interactions beyond classes, for instance, commuting or, in the case of older students, group studies but even post lesson drinks and lunches, in short "school conviviality" (Machado et al., 2019:164).

Responses to the questionnaire also highlighted that poor internet connection and technical issues, in general, play an important role in determining online learning success.

In many cases, indeed, the system crashed, especially in the first period, when the situation was new also for programme designers and Internet service providers who were unprepared for a complete shift to online teaching and could not immediately cope with the high demand. Apart from this, though, also in the following months, some students kept having problems attending classes because their internet connection was not strong enough and they would be continuously excluded from the virtual classroom. In addition, this resulted to be a problem especially during exams, where the test would be nullified, and the student had to retake it another time if technical problems occurred, penalising them and their academic careers.

Furthermore, the learning was judged by many to be less effective in an ERT method, mainly because students were bombarded with too much information in a shorter time, since virtual lessons needed to be shorter. Respondents believe that this fact is not helpful in the long term, because they did not have enough time to process the new knowledge, and, therefore, to acquire it. In addition, tests are labelled as useless, since it is much easier to copy, and labs and practice activities are difficult to attend or not feasible at all, because of the very nature of online lessons. Therefore, for example, a university module called "Outdoor Physical Activities" included in the degree of Human Movement Sciences at the University of Padua, which should have consisted in five practical lessons in the swimming pool, teaching free diving and scuba diving, became, instead, a completely theoretical module, with meetings and conferences delivered by experts – such as underwater documentary makers, explorers, biologists and historians. As interesting it was to meet such experts, it cannot be compared to the practical experience that students of Human Movement Sciences should have had[16].

Unsurprisingly, some people have also said that ERT lacks organisation, is boring and instructors are not prepared for this type of teaching. As previously said, these disadvantages are those that one might expect from a situation of emergency, but are not to be blamed on Distance Education as a whole, because if there is something DE can be proud of is, indeed, its organisation and specialised teachers.

[16] Example provided by one of the respondents to the questionnaire, who added it as an explanation to their claim that ERT is less effective: *"…il corso era "attività motoria all'aria aperta ed ambienti straordinari" che avrebbe dovuto comprendere cinque mattine pratiche in piscina di apnea e attività subacquea. Al posto di questo abbiamo fatto cinque mattine di pura teoria (che non ci ha lasciato nulla) e incontri con esperti (documentaristi subacquei, esploratori, biologi, storici ecc. che svolgono il loro lavoro nel mondo subacqueo) Per quanto sia stato bello incontrare anche delle persone di rilievo, non si può paragonare all'esperienza pratica che avremmo dovuto fare*."

Finally, the same item reported before as a benefit, was also found among the list of disadvantages. The fact that it is much simpler to skip classes without being rebuked, or that cheating in exams can be done easily is seen here as a weakness of ERT, and, indeed, it is, for real learning.

4.3.16 The future of online teaching and learning

To conclude, the questionnaire was interested in investigating students' opinions on the future of online teaching. In particular, they were asked if they thought that online lessons could effectively substitute face-to-face lessons. In the light of what has been said and analysed so far, it does not surprise that the majority of respondents (61.8%) think that online lessons could only partly replace face-to-face ones. Generally, though, the students surveyed did not have a positive attitude towards online lessons, given that 215 people (28.9%) against 69 people (9.3%) affirmed that face-to-face classes cannot be replaced in any way (see *Figure 27*).

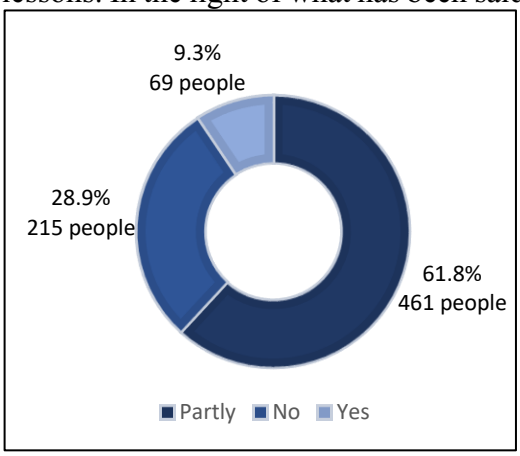


Figure 27 - Students' opinions on whether online lessons could replace face-to-face ones.

Consequently, when asked if they preferred face-to-face or online lessons – especially with reference to foreign languages – the majority of students (59%) replied to prefer face-to-face classes. Interestingly, many people also said to have no preferences and also to like them both (34.2%). Only a little percentage (6.8%) prefer online lessons.

Overall, according to the responses received to the questionnaire, it seems that ERT did not have a huge impact on the autonomy of students. In other words, students' perception is that, in general – even though this method could enhance autonomy – ERT has not done much to foster independence. The data shows that 42.9% of the surveyed think that, thanks to this new experience, they have become neither less nor more autonomous learners, whilst 30.9% have noticed some improvements and claimed that, as a consequence to the implementation of ERT, they can better organise their time and study new topics on their own, without the help of teachers. On the other hand, 14.8% of the respondents find it still very difficult to work autonomously and prefer lessons where they take advantage of the teacher's guidance.

Moreover, when asked if they would maintain both online and face-to-face lessons at the end of the Coronavirus emergency, 47.8% of the students surveyed said that they

would like to keep having them. A slightly lower percentage (39.5%) said they would no longer like to have online lessons, whilst 12.8% of the respondents are not sure whether they would like them integrated in their learning or not.

Even though the data does not show the majority of positive answers in favour of the integration of online lessons into a face-to-face course, we need to be reminded that students have so far experienced Emergency Remote Teaching and not real online Distance Education. Therefore, the idea of Blended Learning, that might be argued to be a smart move in the improvement of both the teaching and the learning, might not be properly understood by students who have in mind their mediocre experience with ERT. It is suggested, here, that Blended Learning, presented before in this study, might be well accepted among students and pupils – provided that it is duly organised – because it would allow them to maintain both school conviviality and face-to-face interaction and, at the same time, they would have a more flexible, better organised, autonomous and more convenient kind of learning.

4.4 Conclusion

The students and pupils' questionnaire resulted to be quite helpful in reporting an overview of the Italian school system situation during the implementation of ERT, especially because of the large number of responses and their different regions of origin. From the analysis just conducted, it has resulted that most of the students surveyed were attending online lessons at the time when they responded to the questionnaire. Opinions and experiences, in general tend to differ. This does not come as a surprise, given the fact that ERT is, indeed, a response to a situation of emergency and institutions' organisation has never been alike, therefore leading to different reactions and a consequent inconsistency in the answers. Moreover, lessons at a distance have been proven to not be beneficial for every student, because of one's individual learning characteristics that might prefer a more cooperative learning environment rather than a more independent one. These factors produced gaps in the answers and some inconsistencies in the data.

All in all, though, it is possible to say that only a few were the students who could not attend online lessons because of technical issues or because of their poor digital literacy; inclusion and participation have been judged in general sufficient, even though not everyone felt one-hundred percent comfortable in participating – but this has to do mainly with the character of each person, as said above. Regarding the teaching of Foreign Languages online, the same shortcomings present in Distance Education are

present also in an ERT context, with people affirming that online lessons do not always allow interaction as face-to-face lessons do and the learning is not as effective.

Finally, the most interesting data might be found in the 61.8% of people who claimed that online lessons can effectively substitute face-to-face ones only partly, confirming the suggestion of Blended Learning. It would, indeed, blend together the strengths of both teaching modalities creating an up-to-date and highly effective learning environment.

CONCLUSION

In the very first months of 2020, Italy and the whole world were hit by the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19). The rapidity with which the infections have happened forced governments to apply the largest quarantine ever registered so far, and lockdowns were imposed halting various economic sectors. The first one to temporarily close was, indeed, the field of education, cancelling all classes in presence, from kindergartens to universities. In order to save the academic year, the Italian Ministry of Education decided to move the learning from the physical classroom to a complete virtual environment, implementing what has been called *Didattica a Distanza* (Distance Education). As it might be expected in a situation of emergency, the attempt at implementing online classes was not judged positively by the press and the people concerned, that is to say teachers, students and their families. What it is argued in this dissertation is that Distance Education, a two-century-long way of teaching, is not comparable to what has been a sudden and unplanned response to a situation of emergency. An in-depth analysis of the literature surrounding Distance Education (DE) has revealed, in fact, substantial differences between online Distance Education and what has been happening in Italy and in other countries. Scholars (Hodges et al., 2020) suggest that the term Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) should be used, instead, in order to outline a clear boundary between the two similar, yet different, teaching and learning experiences. In fact, even though the delivery method of DE and ERT might be analogous, the planning and organisation behind them are completely different, not to mention the reason why these online distance teaching programmes are implemented. In the case of DE, students choose to study at a distance and in many cases prefer it to face-to-face courses for various reasons, whilst ERT is a method imposed by the critical circumstances. Regarding this matter, it has been suggested that, especially when the situation is challenging as it has been this year – but also in a situation of normality – students and pupils' mental and emotional wellbeing should be taken into consideration, as much as their formal education.

In this dissertation an attempt was made at explaining the main differences between DE and ERT, showing also the similarity between the two and suggesting possible implications for the future of teaching. In Chapter 1, the attention was drawn to the history and development of Distance Education and an overview on the three generations of DE was provided, with a particular focus on the pedagogy behind the

technology used to deliver lessons at a distance. Furthermore, examples of online DE were given, describing two very famous instances of it, namely MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) and telematic universities. The main advantages and disadvantages of Distance Education were also reported showing how flexibility, convenience and repeatability are considered beneficial for the learners and how, on the other hand, lack of interaction and the need for a high degree of autonomy are considered hindrances to the learning. Overall, it was suggested that this type of teaching is not suitable for every student, especially from a cognitive point of view. In fact, for some people, the individuality of the learning process required in a distance education context might not agree with one's personal characteristics and might act as a roadblock to motivation and acquisition. Moreover, the fact that not all the subjects can be taught effectively at a distance was also highlighted as a shortcoming. Nevertheless, millions of people have Distance Education to thank for allowing them to get a degree or even to learn how to write.

In Chapter 2, particular attention was given to Distance Education in relation to the teaching of Foreign Languages. In brief, the key elements essential for the acquisition of a Foreign Language were pointed out, such as high motivation, a positive attitude towards the target language, language aptitude, a low Affective Filter and most importantly interaction. Therefore, when considering the teaching of FLs one is reminded that these elements need to be taken into account if one wants to design effective and successful FL classes. As a consequence, the discourse returned to focus on one of the main aspects of this dissertation, that is technology and how it is implemented in education. In the second chapter it has been underlined the importance of the integration of technology in teaching and especially in the teaching of Foreign Languages, because as it is part and parcel of everyday life so it should be included in the learning experience. Not only because the Internet is an infinite source of knowledge and authentic material, but also because in the future the use of technologies will increase, and students need to be ready to tackle them all. It has been pointed out that the integration of technology into face-to-face lessons should not find any obstacles on the part of students, because they were born in a digitalised era and they own a sort of innate predisposition to technology. However, teachers still seem to have some hesitations on the matter. In fact, even though the digitalisation of education has been a priority in the last 20 years for both Italy and Europe, the unwillingness of educators to use technologies in their lessons has been a

strong hindrance to this project. This factor might also be the explanation of the difficulties at the basis of the implementation of ERT, described in the third chapter. Finally, in Chapter 2, the thorny and debated topics of evaluation and evaluation at a distance were discussed. As it is widely accepted that assessment is an important step in the learning process and that it should be considered as a powerful means of communication rather than an obligation and a moment of judgment, it was also pointed out that, especially in the teaching of Foreign Languages, testing and evaluation should be planned and conducted for formative purposes. Furthermore, it has been called attention to the fact that, in a DE context, assessment and a formative feedback are often lacking or incomplete, endangering the whole learning process, because of the large numbers attending online courses and because instructors rarely know their students personally. Regarding ERT, though, where teachers have known their pupils since before the quarantine, a formative feedback should be expected, and the type of testing should be adapted to the new delivery method. However, even though the research conducted for this dissertation showed that, in general, teachers have tried to change their testing methods adapting it to the virtual environment, online assessment was judged negatively, as it does not help the real evaluation of learners' skills. Similarly, students have pointed out an inconsistency in carrying out the evaluation process, meaning that for some it was too easy, whilst for some others it was too difficult. It was suggested that this might have been a consequence of a lack of guidance on the part of the government that did not give practical instructions on how to deal with this important step of the learning process.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 dealt with the analysis of the results obtained from a survey carried out among Italian lower and upper secondary school teachers and pupils, and university professors and students. In the light of what has emerged from the analysis of the survey, a general positive attitude was detected towards the integration of online lessons into face-to-face education. Teachers and professors, in spite of the many difficulties encountered in the implementation of ERT, have acknowledged the convenience and potentiality of Distance Education and online teaching and seemed to be opened to the idea of a combination of online classes and in-presence ones, even when the coronavirus emergency will be over. They appeared to be aware of the fact that this blending might give students an advantage especially for their future, preparing them for entering the real world, which is a globalised and digitalised one. At the same time, they have noticed their own lack of preparation for this type of teaching and agreed on the fact

that they might need extra training in order to be prepared for whatever the future may hold. In brief, what it is suggested in this dissertation that might improve the teaching as a whole, is the concept of Blended Learning. Blended Learning, in fact, would combine online education with traditional place-based classroom methods. It would require both the physical presence of both teachers and students, and, at the same time, it would allow some flexibility over time, place and pace for some parts of the curriculum. It was claimed that BL could offer students the best of both distance and in-presence education, because it would give them easy access to material and resources online and, at the same time, students would not need to sacrifice face-to-face contact – which is fundamental for motivation and specific learning styles. It was also underlined, though, that this change needs to be gradual and both students and teachers need to be accompanied in the process of adaptation. The experience with ERT, then, with the due improvements, might work as the starting point for the future of teaching that sees technology as part and parcel of formal education – as it is an integral part of our lives.

The opinions voiced by students in this research often revealed contrasting views on their experiences with Emergency Remote Teaching. Overall, they presented little difficulties in adapting to the new method, thing that was explained by their ease in dealing with technology and the Internet. In spite of this, they have lamented the increase of the workload and the lack of organisation of the classes – fact that was expected given the situation of emergency. Another important aspect that has emerged from this study was related to the degree of inclusion and participation during online lessons. One of the ideas regarding Distance Education is linked to the fact that it should be a method that allows interconnections between individual with the same learning objectives, fostering interaction between participants and creating a learning community that enhances participation and inclusion. However, the survey has shown that, even though not everyone has, luckily, been stopped by technical issues or fear of participating, it has not been possible to affirm that ERT is one-hundred-percent inclusive, because there will always be a percentage of people that does not manage to be active in an online lessons because of either a poor Internet connection or because they feel uncomfortable interacting from behind a screen.

With regards to Foreign Languages, this research has shown that ERT was not effective for this subject, as confirmed by studies on Distance Education. In fact, not all the disciplines can be taught effectively through a computer, especially those that require

face-to-face interaction and first-hand practice. In spite of this, it has been acknowledged that this emergency has helped students become more autonomous in their studying and helped them better organise their time, as well as learn how to use technology properly. It has been pointed out that this might be very useful since it prepares them for their future jobs, which, arguably, should be the whole purpose of formal education. Once again it is confirmed that Blended Learning could be the future of teaching given that students are ready to welcome this change towards a larger implementation of technology into teaching, but without losing direct contact with teachers and, most importantly, with their classmates. School conviviality and the company of their classmates have been, in fact, mentioned as the things students have missed the most during the ERT experience. With Blended Learning these aspect will not be sacrificed and the strengths of both online distance education and face-to-face teaching will be maintained. Blended Learning would take advantage of technology as a tool to make the learning experience complete and up-to-date, but without penalising the formative adventure of in-presence formal education, with its ups and downs, successes and failures and with the emotional and intellectual growth it brings with it.

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RIASSUNTO IN ITALIANO

Introduzione

All'inizio del 2020 l'Italia e il resto del mondo sono stati colpiti dalla rapidissima diffusione del COVID-19. Durante le prime settimane di marzo furono individuati moltissimi focolai in tutta Europa, ma l'Italia fu il primo paese europeo ad attuare una quarantena generalizzata per bloccare il contagio che stava mettendo in ginocchio il settore ospedaliero. Il governo concretizzò un piano di *lockdown* in cui si è gradualmente assistito alla chiusura di quasi tutti i settori economici. Uno dei primi settori a chiudere i battenti fu proprio quello dell'educazione, che vide la cancellazione di tutte le lezioni in presenza e l'attuazione di una sorta di Didattica a Distanza online. Secondo le linee guida rilasciate dal Ministero dell'Istruzione, questo tipo di didattica da remoto doveva servire a permettere una continuità dell'apprendimento e a rimanere vicino agli studenti nell'affrontare la situazione di isolamento e demotivazione causata dal lungo periodo di distanziamento sociale. Secondo quanto suggerito dal Ministero dell'Istruzione, gli obiettivi formativi dovevano rimanere invariati cercando di adattare l'insegnamento al nuovo canale.

Una tale situazione di emergenza è risultata estremamente difficile per tutti, soprattutto se si tengono in considerazione le implicazioni psicologiche provocate da un lungo periodo di reclusione, dall'alto rischio di contrarre il virus e dal fatto che molte persone stavano affrontando importanti lutti familiari. Perciò, il concetto ribadito anche dal Ministro dell'Istruzione suggeriva un tipo di didattica che fosse sì a distanza, ma non distante.

Nella pratica, però, è comprensibile il fatto che questo tentativo di Didattica a Distanza non sia poi risultato efficiente ed efficace al cento per cento, principalmente perché il tempo a disposizione per docenti e studenti ad adattarsi a questo nuovo metodo e capirne il funzionamento non è stato molto. Quindi, secondo alcuni studiosi (Hodges et al. 2020), è importante separare, anche con una terminologia adeguata, la Didattica a Distanza meticolosamente pianificata che da anni viene studiata e sviluppata da gruppi di esperti, da quella che invece viene rinominata Didattica di Emergenza da Remoto (DER)[17]. L'obiettivo di questa tesi è quello di delineare una linea di separazione netta tra DAD e DER attraverso un'analisi accurata della letteratura che riguarda la Didattica a

[17] *Emergency Remote Teaching* (ERT)

Distanza, il suo sviluppo negli anni e i suoi attuali impieghi, sottolineandone pregi e difetti, anche da un punto di vista cognitivo e la DER, grazie all'analisi di un'indagine condotta su docenti e studenti italiani della scuola secondaria di primo e secondo grado e università. Particolare attenzione è stata data anche all'impiego della Didattica a Distanza nell'insegnamento delle lingue e al discusso e spinoso argomento della valutazione a distanza. Alla luce di quanto emerso dai questionari, si suggerisce infine che l'inclusione di lezioni online in un percorso in presenza potrebbe portare importanti vantaggi all'intero sistema scolastico, migliorando la qualità dell'insegnamento e portandolo a soddisfare le esigenze del mondo tecnologico e globalizzato nel quale viviamo.

1. Didattica a Distanza: Evoluzione, Pregi e Difetti

Molti sono stati i tentativi di definire la Didattica a Distanza, ma in generale, gli studiosi della materia sono tutti d'accordo nell'affermare che si tratta di un tipo di didattica pianificata che fa ampio uso della tecnologia per raggiungere gli studenti a distanza, permettendo loro di organizzare il proprio apprendimento nel modo, tempo e luogo a loro più convenienti (Keegan, 1995; Greenberg, 1998; Anderson & Dron, 2011; Garito, 2013). In questo processo di apprendimento a distanza vi sono tre partecipanti principali che sono: l'insegnante, gli studenti e un tecnico che si occupa di eventuali risoluzioni di problemi legati al buon funzionamento di programmi online per la didattica. Il ruolo dell'insegnante è quello di progettare e pianificare lezioni che, per quanto possibile, non facciano notare agli studenti la mancanza di una classe fisica, perché questo potrebbe creare demotivazione e abbandono agli studi. D'altra parte, è compito degli studenti quello di rispettare le scadenze per la consegna di compiti e progetti, collaborando con i colleghi e interagendo con loro e con l'insegnante, così da sfruttare al massimo l'opportunità di apprendimento. Già qui si può notare una prima differenza sostanziale tra DAD e Didattica di Emergenza da Remoto. La DER infatti manca totalmente di pianificazione e della presenza di esperti che si occupino della parte tecnica, lasciando invece ai docenti questo ruolo, per il quale non sono preparati.

Anche se il concetto di Didattica a Distanza sembra di recente invenzione, data la sua attualità, è in realtà un metodo vecchio due secoli. Gli studiosi hanno individuato tre generazioni di Didattica a Distanza, classificate in termini di tecnologia utilizzata per la sua attuazione. La prima generazione è stata individuata nell'uso del servizio postale. Già agli inizi del XIX secolo, nel Regno Unito, Isaac Pitman cominciò un corso di stenografia

per corrispondenza e negli anni seguenti, molti altri paesi seguirono il suo esempio, soprattutto arrivando alle classi meno abbienti che avevano minori opportunità di avere accesso ad una formazione professionale. Questo nuovo metodo di formazione a distanza, che aiutò la riduzione del divario tra le classi, arrivò in Italia anni dopo, ma ebbe un ruolo importantissimo nella ricostruzione postbellica del paese. Infatti, dal 1951 fino alla metà degli anni Novanta, la rinomata *Scuola Radio Elettra* formò, per corrispondenza, più di un milione di periti elettronici. La seconda generazione è invece definita dall'introduzione dei *mass media* come la radio, la televisione e il cinema. Molti sono i corsi che sono nati e stati trasmessi interamente attraverso queste telecomunicazioni. La BBC nel Regno Unito, così come la RAI in Italia, organizzarono corsi integrativi alla scuola in presenza, ma anche corsi di alfabetizzazione totalmente distribuiti attraverso la televisione, come è stato il caso del programma italiano "Non è mai troppo tardi" condotto da Alberto Manzi, rinominato poi, proprio per questa ragione, "Maestro degli Italiani" (Baldoni & Marengo, 2010). La terza generazione, invece, vede l'introduzione di tecnologie interattive con l'ampio uso del Web. Esempi di Didattica a Distanza appartenenti alla più recente generazione sono i MOOC ("corsi online aperti su larga scala") e le università telematiche, che offrono, a costi relativamente ridotti, corsi di laurea e certificazioni su varie materie e a vari livelli. È importante però sottolineare il fatto che, nonostante la terza generazione sia forse la più diffusa oggigiorno, nessuna ha sostituito quella precedente, bensì, tutte e tre continuano a coesistere.

Per quanto riguarda il tipo di approccio pedagogico che sta dietro ad ogni tecnologia impiegata nella Didattica a Distanza, Anderson (2009) sostiene che i due siano intrecciati in una specie di danza: la tecnologia crea la musica, mentre il tipo di approccio sviluppato ed impiegato ne crea la coreografia. È vero, però, che è possibile ballare anche senza musica, ma non sarebbe altrettanto efficace ballare senza sapere come muoversi. Quindi, per mantenere la metafora di Anderson, dove la tecnologia è il tempo e l'approccio la coreografia creata su quella musica, si potrebbe dire che i due sono invece partner di ballo, dove il ruolo di guida può cambiare a seconda delle esigenze. Ecco che in questo modo, l'approccio può essere definito dal tipo di tecnologia che si vuole implementare oppure può definire, e quindi portare allo sviluppo di una tecnologia appropriata. È, inoltre, importante ricordare che, come affermato da Pallof e Pratt (2000) le tecnologie non insegnano agli studenti, bensì quello rimane il compito degli insegnanti, che devono essere preparati anche ad insegnare attraverso o grazie al supporto della

tecnologia. Essa da sola perciò non è sufficiente, ma ciò che fa la differenza sono lezioni ben organizzate ed in linea con le esigenze e i bisogni degli studenti.

La Didattica a Distanza, come qualunque altro metodo di insegnamento, presenta pregi e difetti. I vantaggi che sono ampiamente riconosciuti come tali sono la flessibilità nel poter scegliere dove, come e quando apprendere; la ripetibilità delle lezioni, le quali sono tutte reperibili online e lo studente può riguardarle quante volte voglia a seconda delle sue necessità. Un altro pregio della Didattica a Distanza riguarda il risparmio di denaro che c'è nello studiare da casa. I costi delle università o dei corsi online sono infatti, di solito, meno elevati rispetto a quelli in presenza. Allo stesso modo, non dovendo lasciare la propria abitazione, gli studenti risparmiano tempo negli spostamenti e soldi per benzina o abbonamenti ai mezzi. Infine, si può identificare come pregio della DAD il fatto che la distanza fisica creata dalla presenza di uno schermo, in qualche modo, opera da barriera tra lo studente, l'insegante e la classe. Questo fattore, per alcuni, può essere molto importante perché crea un ambiente meno stressante e con meno occasioni di imbarazzo. Secondo le teorie di Krashen (1982), nessun tipo di acquisizione può infatti avvenire in un contesto di stress, perché questo innesca il Filtro Affettivo che blocca il raggiungimento delle nuove conoscenze nella memoria a lungo termine. Molti studenti, perciò, quando scelgono di iscriversi ad un corso a distanza sono ben consapevoli di questi vantaggi. Allo stesso tempo però, la DAD presenta anche degli svantaggi. In primo luogo, come la flessibilità è considerata un pregio, può anche essere considerata come un difetto. Infatti, se uno studente non è abituato a lavorare autonomamente, o non è, cognitivamente parlando, portato a farlo, si troverà in grande difficoltà quando dovrà gestire il suo apprendimento. Ciò potrebbe crearle o creagli stress e perciò danneggiare il processo di acquisizione. A tal proposito, è stato suggerito anche che la Didattica a Distanza è più appropriata a studenti più maturi che abbiano un livello di autonomia nello studio maggiore. Un altro svantaggio della formazione a distanza è legato al tipo di materie che si possono insegnare. Infatti, non tutte possono essere efficacemente trasportate in un ambiente virtuale, perché le caratteristiche proprie di questo mezzo di comunicazione mancano di interazione e prossimità fisica, che in alcuni casi, come per laboratori e pratiche, sono essenziali. Analogamente, è risaputo che il gruppo classe, spesso inesistente in percorsi di educazione a distanza, è altamente benefico per creare un contesto di crescita reciproca, favorito non solo dalla nascita di amicizie e collaborazioni, ma anche dalla presenza di dibattiti e di sana competizione. Infine, da un punto di vista

più pragmatico, è anche vero che molti datori di lavoro non accettano di assumere gente con titoli di studio conseguiti online perché non danno a questo tipo di corsi lo stesso valore che a quelli in presenza.

Nonostante tutti gli svantaggi che possono essere legati alla Didattica a Distanza, però, è necessario ricordare che essa ha dato e continuerà a dare la possibilità a milioni e milioni di persone di ricevere un'educazione formale o una preparazione professionale.

2. Didattica a Distanza e Didattica di Emergenza da Remoto delle Lingue Straniere: Pregi, Difetti e Valutazione Formativa

La capacità umana di produrre e comprendere il linguaggio per soddisfare i nostri bisogni comunicativi viene considerata come l'abilità più preziosa della nostra specie. Decenni di studi e di ricerche hanno provato a spiegare come sia possibile che noi riusciamo ad acquisire la nostra lingua materna in così poco tempo e, a differenza di altri animali, come sia possibile che allo stesso tempo riusciamo ad imparare anche altre lingue, diverse da quella nativa. La maggior parte degli esperti si trova d'accordo con le teorie di Noam Chomsky, le quali sostengono, principalmente, che il cervello umano è dotato di una predisposizione genetica all'acquisizione di una o più lingue, grazie a quella che Chomsky definisce Grammatica Universale. Predisposizione naturale a parte, che è fondamentale per l'acquisizione, altri fattori ambientali ed individuali hanno invece un ruolo importante nell'apprendimento[18] di altre lingue: primo fra tutti l'esposizione a input comprensibile e la motivazione all'apprendimento. Dörnyei (1998), infatti, afferma che la motivazione fornisce lo slancio primario per iniziare l'apprendimento di una lingua straniera (LS) e successivamente è la forza trainante per sostenerne il processo, spesso lungo e noioso. Altri fattori, come ad esempio, l'attitudine al linguaggio e una mentalità aperta verso quel linguaggio e la cultura che esso trasmette, sono altrettanto importanti nel determinare il successo nell'apprendimento. In breve, gli elementi chiave a sostegno dell'apprendimento di una LS sono: una grande motivazione, un atteggiamento positivo verso la lingua target, un'attitudine al linguaggio e un filtro affettivo basso. Oltre a questi aspetti, anche l'interazione risulta essere fondamentale nell'apprendimento di una lingua, perché senza la possibilità di praticare e rafforzare le proprie capacità comunicative, l'apprendimento sarà poco efficace. Nella progettazione di lezioni di lingue straniere,

[18] In linguistica c'è una differenza tra acquisizione e apprendimento. Con *acquisizione* si fa rifermento al processo attraverso il quale il bambino impara la sua lingua materna. Mentre con *apprendimento* ci si riferisce al processo di studio di lingue diverse da quella o da quelle native.

quindi, i docenti dovrebbero tenere conto di tutti questi aspetti in modo da pianificare lezioni che siano efficaci e che portino lo studente ad un apprendimento reale e duraturo.

L'insegnamento delle lingue straniere è un campo di studi che nei decenni si è evoluto, accompagnato dai vari cambiamenti nelle ipotesi e nelle teorie sull'acquisizione. Molti sono infatti gli approcci e i metodi di insegnamento che negli anni sono stati concepiti e messi in pratica: dall'approccio grammatico-traduttivo, che mette al centro l'insegnante, all'approccio comunicativo che invece vede lo studente come il reale protagonista del processo di apprendimento. Recentemente, poi, come ha avuto un impatto anche nella nostra quotidianità, la tecnologia è entrata nel campo educativo, soprattutto per quando riguarda le lingue straniere, diventandone parte integrante. Secondo molti studiosi (Evans, 2009; Riasati, 2012; Shyamlee & Phil, 2012; Alsied & Pathan, 2013; Favaro & Menegale, 2014; Gilakjani, 2017; Ahmadi, 2018), l'integrazione della tecnologia nell'insegnamento delle lingue dovrebbe essere considerata obbligatoria, perché apre lo studente al mondo, e lo aiuta a mantenersi motivato, offrendogli una varietà infinita di materiale didattico e non. Inoltre, rende l'apprendimento divertente incoraggiando la partecipazione attiva dell'alunno e la sua autonomia. Per di più, lo sviluppo della tecnologia ha permesso la progettazione di corsi di lingua mediati interamente dal computer e guidati da insegnanti esperti.

Ovviamente, come alcune delle caratteristiche dell'educazione a distanza risultano benefiche per l'apprendimento delle lingue, allo stesso modo altre rischiano di metterne a repentaglio il successo. Alcuni dei vantaggi dell'apprendimento a distanza delle LS è l'alto livello di motivazione fornito dalle varie attività proposte online che sono infatti divertenti, sempre nuove e spesso più reali di quelle proposte in presenza. Tuttavia, il tipo di interazione che viene proposto in chat online e videoconferenze è diverso dalla comunicazione ed interazione che avviene faccia a faccia, perché varia la percezione che abbiamo di noi stessi e degli altri. Inoltre, è anche vero che serve molta più auto-motivazione in un contesto a distanza perché non si può fare affidamento su quella fornita dal gruppo classe o dall'insegnante. Perciò, si potrebbe affermare che la Didattica a Distanza per quanto riguarda le lingue straniere, ma come detto prima non solo, sarebbe più adatta a studenti più grandi, con un grado di maturità ed autonomia più alti. Inoltre, nel caso di lezioni asincrone in modo particolare, c'è spesso un ritardo importante nella produzione di feedback. La consegna di una spiegazione costruttiva al voto ricevuto, se non è eseguita in modo ravvicinato alla performance perde la sua utilità e non aiuta

l'apprendimento dello studente, che al contrario potrebbe sentirsi demotivato da questa mancanza. Perciò, nonostante le attività proposte da corsi di lingua a distanza spesso siano motivanti e coinvolgenti e nonostante internet oggigiorno permetta una comunicazione faccia a faccia e sincrona di una qualità soddisfacente, l'interazione, il senso di comunità e appartenenza e un feedback rapido e personalizzato spesso mancano, mettendo in pericolo così l'intero processo di apprendimento o comunque riducendone l'efficacia.

A seguito della rapida diffusione del COVID-19 nei primi mesi del 2020, lockdown generalizzati e misure di distanziamento sociale sono stati imposti in oltre 109 paesi. Scuole e università furono tra le prime istituzioni a chiudere temporaneamente le loro attività in presenza per limitarne il più possibile la diffusione. In Italia, per evitare che l'anno accademico andasse perso, si è iniziato un programma di didattica online, erroneamente definita Didattica a Distanza (DAD). Erroneamente perché questo tentativo di sostituire la didattica in presenza tramite l'insegnamento online allo scopo di rispondere ad un'emergenza sanitaria presenta poche similitudini con quella che è la Didattica a Distanza vera e propria. La corretta terminologia che gli studiosi hanno proposto è invece Didattica di Emergenza da Remoto (DER) a sottolineare la sostanziale differenza tra un tipo di didattica accuratamente pianificata e che trae completo vantaggio dalle tecnologie, la DAD appunto, e un tipo di didattica che invece viene attuata in risposta ad un'emergenza sanitaria o calamità naturale, la DER. Risulta possibile, quindi, notare il fatto che il sistema scolastico italiano, ma anche quello di altri paesi, non fosse preparato ad affrontare l'emergenza coronavirus e questa situazione non ha fatto altro che mostrare le carenze nel nostro sistema educativo, la mancanza di formazione dei nostri insegnanti per un tipo di didattica prettamente online e la necessità di migliorare l'alfabetizzazione digitale degli studenti in campo educativo.

Nei mesi di marzo e aprile 2020, ho preso parte ad un'esperienza di tirocinio online in una scuola secondaria di secondo grado, affiancando virtualmente l'insegnante di inglese. L'esperienza è stata utile per osservare in prima persona l'attuazione della DER dal punto di vista del docente. In generale, la connessione poco stabile di Internet è risultata essere uno degli ostacoli principali e che ha influenzato negativamente la qualità delle lezioni. Questo tirocinio ha evidenziato ancora una volta il fatto che, mentre la Didattica a Distanza è sempre stata una opzione flessibile per gli studenti, la DER è un obbligo (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020) e ciò dovrebbe essere preso in considerazione quando

si mette in pratica questo metodo di insegnamento, perché le priorità e i bisogni degli studenti potrebbero essere completamente diversi da quelli del curriculum.

3. La Valutazione a Distanza e Valutazione a Distanza delle Lingue Straniere

Spostando poi l'attenzione al dibattuto argomento della valutazione e della valutazione a distanza, si ricorda, in primo luogo, che la valutazione può essere di due tipi: sommativa e formativa. La valutazione sommativa, che è anche la più diffusa, offre poche informazioni sul livello raggiunto dallo studente e poche o nessune sulle competenze sviluppate o le difficoltà ancora presenti. Questo tipo di valutazione è utile alla scuola per creare delle statistiche e alla famiglia del discente per capire l'andamento del/la figlio/a. D'altra parte, invece, la valutazione formativa è una pratica continuativa ed è un processo che prevede una verifica costante dei livelli raggiunti dallo studente e una conseguente consegna di un feedback accurato che permette al docente di aggiustare il tiro, se i suoi metodi non sono d'aiuto all'alunno, e al discente per migliore le sue performance (McManus, 2008). Questo tipo di valutazione formativa, essendo una pratica costante, toglie lo stress tipico dell'esaminazione perché lo studente ci si abitua e lo considera, come dovrebbe essere, parte integrante del processo di apprendimento.

Per quanto riguarda la valutazione nell'insegnamento delle lingue straniere, il suo ruolo è anche più importante, visto e considerato il grande sforzo cognitivo che l'acquisizione di una lingua richiede. Novello (2014) ricorda che la valutazione non dovrebbe essere percepita né come un obbligo da parte del docente né come motivo di stress da parte del discente, ma come un potente mezzo di comunicazione tra i due. Inoltre, per quanto riguarda il tipo di prove da sottoporre, tre elementi sono primariamente citati come fondamentali perché la valutazione proceda senza ansie per lo studente. Questi elementi sono la familiarità con la prova, dove lo studente conosce il tipo di test che andrà ad affrontare; l'equità della prova che dà al discente più occasioni di dimostrare l'acquisizione delle sue competenze; ed infine l'autenticità della verifica che rifletta situazioni il più possibile reali, così che l'apprendente possa trovare significato in ciò che sta facendo.

Se la valutazione delle lingue straniere è di per sé un argomento delicato, la valutazione a distanza lo è ancora di più, quando alcuni elementi essenziali a volte possono venire meno. Primi fra tutti la comunicazione. Se come già detto la valutazione è da considerarsi un potente mezzo di comunicazione, nella Didattica a Distanza e

soprattutto nella Didattica di Emergenza da Remoto dove l'interazione a volte manca o è incompleta, ecco che anche la valutazione potrebbe pagarne le conseguenze. Nel caso delle DAD, per esempio, succede spesso che docente e studenti non abbiano una relazione diretta, e questo mette in discussione le basi della valutazione dove la conoscenza del discente come individuo, prima che come apprendente, è vitale. Nel caso della DER delle lingue straniere, inoltre, non tutte le competenze possono essere efficacemente valutate, perciò, come suggerito da Novello (2020), è necessario attuare delle scelte, prediligendo magari quelle competenze che nella didattica in presenza sono trascurate.

4. La DER in Italia durante il COVID-19: Indagine Condotta su Professori della Scuola Secondaria di Primo e Secondo Grado e Università

Nei primi mesi del 2020 è stata condotta un'indagine su professori della scuola secondaria di primo e secondo grado e università con lo scopo di capire le loro opinioni sui vantaggi e svantaggi delle Didattica di Emergenza da Remoto. È stato creato un questionario online e somministrato a professori che attualmente lavorano all'interno del sistema scolastico italiano. Il questionario, risposto in via del tutto anonima, era composto da 25 domande organizzate in 4 sezioni. Nella prima sezione si sono richiesti dati di tipo biografico, come età, genere, regione di origine, materia insegnata e tipo di scuola. Nella seconda sezione, le domande facevano riferimento al tipo di esperienza avuta con la DER, i programmi usati e la percezione sul grado di motivazione degli studenti. Inoltre, una sezione a parte è stata dedicata all'insegnamento delle lingue straniere, cercando di capire punti di forza e non della DER per le lingue. Infine, la quarta e ultima sezione era interessata a capire le opinioni dei partecipanti al questionario sul futuro della didattica online. In totale, sono stati consegnati 148 questionari compilati, dove la maggior parte dei partecipanti ha risposto affermativamente alla domanda "*Sta preparando lezioni a distanza?"*. I docenti che invece non stavano dando lezione online, ad esempio gli insegnanti di sostegno, hanno però affermato che stavano comunque mantenendo il contatto con gli studenti soprattutto per un supporto di tipo psicologico. Si può dire che questo tipo di aiuto sia anzi ciò di cui i giovani abbiano più bisogno in una situazione di emergenza come quella in cui ci siamo trovati (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Non si sta in questo modo riducendo l'attenzione sull'aspetto didattico, anzi, ma è risaputo che in una situazione di stress non c'è acquisizione, come sottolinea Krashen con la sua ipotesi del Filtro Affettivo (Krashen, 1982). Perciò, in una situazione di emergenza sanitaria, ma anche una volta tornati alla normalità, si suggerisce che l'equilibrio mentale ed emotivo

degli studenti dovrebbe essere preso in considerazione tanto quanto la loro educazione formale.

Le risposte al questionario hanno dimostrato che una parte dei partecipanti ha avuto problemi con l'utilizzo di programmi online e questo fatto potrebbe essere legato alla fascia di età alla quale appartengono, dato che i docenti dai 55 anni in su sono stati quelli ad aver avuto più incertezze. Le generazioni più giovani invece, che sono nate nell'era del digitale, sono più rapide ed intuitive e riescono a risolvere eventuali problemi tecnici con più facilità, come se fossero naturalmente predisposti a farlo e, infatti, hanno affermato di non aver avuto problemi con l'utilizzo di programmi online. Inoltre, la maggior parte degli intervistati ha affermato che, alla fine dell'emergenza coronavirus, le lezioni online potrebbero essere integrate a quelle in presenza, rendendo l'esperienza di apprendimento più efficace ed accessibile. Alla luce di ciò, è stato suggerito che un modo per migliorare l'insegnamento potrebbe trovarsi nel concetto del *Blended Learning* o apprendimento misto, dove un percorso di didattica online a distanza viene combinato e inserito in un corso in presenza, offrendo così agli studenti il meglio da entrambi i mondi (Kaur, 2013). L'apprendimento misto, con la giusta pianificazione, preparazione e periodo di adattamento potrebbe portare grandi vantaggi a quelle persone che hanno bisogno di un tempo di studio flessibile e più autonomo, ma allo stesso tempo non priverebbe lo studente di interazione diretta e convivialità scolastica in presenza. Inoltre, dato che la Didattica a Distanza non è efficace per tutte le materie, il *Blended Learning* potrebbe essere la riposta a questo problema, dove le parti pratiche possono essere condotte in presenza, mentre quelle più teoriche a distanza. L'esperienza di DER quindi potrebbe servire da punto di partenza per sviluppi futuri in questa direzione di digitalizzazione integrata. In tutto ciò, però, è importante ricordare che il ruolo dell'insegnante rimane comunque importante nel dirigere e facilitare l'apprendimento, guidando i discenti nell'uso corretto della tecnologia a scopo educativo, verso l'autonomia e il pensiero critico.

Complessivamente, i risultati del questionario sono in linea con le aspettative, mostrando un malcontento generale nei confronti della DER, legato alla mancanza di vicinanza e la scarsa connessione a Internet. Tuttavia, si è notato un atteggiamento positivo nei confronti della possibilità di continuare a fare lezioni online anche dopo la fine dell'emergenza sanitaria. Ciò dimostra che i docenti riconoscono il potenziale della

formazione a distanza così come vedono possibile, con la giusta organizzazione preliminare, l'integrazione della didattica online a quella in presenza.

5. La DER in Italia durante il COVID-19: Indagine Condotta su Studenti della Scuola Secondaria di Primo e Secondo Grado e Università

Qui di seguito, invece, sono riportati i risultati ottenuti dall'indagine condotta su studenti di scuola secondaria di primo e secondo grado e università. Al questionario creato per questa ricerca sono state inviate 753 risposte provenienti da quasi tutte le regioni italiane. L'alto numero di risposte va ben oltre le aspettative ed ha permesso una buona panoramica sulla situazione italiana di Didattica di Emergenza da Remoto. La grande attualità dell'argomento deve aver sicuramente influito dando voce alle opinioni degli studenti che stavano vivendo con non poche difficoltà la situazione di emergenza. Come nel caso dei professori, anche la maggioranza degli studenti ha risposto affermativamente alla domanda *"Stai seguendo delle lezioni a distanza fornite dalla tua scuola/università?".* In generale, le opinioni e le esperienze riportate tendono a differire. Ciò non sorprende più di tanto, visto che la DER è appunto una risposta ad una situazione di emergenza e l'organizzazione delle istituzioni non ha seguito lo stesso iter, provocando quindi reazioni diverse nei discenti e un'incoerenza generale nelle risposte al questionario. Inoltre, le lezioni a distanza non si sono rivelate vantaggiose per tutti gli studenti perché ogni persona ha un proprio stile di apprendimento e delle proprie caratteristiche psicologiche personali che non sempre sono in linea con un ambiente virtuale poco cooperativo. Questi fattori hanno prodotto delle incongruenze nei dati, però, tutto sommato, è possibile affermare che solo pochi sono stati gli studenti che non hanno potuto frequentare le lezioni online a causa di problemi tecnici o per mancanza di una stabile connessione ad Internet; l'inclusione e la partecipazione sono state giudicate sufficienti anche se non tutti si sono sentiti al cento per cento a proprio agio nell'intervenire e partecipare attivamente, ma questo ha a che fare principalmente con le caratteristiche di ogni individuo, che come detto sopra, possono, come no, andare d'accordo con la didattica online. Per quanto riguarda l'insegnamento delle lingue straniere online, le stesse carenze presenti nella DaD sono presenti anche in un contesto di DER. I partecipanti hanno affermato infatti che le lezioni online non sempre consentono l'interazione come le lezioni in presenza e l'apprendimento della lingua non è altrettanto efficace. Infine, il dato più interessante fa riferimento all'alta percentuale (61.8%) di persone che afferma che le lezioni online possono sostituire parzialmente le

lezioni in presenza, confermando quanto suggerito sopra sulla possibile attuazione del *Blended Learning.* Di fatto, attraverso l'apprendimento misto si trarrebbe vantaggio della tecnologia come strumento per rendere il processo educativo un'esperienza completa e aggiornata, ma senza penalizzare l'avventura formativa che la scuola offre in presenza, con i suoi alti e bassi, i suoi successi e fallimenti e con la crescita emotiva e intellettuale che questa rende possibile.