Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree programme

in Language Sciences
D.M. 270/2004

Final Thesis

"Anytime, anywhere":
the new frontier of *eLearning*

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Graziano Serragiotto

Assistant supervisor
Ch. Prof. Monica Banzato

Graduand
Taryn Curcuruto
Matriculation Number 858273

Academic Year
2015/ 2017

Index

Introduction

Thanks to the expansion of technology and the Internet era, teaching a language online has become a reality that whoever works in this field cannot disregard. *eLearning* represents the new frontier, the means by which the didactic process takes on a new role and the formula "anytime, anywhere" finds its full achievement.

The rise of industrialisation and globalisation reflect the emerging awareness according to which education should not be confined to the walls of a classroom, but should be addressed and promoted in all its possible ways through the use of social networking sites, apps, language-learning platforms and so forth.

The Cmc (Computer-Mediated Communication) has given rise to the possibility of a rapid interaction between individuals who do not necessarily share geographic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, reaching a major milestone for what learning a language in the 21st century represents. From a young age, the last generation of users have had the capability to combine multiple tools and develop an automatic knowledge of the digital world in all its facets, thus creating new ways of communicating, cooperating and learning.

After providing a definition of *eLearning*, the present study aims to analyse its crucial contribution to the didactic field and, more specifically, to online Distance Education. Starting with the consideration that a telematic network can be constituted of different levels according to their specific scopes, the next step is to underline which stages and under what circumstances the process of education has gone through. In this case, we

will see that the traditional approach which we are normally accustomed to think of when it comes to learning a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) is met by the innovation introduced with the new technologies.

Next, an in-depth overview of the theoretical background of traditional teaching methods and the predominant approaches that have followed one another during the last century will explain the gradual evolution that occurred in the glottodidactic field. We will see how the "quantity over quality" formula that influenced the teaching of second/foreign languages, when grammar was considered the most important aspect of a language (Grammar-based Approach), was slowly weakened by the reaction and development of new approaches prioritising other aspects of the language (Reading Method, Structuralism, Behaviourism, Audio-lingual Method, Generative Linguistics, Pragmatic Approach, Communicative Approach, Situational Approach, Affective-humanistic Approach, Natural Approach).

The study will then explore the theoretical foundations that make up *eLearning* and the most valuable elements that come into play when it comes to the implementation of this specific educational setting. After a more holistic focus outlining the three subsets of *eLearning*, its scopes and functions, a series of potential benefits and drawbacks will be listed in order to investigate on the factors that enrich the learning system and the aspects that are considered as a barrier to an effective acquisition.

Attention will be then drawn to the innumerable applications that are possible through *eLearning*, where a general discussion on mixed modalities – face-to-face and online – and computer-based modalities (respectively, blended and flipped classrooms) will raise awareness for what concerns the recognition of new learning frontiers.

The last part of the first chapter will discuss the issues of *Co-Learning* and *eTeaching*, which are both crucial for the promotion of socialisation among e-learners and the facilitation of the educational process.

The second chapter of the study will proceed with a definition of the term "Distance Education" and the categorisation of its five generations (the Correspondence Model, the Multi-Media Model, the Telelearning Model, the Flexible Learning Model and the Intelligent Flexible Learning Model).

Then, an example of the classrooms available through Distance Education, as opposed to the traditional ones, will be made and an explanation of the differences between synchronous and asynchronous learning will be provided.

Another important part of the second chapter will be the focus on the centrality of Learner Autonomy and Agency, whose interaction, collaboration and negotiation with the instructor are vital for him/her to achieve the ultimate goal: language competence. The concept of autonomy will be analysed in its multiple facets, according to the controversial opinion that it is connected to teacher-less environments and independence, as well as teacher-learner interaction and interdependence.

The analysis will then offer insight on the issue of Self-Regulated Learning, its six-dimension model and the indicators of Agency that constitute a self-learning environment. The complexity of this outcome is evident and the study of motivation as one of the main factors that play a key role in the readiness of learners to learn autonomy, become autonomous and reach great success in language learning will be referred to in the last part of the second chapter.

The third chapter will briefly reflect on the role of social media in *eLearning*, explaining the outcomes, advantages and disadvantages of this

new trend and providing a series of examples of language-learning platforms and online communities used to enhance L2 and FL acquisition.

The fourth chapter will present the analysis of a series of online questionnaires regarding the acceptability or non-acceptability of *eLearning* and will examine how Distance Education students maintain motivation during their online learning process, demonstrating to what extent this new frontier of Language Education works and how it is perceived today.

The responses will be divided into six macrogroups on the basis of a thematic choice and the findings emerged from the analysis of the data collected, which consist of 62 Language Learner's Forum users having taken a language learning online course, will be compared with the work of academics, researchers and linguists who gave their contributions to the literature review of *eLearning*. Then, the survey participants' actual opinions will be combined with the theoretical literature and, thanks to this, a higher degree of authenticity, variety and personal learning strategies will be reached.

Finally, a list of experienced pros and cons of *eLearning* will characterise the last part of the fourth chapter, which will help us to draw significant conclusions on this current topic.

Chapter 1

eLearning: theory and practice

Through global networks, digital tools and Internet in all its facets, every day we are faced with the possibility to easily get in touch with foreign languages and cultures. Concomitantly, a new working environment in the teaching and learning field has developed: this is the reason why the interest in *eLearning* is rapidly growing and it is considered one of the most innovative educational frontiers, where learning takes place electronically in the comfort of the student's needs.

1.1 Definition of *eLearning*

How can "*eLearning*" be defined? What are the leading aspects that make this approach innovative? Starting with some definitions that describe the role of this new concept, we can better understand, historically and synchronically, the innovation in both the formative and communicative fields.

> *eLearning* is the use of electronic media, educational technology, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education. […] The characteristics of *eLearning* are that there is a physical distance between the students and the teachers, and usually electronic technologies are used for the delivery of the material.[1]

---

[1] Thabit H.T., Jasim Y. A. A., 2017, *The Role of Social Networks in Increasing the Activity of e-Learning*, Switzerland, Springer International Publishing, p. 36.

> *eLearning* involves the delivery and administration of learning opportunities and support via computer, networked and web-based technology, to help individual performance and development.[2]

Since its expansion, the Internet has changed what we do as well as how we do it: the most common uses of the World Wide Web (Www) and all its infinite applications are communication via email, real-time chatrooms, online instant messaging, audio and video conferencing, all of which allow users to reach new standards of communication, social interaction and working experiences. In her book on L2 in the digital world, Vandergriff (2016) talked about two generations of the Web: the first generation, Web 1.0, which permitted users to simply connect to static websites (Read-only Web), and the second generation, Web 2.0, which consists in different forms of interaction with the sites thanks to the action of posting, editing and expressing ideas of the users (Read and Write Web)[3].

Before operating a chronological review of the different phases that have characterized the Language Education field, we must clarify a shift in the terminology, meaning and interpretation of the concept of technology.

1.2 CBT, CALL, ICT

During the sixties and the seventies, the emphasis was on the technological tool itself, the personal computer, and all the functions the said electronic

---

[2] Pollard E., Hillage J., 2001, *Exploring e-Learning*, Uκ, The Institute for Employment Studies, p. 2.

[3] Vandergriff I., 2016, *Second-language Discourse in the Digital World. Linguistic and Social Practices in and beyond the Networked Classroom*, Amsterdam Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. 21.

machine could operate: researchers would refer to this period as the CBT (Computer-Based Training).

Before introducing the term that we use nowadays to refer to the occurrence of the learning process through the mediation of technology, a former acronym, CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning), was used. However, this was inadequate to fully describe the concept. In this respect, researchers believed that the words *computer* and *learning* in CALL were too limited, because the technological applications that can be used by the teachers to foster and support the language learning and teaching processes are infinite. In their manual on understanding, programming and communicating thanks to *eLearning*, Cantoni, Botturi and Succi (2007) explain the gradual passage from the centrality of digital technology represented by the computer ("based") to its role of mere support ("assisted") [4]. We can now talk about *eLearning* and not necessarily infer that we need to use a computer to access the Internet and the World Wide Web.

The acronym ICT, which stands for "Information and Communication Technology", is now used to describe a type of education, in our specific case the foreign language education, that can have a positive impact on student achievement in terms of authenticity, competence and practical skills through a myriad of digital tools. The rise of industrialisation and globalisation reflects the emerging awareness according to which education should not be confined to the walls of a classroom, but must be addressed and promoted in various ways. Most of the learning that occurs is mediated by technology: formal and informal learning are two separate entities and are taken over by ICT that becomes a bridge between them.

---

[4] Cantoni L., Botturi L., Succi C., 2007, *ELearning. Capire, progettare, comunicare*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, p. 24.

Moreover, the growing phenomenon of Information and Communication Technologies is gradually changing not only the education sphere, but also the way we live and interact with people, thanks to the use of instant messages, emails, cell phones, tablets and the consequent creation of new contents and experiences.

1.3 Concept of "anytime, anywhere"

Thanks to the proliferation of personal computers, smartphones and tablets, people have the possibility to be constantly online, whenever and wherever they want, and interact with friends or colleagues all over the world. Not only does the use of highly interactive instruments result in the annulment of the physical distance between individuals, allowing a more rapid communication, but it can also lead to an effective education.

Navigating the Internet and using it for didactic purposes is an idea that has developed in the last few decades and is now increasing. Students decide to learn a language online because of the limitless benefits it brings. The learning system is innovative and always adjustable, the techniques are uncountable and the engagement of students in this experience encourages critical thinking, enhances communication and exchange of ideas, all the while developing cooperative learning between them and the teacher. Each of these abilities that can be matured thanks to *eLearning* make the learning environment much more efficient and positive.

Caburlotto (2012) suggested to primarily focus one's attention on the so-called *mLearning* (Mobile Learning), which denotes students who are constantly connected on the net, navigating and interacting with people all over the world in real time, thanks to the numerous electronic devises they dispose of. The use of email, social networks, Skype conferences and the

consequent creation of textual and audiovisual contents are the basic postulates of online learning and the principle of "anytime, anywhere".

> Il primo concetto da focalizzare è quello di *Mobile Learning*, definito anche *mLearning*, che prende in considerazione come gli studenti siano (e sempre saranno) costantemente connessi alla rete, mediante strumenti altamente interattivi come i tablet, i PC, o gli smartphone di ultima generazione, i quali consentono non solo la navigazione e l'utilizzo delle email, ma anche l'interazione mediante social network, la partecipazione in tempo reale, ad esempio mediante Skype, fino a giungere alla produzione di materiali sia testuali che audio/video; il tutto sempre in accordo con uno dei postulati di base della formazione via rete, ovvero *anytime*, *anywhere*.[5]

According to this principle, being exposed to a second language and to authentic materials thanks to the deployment of informatic and web-oriented tools, provides the didactic field with a new face. Podcasts, YouTube and a series of online portals where materials are structured according to a specific language and content allow the users to access these services every hour of the day, in whatever place they are, as long as they have an Internet connection. With this in mind, we should underline the possibility of a dual function offered by some of the tools listed previously: one is the receptive fruition of the input, which consists in "passively" receiving the materials without carrying out any edits on the original materials, and the other is the textual/audiovisual production, which entails the "active" realisation of written and/or oral supplies directly by the students.

The positive outcome of this type of education is not casual, but is the result of a high level of collaboration between the two main actors of the language acquisition process: the teacher, or instructor, seen more as a

---

[5] Caburlotto F., 2012, "Le nuove potenzialità glottodidattiche del computer e della rete", in Caon F., Serragiotto G., *Tecnologia e didattica delle lingue. Teorie, risorse, sperimentazioni*, Novara, De Agostini Scuola Spa, p. 50.

facilitator than a mere "carrier of knowledge", and the student, who is also consciously active during the completion of the learning program.

We will now proceed with a detailed overview of the evolution of the educational context, starting from the first and foremost traditional approach, the classroom-based one, and finishing with the investigation of a more recent and revolutionary perspective: *eLearning*.

1.4 Glottodidactics then and now

Glottodidactics is that specific branch of linguistics that deals with Language Education. Nowadays the concept of multilingual education is implied, whereas fifty years ago L2 competence was at a very low level and only the national language was being investigated. The methods used at the beginning of this new study area completely ignored the learner's needs, and language merely consisted in a collection of rules taught systematically.

With the passing of time, the styles and strategies used in the teaching of foreign languages were subjected to a significant evolution: from the traditional Grammar Approach to a later stage represented by the Reading Method, from a linguistic competence to a communicative one, these different teaching methods led to a gradual growth of the linguistic field.

After an in-depth description of the theoretical background of traditional teaching taking as a reference Chiapedi's (2013) review [6] on the main linguistic models and glottodidactic methods for SLA[7], an analysis on the case of *eLearning* and what it implies will follow.

---

[6] Chiapedi N., 2013, *Modelli linguistici descrittivi e metodi glottodidattici*, ICoN: Italian Culture on the Net.

[7] The acronym stands for Second Language Acquisition.

1.4.1 Quantity over quality

During the Middle Ages, Latin was the only language of culture and international communication in Europe, and up until the Renaissance it was imparted in the vast majority of schools all around the world. Because of its geographical extension, for a long period of time the methods used for its teaching influenced the study of other foreign languages.

From its early beginnings, Language Education was just a knowledge issue. Teachers would inundate students with grammar rules and exercises rather than enhance their communication skills. Even when Latin stopped being the language of culture and was substituted by French and English primarily, the teaching of foreign languages still followed a grammar-based approach, where the scope was to base the learning programmes on declinations, paradigms and syntactic structures. Written exercises would prevail over oral practice and experience-based communication, which developed later on, when the communicative competence assumed a leading role in the acquisition of a language.

As Ellis (2006) stated in his paper on grammar teaching, the grammatical aspect has always been tackled in its narrow definition and now this tradition must be halted. According to the linguist, Language Education cannot limit itself to the simple presentation and practice of syntactic items, but it must go beyond this and involve the learners' inductive abilities to discover the rules for themselves and recognize and correct their errors during communicative tasks. The quantity of notions taught during a traditional grammatical lesson should be subjugated by the quality of what learners can acquire with a more updated approach. The broad definition of grammar teaching given by Ellis perfectly encompasses this concept:

> Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it.[8]

However, before this new concept was conceived, the Grammar-Based Approach dominated the scene until the 19th century. After that, it was slowly weakened by the development of new methods that prioritised other aspects of the language.

1.4.2 Reactions to the formal approaches

During the 20th century, language started to be classified according to four different dimensions (or skills): writing, reading, listening and speaking. Only with this knowledge, the Grammar Approach started resulting too limited because its sole use could not possibly lead to the development of communicative competence. Each skill is different from the other and so are the conditions that dictate the use of a specific skill. Over time, the idea that a complete language acquisition requires knowing how to use that language established itself, and a greater interest was taken in the productive ability that is speaking, the teaching of which successively became of primary importance.

The first half of the 20th century saw the predominance of the Reading Method, which entailed the focus on just one linguistic ability (reading comprehension) thanks to the simple reading and understanding of a text. This approach developed during the two World Wars and is still used for the enhancement of comprehension skills, but it ultimately results very limiting

---

[8] Ellis R., 2006, *Current Issues in the Teaching of Grammar: An SLA Perspective*, New Zealand, University of Auckland, p. 84.

because its sole use may lead to situations where the student understands the general meaning of what is being said, but lacks the ability to pronounce the words and develop critical thinking to express that same meaning.

In the forties, Linguistics started becoming an autonomous discipline with a scientific value. Structuralism was the most spread approach during this period and it consisted in the postulate according to which knowing a language means knowing how to produce grammatical structures and categories and all the components that make up the language interact with each other, forming the rules of said language. This method, which primarily developed in America, derived from a series of behaviourist theories that explained the existence of norms that regulate linguistic behaviour. Every child is born *tabula rasa*, that is to say empty, without a built-in cognitive content, and through a process of stimulus-response-reinforcement, there is a gradual acquisition of a series of habits where verbal and non-verbal elements come together and learning takes place.

The structuralist and behaviourist theories influenced the development of the Audio-lingual Method. It consisted in a specialised programme for foreign language teaching ideated by the American army during Second World War, when countries all over the world were in contact with each other. ASTP was its first name, which stood for "Army Specialised Training Programme", which became ground-breaking for what concerned the teaching of foreign languages. It consisted in a sort of mixture between Behaviourism and General Linguistics: learning took place in a linguistic laboratory, where the teacher guided the students and followed some specific steps. The positive outcome of this work would depend from a cooperation between the teacher and the students. The oral abilities were implemented more than the written ones and there was not a focus on grammar as much as there was with the Grammar Approach, because it was taught implicitly through an inductive method: this means that students would extrapolate the

grammatical rules of the L2 without them being overtly explained by the teacher.

In the 1960's, a reaction to the Structuralist Approach was Chomsky's Generative Linguistics, according to which learning is a biological phenomenon where each speaker is not born *tabula rasa*, but with a disposition, an innate faculty of acquiring a language that is activated when learning the mother tongue and is subsequently reactivated when learning other languages.

During the seventies, the core node of the Language Learning Theory was the Communicative Approach, where the acquisition of a L2 was the result of having to communicate real, authentic meaning all the while giving greater importance to the learner's needs and wants. Austin (1955) was the main representative of the Pragmatic Field, which is connected to the concept of "functions" of a language (presenting, excusing, comparing, etc.): according to this principle, speakers "do things with words" [9] and use language to create an effect.

Hymes (1972) believed that individuals have a communicative competence only when they acquire the knowledge and the ability of using a second language on the basis of four main parameters: grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociocultural and pragmatic[10]. According to this principle, grammar is no longer the sole and only feature; the student's needs, as well as the communicational and cultural side, take the leading role and acquire more importance. Whenever the speakers are able to use the L2 appropriately, interacting with other participants according to the different situations they

---

[9] *How to Do Things with Words* is Austin's most influential work in which he points out that we use language to describe what we are actually doing rather than only making an assertion about doing it.

[10] Hymes D. H., 1972, "On Communicative Competence", in Pride J. B., Holmes J., *Sociolinguistics. Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, pp. 269-293.

are in, a communicative competence is developed. The cultural elements are also present in this model because language is subjected to social and cultural norms and learning a language means acquiring a sensitivity towards the culture of that language. Moreover, the communicative model is process-oriented. It entails an experiential type of learning which consists in the concept according to which students learn to speak by "doing things". It is connected to the collaborative activities and a constructionist type of learning which allow students to build knowledge according to their personal styles and strategies and, therefore, expand their acquisition. Evidently the role of the teacher, seen more as a guide, a facilitator and a creator of materials, is pivotal for a positive outcome.

Hereafter, a new field of inquiry began: the Psychological, Situational Approach, also known as the Psychoanalysis Sociolinguistics. It refers to that type of teaching method that gives priority to the use of the language in specific social settings and consists in knowing the norm of use, when and how to use a language according to where and in front of whom the speaker is. Fishman (1970)[11] coined the concept of "social situation", according to which language is used in a determinate social context and it can be fully grasped only in reference to that determinate context. Chiapedi made a brief list of the main factors that come into play during a communicative event and they are: the participants (two or more), their role, the relationship between them, the physical and cultural place in which the interaction takes place and the topic of communication ("la situazione, i partecipanti, gli scopi della comunicazione, il contenuto del messaggio, la scelta del canale linguistico attraverso cui si comunica e la scelta del registro")[12]. Here the

---

[11] Fishman J. A., 1970, *Sociolinguistics: A Brief Introduction*, Rowley, MA, Newbury House.

[12] Chiapedi N., 2013, *Modelli linguistici descrittivi e metodi glottodidattici*, ICoN: Italian Culture on the Net, p. 21.

grammatical aspect still covers an important role within the acquisition process and language is still seen as a formal concept.

1.4.3 Affective-humanistic and Natural approaches

When it comes to language education, it is important to explore the relationship between Glottodidactics and the psychological aspects that are triggered in the process.

The Affective-humanistic Approach refers to a series of methods which developed in the eighties as a reaction to the excessive mechanisation of the Audio-lingual Method. By "affective" factors we mostly mean the needs and desires of the learners and their aim to be able to realise a potential language, the verbal language, connected with the real world. Specifically, the teachers prepare the students to linguistically behave appropriately and effectively outside the classroom walls, in different social settings. This approach found its representation in Carl Roger's (1969)[13] Humanistic Psychology, that promoted the focus on the human beings in their entirety, emphasizing the emotional components that make up the language acquisition, such as self-realisation, personality traits, creativity.

If subjected to stress or anxiety, the human brain activates the affective filter, a concept ideated by Krashen (1987)[14] that explains a sort of barrier that prevents the student from registering some aspects of the L2. In fact, when the filter is on because of a psychological block due to fear, the input rebounds and no information gets transformed into intake, allowing the student to have access to only a temporary learning. Whereas, when the filter

---

[13] Rogers C., *et al.*; (a cura di), 1967, *Person to Person: The Problem of Being Human: A New Trend in Psychology*, Lafayette, Ca, Real People Press, p. 28.

[14] Krashen S. D., 1987, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall International.

is not activated, thanks to the encouragement of the teacher and an anxiety-free environment, the student has a positive attitude, s/he is willing to face new challenges and the process of language acquisition is faster and more effective. Although it is carried out inductively, the teaching of grammar is still a fundamental part of the Affective Approach, with the students finding out by themselves the rules of the language and the teacher guiding them.

According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis which gave rise to the Natural Approach, the factors that intervene during the acquisition of a foreign language: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Motivation is the initial purpose, the effort students are willing to make, the force that drives them to achieve their final learning objective. Self-confidence is the condition learners need to be in, the courage and determination to believe in theirselves and their infinite capabilities. Lastly, anxiety and communication apprehension are the reluctance to participate in the classroom, the avoidance of collaboration, the unconscious cognitive paralysis that tension and stress generally cause in individuals, affecting negatively their performance.

As we saw from this overview of the main educational approaches, the teaching of a language has gradually become learner-centric. The teacher is no longer seen as a mere carrier of knowledge, as someone who tells facts and offers solutions with the students passively accepting them: now both the teacher and the student have an equal role and while the first works as a guide, the latter is trained to explore, interpret and solve most of the learning problems that occur.

We will now proceed with the theoretical foundations that make up *eLearning* and the most valuable elements to take into consideration when it comes to this specific educational context.

1.5 Literature review of *eLearning*

Addressing issues as what *e-Education* is and under what circumstances online Language Learning occurs is not easy, especially since most of the practical case studies are based on minimal theory and often lack of scientific research. Nonetheless, there is a fairly wide range of literature aimed at investigating the phenomenon of computer-mediated learning. Applied *eLearning* and *eTeaching* in higher education cover a series of possibilities in the provision of the strategies used to balance the relationship between students and teachers and the means to reach positive alternative learning environments.

Several researches were carried out in order to look more closely at the issue of interaction in online learning: Moore (1998), for one, claimed the existence of three types of interactivity in the learning process: the learner-content interaction (cognitive presence), the learner-instructor interaction (teacher presence) and the learner-learner interaction (social presence) [15].

The first type of interaction is the one that defines education because of its cognitive and intellectual process, through which students "talk to themselves about the information and ideas they encounter in a text, television program, lecture" and slowly develop their understanding.

The second type of interaction foresees the teacher's influence on learners, stimulating and maintaining their interests in the programme that is being taught, motivating them to learn and guiding them to the further step of self-direction. Even when students reach autonomy, they still are vulnerable when it comes to applying what they have learned, so "it is for

---

[15] Moore M. G., 1989, *Three Types of Interaction*, American Journal of Distance Education, Vol. 3, Num. 2, pp. 1-6.

reality testing and feedback that interaction with an instructor is likely to be most valuable".

Lastly, the learner-learner interaction represents a new dimension of Distance Education where a series of information exchanges take place among peers, with or without a synchronous interaction with the teacher. "This process […] teaches important principles regarding the nature of knowledge and the role of the scholar as a maker of knowledge". In this way, all the participants to the learning process are challenged to explore a new environment together and reach important personal goals.

> The learner's interactions and subsequent received responses promote an interconnected sense of being. The learner's environment and experience create an emotional, social and motivational component to learning, which increases the individual's satisfaction with the learning environment.[16]

In her book on online tutoring and Distance Education, Duggleby (2000) explored a great deal of components required in an online environment and provided a series of instructions on how to be a facilitator for learning and how to take responsibility for one's own language acquisition, guiding both teachers and students through the course[17].

An important contribution on this matter was made by Urdan and Weggen (2000), who created a graph that illustrated the different subsets of *eLearning*[18], with distance learning being the macro concept encapsulating other learning environments.

---

[16] Song M. S., 2010, *E-learning: Investigating Students' Acceptance of Online Learning in Hospitality Programs*, Iowa State University, p. 7.

[17] Duggleby J., 2000, *How to Be an Online Tutor*, Aldershot, Hampshire, Burlington, Vᴛ, Gower.

[18] Urdan T., Weggen C., 2000, *Corporate e-Learning: Exploring a New Frontier*, San Francisco, Wʀ Hambrecht & Co.
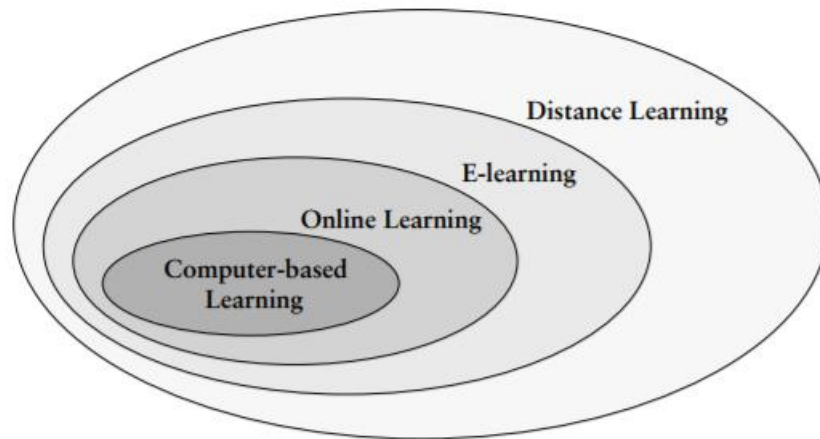
Figure 1: Subsets of eLearning (source: WR Hambrecht + Co, 2000).

The definition they provide fully explains the graph and the way computer-based learning is set within online learning, which is located within *eLearning*, which in turn is enclosed within distance learning:

> The term *eLearning* covers a wide set of applications and processes, including computer-based learning, Web-based learning, virtual classrooms and digital collaboration. We define *eLearning* as the delivery of content and interaction via all electronic media, including the Internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcast, audio/video tape, interactive TV, and CD-ROM. Yet, *eLearning* is defined more narrowly than distance learning, which would include text-based learning and courses conducted via written correspondence.[19]

For what concerns the specific field of Language Education, Peterson (2000) spoke of the relevance of the deployment of multiple technologies in order to create, activate, distribute and increase education. He believed that the electronic facet goes hand in hand with the didactic one, meaning that they are complementary and the realization of one depends on the practice of the other. In this respect, *eLearning* allows the students to take full advantage of the potential of the network, to make full use of a variety of codes which

---

[19] Ibidem, p. 8.

would be difficult to be reproduced in traditional training and, therefore, to improve their learning process.

As Pollard and Hillage (2001) wrote on their exploration on *eLearning*[20], its investigation and study can be carried out according to a more holistic focus, surpassing the idea of it only being a way to learn via computer and rather considering it as a three-level model, where each level has a specific scope:

a. The first level represents the most basic form of *eLearning* and it considers the use of information and communication technologies in order to provide individuals with materials that stimulate and expand their knowledge and ameliorate their performance.

b. The second level is associated with interactive learning material and here *eLearning* is used to provide the students with more sophisticated personal skills and development thanks to the deployment of a wide range of topics and technology delivered content.

c. The third level is analysed in its multi-dimensional facet because it plays a wider role: by encapsulating the first two levels and their respective functions, it comprehends the monitoring of learning developments and outcomes and the provision of different kinds of support from experts (administration) and peers (learner support).

Thanks to this model, we can recognise the learner-centric fruition of *eLearning* with the organisation of programmes based on the convenience, lifestyle, learning strategies and skills of the individuals, and the collaborative interaction between who e-learns and who e-teaches.

---

[20] Pollard E., Hillage J., 2001, *Exploring e-Learning*, Brighton, UK, The Institute for Employment Studies, p. 8.

1.5.1 Potential benefits and drawbacks of *eLearning*

For what concerns the specific aspect of technology in higher education, Bates (1995) listed the three main types of improvement for the use of *eLearning* in education that enrich the learning system: the improvement in the quality of the learning, in the access for teaching and training purposes and in the cost-effectiveness of education.[21] All these elements reflect the major benefits that come to mind when we reflect on what *eLearning* can offer compared to traditional educational sites.

In this respect, Duggleby (2000) believed that the quality of teaching does no longer depend solely on the skills of the teacher, who still has a vital role in the process, but "students can be judged by the quality of their work alone"[22]. For what concerns the cost-effectiveness, the linguist affirmed that not only savings can be made on accommodations and everything related to them (cleaning, lighting, heating, equipment of classrooms), but the students' incomes can also be protected because they can carry their study online, whenever they want, without having to leave their employment. Time and place flexibility, a student-centric type of learning, a collaborative relationship among learners, teachers and peers are the main advantages of *eLearning*, because they allow the students to actively become protagonists of their language acquisition process, to identify their difficulties and improvements and to control the pace of their learning.

Nevertheless, considering only these advantages would be limiting and highly unproductive for our analysis on *eLearning*. Not only must we consider the possible beneficial outcomes of these new teaching methods and

---

[21] Bates A. W., 1995, *Technology, Open Learning and Distance Education*, London and New York, Routledge, p. 30.

[22] Duggleby J., 2000, *How to Be an Online Tutor*, Aldershot, Hampshire, Burlington, VT, Gower, p. 8.

technologies that we have previously listed, but we should also be tackling the issue of a series of difficulties that may arise and become disadvantages if *eLearning* is not conducted correctly.

One of the main potential barriers to an effective acquisition could be the unsuitability for some types of learners. Even though each individual has his/her own learning strategy that can be adapted according to their needs and goals, some learners can prefer a learning style to another, facing major challenges for the rest of the learning process. This concept was well described by Kearsley (1997) in his piece on online education, where he provided a definition of this new paradigm of learning and teaching, he explored what it can accomplish and how, and he listed a set of conventions, or, as he called them, "rules of netiquette", that can make online communication more effective.[23]

Another problem that can arise regards the struggle of the students in finding the right motivation to carry their distance learning experience and reach its completion. Murphy (2011) wrote a paper on this matter[24], which we will thoroughly discuss in the second chapter. Needless to say, *eLearning* requires a lot of self-discipline by the students and encouragement by the teachers, so it sometimes results heavily reliant to these aspects and if they are missing it can raise concerns regarding the final product of the course.

To sum up, because of its innumerable opportunities, *eLearning* has attracted the attention of many educational systems, especially for what concerns higher education. Its applications are also countless and comprehend a series of practices where classroom-based lessons can be mixed with online lessons, in the case of blended learning, or traditional

---

[23] Kearsley G., 1997, A Guide to Online Education.

[24] Murphy L., 2011, "Why Am I Doing This?" Maintaining Motivation in Distance Language Learning", in Murray G., Gao X., Lamb T., *Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning*, Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto, Multilingual Matters, pp. 17-27.

classes can be "flipped" and acquire a virtual component, in the case of flipped classrooms. We will discuss this topic in greater detail in the following paragraph.

1.5.2 Blended, authentic-language and flipped classrooms

Graham (2006) has dealt with the study of this particular field, defining the blended learning environment as a combination of face-to-face teaching and learning programmes with online tasks and activities: both modalities are used alongside and complement each other in order to reach a comprehensive result[25]. Carrying out this recent method and promoting a type of learning that enhances language acquisition by putting together two opposite worlds, one completely human and one virtual, requires a wise and dynamic use of all the opportunities for a positive effect on learning, where the needs of the students and the cooperation they create with others become the key ingredients. The use of *eLearning* is incorporated in this educational strategy, but not in its entirety. To the possibility of operating the technological side of the Internet and ICT materials, we can add a further benefit represented by the social interactions and exchanges of experience that occur in direct conversations.

There are two important applications regarding this conception: the authentic language classroom and the flipped language classroom. The first one is a computer-mediated communication that takes place in two different schools situated in two different countries, where the students are required to work at a distance with their peers, share information on a specific topic on the basis of a common project and face some common tasks. The main

---

[25] Graham R. G., 2006, "Blended Learning System: Definition, Current Trends and Future Directions", in Bonk C. J., Graham C. R., *The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global perspectives, local designs*, San Francisco, CA, Pfeiffer Publications, pp. 3-21.

goals of this application are: to engage students in intercultural exchanges, to create meaningful interactions and emotionally involving experiences and to increase the authenticity in the classroom practices. In this case, language learning is the result of having to communicate real meaning thanks to the further step determined by ICT.

The second application is the flipped language classroom, which consists in a virtual language environment where the exchange of information is recorded, passed on screen and then discussed in the classroom. The core idea of this method is to "flip" the common instructional approach with teacher-created videos and interactive lessons, with directions that no longer occur in the classroom, but that can be accessed at home, in advance of the class. This method has a double aim: prepare the students beforehand, letting them get introduced to the content of the lesson and making it easier to participate in classroom activities; allow the students to check their comprehension thanks to the possibility of listening to the recording over and over again and extend more rapidly their learning. So, the difference between the blended learning and the flipped learning is that the latter is asynchronous and what is learned online is subsequently applied in the classroom.

The main reason why it is becoming increasingly important to expand our horizons and create new frontiers of learning is because we now have the possibility to control the geographical distribution of the learners, with online courses intervening and adding educational value to traditional classes. Through the dialogue and sharing of experiences thanks to the many resources available from the Internet, there is a shift in the concept of "technology as a means to change the delivery method to technology as a means to enhance learning"[26] (Futch and Chen, 2017).

---

[26] Futch L., Chen B., 2017, *Understanding Blended Learning*, Blendkit Reader, University of Central Florida (UCF), p. 4.

1.6 *Co-Learning*

"*Co-Learning*" is a specific term used to describe the concept of learning together in different ways through the deployment of the Internet in general and social media.

Kaplan and Haenlan (2010) provided an exhaustive definition of social media: "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content"[27]. The sharing of said content, the provision of always new contributions, the possibility of immediate responses and feedback are the basis of an open collaboration among multiple users.

This phenomenon is spread also with regards to online learning platforms, where co-learning is used to "emphasize the importance of changing the role of, respectively, teachers and students from dispensers and receptacles of knowledge to both co-learners – collaborative partners on the process of sensemaking, understanding and creating knowledge" (Okada, *et al.*, 2012)[28].

Thanks to the development of technology and more immediate ways to publish and access new pieces of work, there has been an important increase in the self-motivated and self-guided capabilities of e-learners, who are now reusing, adapting and sharing materials all the while providing a new venue of collaborative experiences with other users. The greater the collaboration, the more effective the pedagogic efficiency.

---

[27] Kaplan A. M., Haenlein M., 2010, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media", *in Business Horizons*, Indiana University, Vol. 53, Num. 1, p. 59.

[28] Okada A., *et al.*; (a cura di), 2012, *Colearning – Collaborative Open Learning through OER & Social Media*, The Open University, Milton Keynes, p. 14.

Cooperative learning has currently gained new ground and is now recognised as an effective pedagogical practice for the promotion and diffusion of learning, simultaneously reaching different goals, like the advancement of both socialisation and knowledge among diverse groups of students. Gillies and Ashman (2003) analysed the different variables that come into play when cooperative learning experiences are carried out, putting them in opposition to the traditional classroom and stating that their presence "promotes socialisation and learning among diverse groups of students"[29].

1.7 *eTeaching*

The last paragraph of our study will explore the notion of *eTeaching* and the responsibility of the instructors in the design of the learning project, the planning of the lessons and the carrying out of the activities proposed to the students.

If a positive, anxiety-free environment in a traditional classroom is one of the most required factors to raise awareness on the language that is being taught and facilitate the learning challenge, the same condition must be conducted in online classes as well. Teachers must always encourage the learners to reflect on their learning, clarifying their concerns and alleviating their challenges. Surely, the success of a language acquisition project does not solely depend on the instructor, since Learner Autonomy is one of the main component of *eLearning*; however, instructors must be able to apply teaching approaches in order to provide the learners with a positive learning experience.

---

[29] Gillies R. M., Ashman A. F., 2003, *Co-operative Learning. The Social and Intellectual outcomes of learning in groups*, London and New York, RoutledgeFalmer, p. 13.

Andrade (2015) affirmed that a structured course design and a dialogue between the teacher and the students facilitate the educational process. The former "helps guide learners and provides predictability" while the latter "entails communication among course participants and the teacher for purposes of socialization and learning support" [30]. The higher the structure and the dialogue, the less the autonomy of the learners, whose skills will improve more slowly. On the other hand, the lower the dialogue and the structure, the more independent the students: in this way, they can make choices about their learning and complete their assignments in autonomy, with a more rapid improvement of their skills.

As we can see, students cannot reach by themselves the capacity to learn autonomously: teachers also play their part, helping the learners become more self-aware and in control of their learning. Even in the training courses of *eTeaching*, teachers are invited to self-reflect on the subject of self-regulated learning, considering in what way they can help the students increase autonomous behaviours and learning strategies.

What is important for the achievement of the targeted goals set by the teacher during the structure of an online course is unambiguity: unambiguity in the presentation of the programme and in the explanation of a lesson, unambiguity in the assignment instructions and in the setting of the deadlines, unambiguity in the test evaluations and in the clarification of students' errors. Since the instructors who develop online courses are capable to anticipate the learners' struggles and to assist them if necessary, this principle needs to be taken into great consideration for an effective pedagogy in the *eTeaching* application.

---

[30] Andrade M. S., 2015, "Effective eLearning and eTeaching: A Theoretical Model", in Gradinarova B., *eLearning: Instructional Design, Organizational Strategy and Management*., InTech: open science, open minds, Chapter 2, pp. 33-59.

The first chapter of the present study has tackled a series of issues connected to *eLearning* and the principles that go with it. In the next chapter, the analysis will focus on the concept of Distance Education, Learner Autonomy and all the motivational factors involved in the realisation of language acquisition.

Chapter 2

Distance Education and Learners' Autonomy

2.1 Distance Education

The term "Distance Education" (or Distance Learning) refers to all the teaching and learning processes unbounded by temporal and spatial restrictions that occur without a real-time teacher-student interaction, both of whose collaboration is carried out through technological mediation. Peratton, Robinson and Creed (2001) gave an exhaustive definition of this online delivery mode, describing it as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learners"[31].

An investigation on the differences and similarities between classroom and Distance Learning carried out by Helleve (2012) showed that computers have now changed the traditional communication between teachers and students. While a face-to-face classroom presents a pattern of communication known as "initiative, response and evaluation", meaning that the teacher asks the learner a question and the learner – based on his/her response – is evaluated, a computer-based class is characterised by a communication that builds a "community of learners […] where the main purpose is advancement of learning"[32]. The term "community" is used to

---

[31] Peratton H., Robinson B., Creed C., 2001, *Teacher Education through Distance Learning: Technology, Curriculum, Evaluation, Cost*, Paris, UNESCO, p. 3.

[32] Helleve I., 2012, "Differences and Similarities in Approach between Classroom and Distance Learning", in Moore J. L., *International Perspectives of Distance Learning in Higher Education*, InTech, open science, open minds, Chapter 12, p. 254.

refer to individuals who are independent of age, social or educational status and are gathered together for a common purpose: learning.

The possibility to avail oneself of textual and multimedia materials, all the while managing online communities for the creation, control and use of course content, is at the base of the Distance Learning approach. Before the implementation of this new interactive online dimension, other instruments were available for the use of distance education. Nipper (1989) categorised three generations of Distance Learning:

a. The first generation was characterised by the printing of learning materials and the postal correspondence between the teachers and the individual students.

b. The second generation, also known as "Industrialised phase", developed when audio cassettes, radio and television broadcasts led to an immediacy of the teacher content delivery and the student content collection, thus increasing the number of individuals who could access education.

c. The third generation was represented by *eLearning* and Communication Technology, the realisation of which was possible thanks to a high-quality electronic nature of the content, a time and place flexibility, a holistic connectivity and a two-way communication between and among multiple users.

As for the development of *eLearning* and its evident predominance over the earlier generations, Nipper (1989) stated that:

> the main objectives of the first and second-generation systems have been the production and distribution of teaching/learning material to the learners. Communication with the learners has been marginal and communication amongst the learners has been more or less non-existent.[33]

Taylor (2001) extended Nipper's work and to the first three generations of Distance Learning, respectively known as the Correspondence Model, the Multi-Media Model and the Telelearning Model, he added a fourth and a fifth generation. The fourth generation, or Flexible Learning Model, entailed flexibility of time, place and learning pace thanks to the use of online techniques and technologies. The fifth generation[34], or Intelligent Flexible Learning Model, allowed lower costs for more effective educational and administrative support systems.

---

[33] Nipper S., 1989, "Third generation distance learning and computer conferencing", in Mason R., Kaye A., *Mindweave: Communication, Computers and Distance Education*, Pergamon, Oxford, Uκ, p. 63.

[34] Taylor J. C., 2001, "Fifth Generation Distance Education", Higher Education Series, pp. 1-8.

Models of Distance Education	Associated Delivery Technologies	Characteristics of Delivery Technologies				
		Flexibility			Highly Refined Materials	Advanced Interactive Delivery
		Time	Place	Pace		
First Generation—The Correspondence Model	• Print	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Second Genera-tion—The Multi-Media Model	• Print	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	• Audiotape	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	• Videotape	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	• Computer-based learning (eg CML/CAL)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	• Interactive video (disk and tape)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Third Generation—The Telelearning Model	•Audio-teleconference	No	No	No	No	Yes
	• Videoconference					
	• Audiographic Communication	No	No	No	No	Yes
		No	No	No	Yes	Yes
	• Broadcast TV/Radio, Audiotele-conference	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Fourth Generation—The Flexible Learning Model	• Interactive multimedia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	• internet based access to www resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	• computer mediated communications	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Fifth Generation—The Intelligent Flexible Learning Model	• interactive multimedia online	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	• internet based access to WWW resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	• Computer-mediated communication, using automated response systems	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	• Campus portal access to institutional processes and resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 2: Model of Distance Education (source: Taylor, 2001).

In opposition to same-time, same-place traditional classrooms, the classes that are available through Distance Learning can be synchronous or asynchronous based on the time the teacher-learner and learner-learner exchanges take place.

2.2 Synchronous and asynchronous learning

The first type of online learning occurs when there is a real-time interaction between the participants in the didactic process. It is an example of same-time/different-place form of learning and it presents multiple possibilities for its completion. Normally, students who enrol in these courses are required to make themselves available to attend the online lesson at a specific hour. There is a series of multimedia technologies that are used to carry out a synchronous learning, such as video-conferencing, group chats, web seminars, white boards, etc., which allow a more direct interaction between the students and the instructor.

The asynchronous mode is considered the "purest" form of Distance Education, as the learning occurs both in different places and at different times. The technology used for asynchronous learning can be emails, video and audio recordings, etc., which allow the students to be in control of their assignments and learning process without completely relying on the teacher. E-learners are offered all the materials necessary to take the class and can decide when and where it is more convenient for them to access them. Of course, the instructors are well aware of the difficulties that the students may find during their language learning process, so the separation between them must always be controlled and, in some cases, reduced.

2.3 Theory of Transactional Distance

Moore (2007) formulated the Theory of Transactional Distance that is defined as a "typology of all education programs having this distinguishing

characteristic of separation of teacher and learner"[35], with structure, dialogue and autonomy being the three main components.

- − *Structure* comprises all the elements that make up a course, such as learning/teaching goals, assignments, deadlines, work materials, schedule, evaluations.

- − *Dialogue* consists of a two-way communication between the teacher, the students and their peers. In addition to the actual agents of the didactic process, the tools needed to conduct it play a crucial role.

- − *Autonomy* is connected to the students' choice of making decisions about their learning in terms of which objectives they have set and want to achieve, the selection of study content and students' capacity of being self-directed, in charge and aware of their active role, knowing which learning strategies is personally best for them.

Before analysing the level of motivation students need to reach in order to conduct their learning activities, a clarification must be made regarding the change in perspective of the concept of Language Learner Agency.

In the past, students who "learned by themselves" would follow the instructions of course writers and would not have control over their own learning process; whereas in the last few years this idea has evolved and studying autonomously is now seen as a communicative and social process, highly encouraged by ICT. Learners have equal importance as their instructors as for what concerns the choice of the content, the materials, the tools and the setting of their learning objectives, but – at the same time – they still need their instructors to promote agency.

---

[35] Moore M., 2007, "The Theory of Transactional Distance", in Moore M., *Handbook of Distance Education*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, p. 91.

We have already outlined the specific role of the teacher, who is more of a facilitator than a director, and the specific role of the student, who is responsible for the conduct of his/her learning process at a distance. However, autonomy cannot be intended in its broad sense and in the following paragraphs we will clarify the reasons behind this statement.

2.4 Autonomy and Self-Regulated Learning

Although the terms "Autonomy" and "Self-Regulated Learning" appear to be similar on the surface, there is a difference between the two constructs that lies in the learning environments: while the former represents a person-centred approach, a combination of "volition and willingness to learn" (Nguyen and Gu, 2013), the latter investigates on the "learner's strategies and skills of metacognitive self-management, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating"[36] and, therefore, is primarily cognitive.

Some decades ago, Holec (1981) provided a definition of autonomy in relation to foreign language learning, underlying the central role of the students and their "ability to take charge of their own learning"[37]. This was considered a major milestone for the didactic field because it acknowledged the main implications connected to education and entailed the acceptance of responsibility of the learner. From that moment on, Learner Autonomy became the predominant concern of researchers, who agree that students' goal-setting, planning, monitoring and self-evaluating of their improvements

---

[36] Nguyen L. T. C., Gu Y., 2013, "Strategy-based Instruction: A Learner-focused Approach for Developing Learner Autonomy", *Language Teaching Research*, Vol. 17, Num. 1, p. 13.

[37] Holec H., 1981, *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, Oxford, Pergamon, Strasbourg, Council of Europe, p. 3.

or setbacks during their language learning process are the necessary steps for a correct and constructive action of autonomy.

The concept of autonomy is controversial because some linguists, educationalists and students consider it as a synonym for "teacher-less learning" and connect it with self-instruction, whereas others believe that the role of the instructors is not be underestimated because they are the ones who, through a series of strategies, support students in the promotion of their independence and the development of their autonomy.

In relation to this topic, the term "full autonomy" was used by Dickinson (1987) to describe "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" [38], without the need of an intervention from the teachers or institutions.

A couple of years later, the belief of autonomy as a synonym for independence began to weaken, and the idea that autonomy implicates a certain degree of interdependence, as well as the capacity to develop social relationships within the educational context, consolidated. In this regard, Kohonen (1992) affirmed:

> Personal decisions are necessarily made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions and expectations. Autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways.[39]

---

[38] Dickinson L., 1987, *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*, Cambridge University Press, p. 11.

[39] Kohonen V., 1992, "Experiential Language Learning: Second Language Learning as Cooperative Learner Education", in Nunan D., *Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, p. 19.

White (1995) believed that one of the limits of Distance Education is to assume Learner Autonomy as a given rather than recognising that it needs time to be applied[40]. Similarly, Benson (2001) stated that "there is no necessary relationship between self-instruction and the development of autonomy and […], under certain conditions, self-instruction modes of learning may even inhibit autonomy"[41]. He wrote about the "two faces of autonomy", drawing sustenance to the ambiguous assumption that Learner Autonomy means for the students to be free from the direction and control of the instructor and to go against the conventional language-teaching classroom.

According to Little (2003), autonomous learners "understand the purpose of their learning program, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning and evaluate its effectiveness"[42].

After offering insight into what Self-Regulated Learning is, stating that it "emphasizes how to develop responsibility for learning and related behaviours"[43], Andrade (2015) made another important contribution on this matter, explaining that the central role of SRL in an online class involves the ability of the learner to take charge of the factors and conditions that influence his/her language acquisition. The linguist formulated a theory

---

[40] White C., 1995, "Autonomy and Strategy Use in Distance Foreign Language Learning: Research Findings", in *System*, Vol. 23, Num. 2, pp. 207-222.

[41] Benson P., 2011, *Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning*, London and New York Routledge, p. 6.

[42] Little D., 2003, *Learner Autonomy and Second/Foreign Language Learning*.

[43] Andrade M. S., 2012, "Self-Regulated Learning Activities: Supporting Success in Online Courses", in Moore J. L., *International Perspectives of Distance Learning in Higher Education*, InTech, open science, open minds, Chapter 6, p. 112.

consisting of a six-dimension model[44], which comprises the elements that can be applied to the teaching and learning processes for the growth of student achievement:

a. *motive* (purpose and goals)

b. *method* (learning strategies)

c. *time*

d. *social environment* (collaborative environment)

e. *physical environment* (study environment)

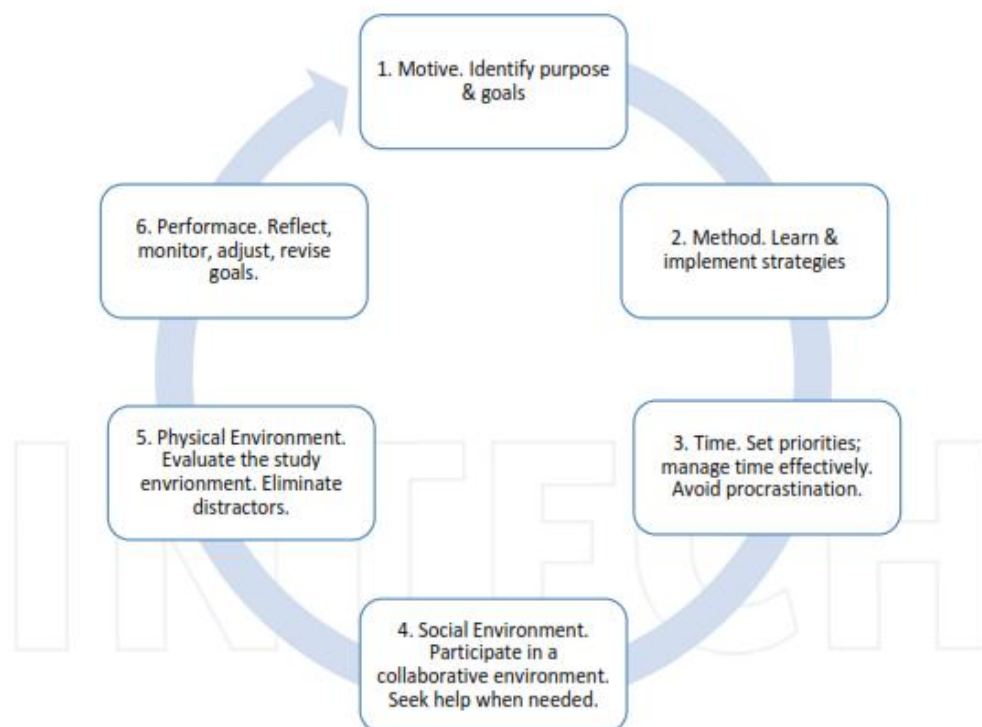f. *performance* (reflecting, monitoring, revising goals)

Figure 3: *The cycle of self-regulated learning (source: Andrade, 2015).*

---

[44] Andrade M. S., 2015, "Effective eLearning and eTeaching: A Theoretical Model", in Gradinarova B., *E-Learning: Instructional Design, Organizational Strategy and Management*, InTech: open science, open minds, Chapter 2, pp. 33-59.

Nevertheless, these phases are not always put into practice. Murphy (2011) reflected on the benefits that distance learners find when studying autonomously, explaining which aspects of their learning they can control and which ones they cannot. They have the possibility to be in charge of the time, place and content of their study, but developing abilities such as goal-setting, planning and evaluating cannot be implemented immediately[45].

For this reason, the content of online courses must be carefully structured and provided with detailed guidelines from the instructor on the basis of the students' needs, so that their learning can be encouraged, facilitated and accelerated.

2.5 Agency: a holistic view

After an excursus of the concept of autonomy and a review of the linguists that have sought to analyse its numerous facets, we will deal with the notion of agency, which is strictly interrelated with autonomy. According to Kohonen (2009), agency refers to:

> ownership of learning, and power relationship in the classroom: the extent to which the pupil has an active, participatory role […] in the learning process, and is an originator, actor and author of his/her learning"[46].

Vandergriff (2016) wrote a book on the L2 discourse in the digital world and explained the two main reasons why agency is beneficial for SLA research: the first is that the greater the agency, the more positive the language-

---

[45] Murphy L., 2011, "Autonomy in Context: A Tale of Two Learners", in Gardner D., *Fostering Autonomy in Language Learning*, Gaziantep, Zirve University, pp. 17-27.

[46] Kohonen V., 2009, "Autonomy, Authenticity and Agency in Language Education: the European Language Portfolio as a Pedagogical Resource", in Kantelinen R., Pollari P., *Language Education and Lifelong Learning*, University of Easter Finland, Philosophical Faculty, p. 11.

learning success; the second consists in an extended role of the students, who can now proactively participate in the educational process. Before this, the classrooms were primarily directed by the teachers, who would prepare the lessons, choose the materials and have control of "the physical and discourse space"[47], demolishing the learners' progress and identity and leading to an inevitable lack of agency and autonomy.

Once again, the word "autonomy" is not to be considered as a series of independent and non-motivated actions: as a matter of fact, students' ability to control their own acquisition is always driven by social responsibility and the desire of formulating and reaching specific goals, all the while keeping the interaction with their instructors and peers going.

Following van Lier's (2008) list of the variables that come into play in a self-learning environment as opposed to the ones which are not linked to agency[48], Vandergriff went on to explain them one by one.

INDICATORS OF AGENCY	NONINDICATORS OF AGENCY
Learner	Learner
– initiates learning – formulates personal goals – seeks help – attends to own needs – self-regulates the learning process	– has specific learning goals – has specific type of knowledge, e.g., metalinguistic knowledge – learns deliberately

Figure 4: Some indicators and non-indicators of agency (source: van Lier, 2008).

[47] Vandergriff I, 2016, *Second-language Discourse in the Digital World. Linguistic and Social Practices in and beyond the Networked Classroom*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. 87.

[48] van Lier L., 2008, "Agency in the Classroom", in Lantolf J. P., Poehner M. E., *Sociocultural Theory and the Teaching of Second Languages*, London, Equinox.

Self-agent students have the capability of being self-starters, meaning that they are able to initiate and personalise their learning according to their interests and needs. The planning of their study is accompanied by the ability to formulate personal learning objectives. During this operation, "learners make plans for their learning process and adapt their behaviour and their plans as the process unfolds"[49].

Another variable that may appear paradoxical but is necessary for the implementation of self-agency is asking for help when needed. Students who realise they have a block that cannot be solved without the intervention of someone who is appositely there to guide them are heading in the right direction for a successful realisation of their language learning process.

Self-agency is crucial in Distance Learning and it inevitably goes hand in hand with self-motivation. As a matter of fact, learners who decide to take an online course or use technological tools to enhance their linguistic knowledge are generally motivated to do most of the work on their own, feeling like they are the real protagonists of their learning process. They set personal goals periodically, work with different materials and monitor their progress, all the while trying to maintain a high level of motivation.

What is motivation and how can it be promoted? The following paragraphs will provide some answers to these questions.

2.6 Motivation in Distance Education

Motivation is one of the main factors connected to language acquisition and Learner Autonomy and it should always be present for an adequate educational attainment level. To give a simple definition of motivation

---

[49] Vandergriff I., 2016, *Second-language Discourse in the Digital World. Linguistic and Social Practices in and beyond the Networked Classroom*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. 89.

would be restricting and nearly impossible, especially since it is an individual characteristic that cannot be measured because of its limitless implications.

In a very broad sense, motivation is: setting an objective, be willing to make all the efforts necessary in order to reach it and keeping a positive attitude throughout the process, showing very little refusal when setbacks occur.

Some of the main linguists who addressed the topic of motivation in the foreign language acquisition were: Gardner and Lambert (1972), Gardner (1985), Ryan and Deci (1985; 2000), Dörnyei and Ottó (1998), Dörnyei and Ushioda, (2009), Murphy (2011). After asking themselves how and where students find their motivation to study a L2, they started investigating on the attitudes and learning strategies that can be carried in the process.

A primary distinction provided by Gardner and Lambert (1972) was represented by the dichotomy between integrative and instrumental motivation[50]. The former refers to the individuals who live in a country where the language spoken is their L2, strongly identify with the community that speaks that language and want to be accepted and be part of it: it is something routed in the personality of the learner and it does not tend to disappear or run out. The latter, on the other hand, indicates the students who choose to learn a language for the benefits they could have from it (status, symbol of prestige, job opportunities, etc.): in this case, their learning desire is more likely to run out.

Gardner (1985) proposed two additional types of motivation: language learning motivation and classroom learning motivation. After explaining their main differences, he recognised that in a very real sense they cannot be separate. The language learning motivation is connected directly to the

---

[50] Gardner R. C., Lambert W. E., 1972, *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*, Rowley, MA, Newbury House.

willingness of the learner to acquire a second language on the basis of his/her attitudes in order to communicate and be part of a community. The classroom learning motivation is related to the classroom situation and is influenced by a series of factors: "the teacher, the class atmosphere, the course content, materials and facilities, as well as personal characteristics of the student"[51]. This last type of motivation can be influenced by the general language learning motivation previously mentioned, which represents the actual foundation for the conduct of one's learning process.

2.6.1 Self-Determination Theory, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

SDT is an approach to human motivation and personality that focuses on the tendencies, the psychological needs, the social and contextual conditions that self-motivate and self-determine peoples' choice to foster growth, integration, social development and personal well-being[52].

Through the years, Ryan and Deci (1985; 2000) carried out numerous researches on human motivation in all kinds of educational environments, formulating a series of theories and postulates which served as a reference for the studies on motivation in the years that followed.

One of their initial works included a definition of intrinsic motivation, which consists in the exemplificative manifestation of human behaviours toward learning:

> Intrinsic motivation is in evidence whenever students' natural curiosity and interest energise their learning. When the educational environment

---

[51] Gardner R. C., 1985, *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*, University of Western Ontario, p. 3.

[52] Ryan R. M., Deci E. L., 2000, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being", in *American Psychologist*, University of Rochester, p. 68.

provides optimal challenges, rich sources of stimulation, and a context of autonomy, this motivational wellspring in learning is likely to flourish.[53]

However, motivation is not to be considered as a single construct that originates within the self, but it sometimes can be subjected to an external coercion, where the pressure of someone or something else moves a person to act (Extrinsic Motivation).

Ryan and Deci (2000) expanded their theory and introduced the importance of three psychological components that are linked to motivated processes: autonomy, competence, relatedness.

- *Autonomy*, which we have already broadly discussed, is the students' acquired ability to be in charge of their learning process.

- *Competence* consists in the expansion of the learners' skills and the achievement of positive results. "Feelings of competence will not enhance intrinsic motivation unless accompanied by a sense of autonomy"[54].

- *Relatedness* refers to a collaborative relationship with others, a feeling of belongingness and a need of feedback.

---

[53] Ryan R. M., Deci E. L., 1985, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour*, New York, Boston, Dordrecht, London, Moscow, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, p. 245.

[54] Ryan R., Deci E. L., 2000, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions", Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25, p.58.

2.6.2 Preactional, actional and postactional stages

Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) claimed the presence of three distinct phases of learning motivation: the preactional stage, the actional stage and the postactional stage.

a. Pre-action (Choice Motivation): the source of motivation. It is the phase in which students realise what they want to do, set themselves a target and decide on an action.

b. Action (Executive Motivation): the need to sustain motivation. It consists in the proactive phase in which learners make all the efforts necessary in order to carry out their activities and goals.

c. Post-action (Retrospective Motivation): the looking-back stage. It is the phase in which students evaluate their terminated experience, see the accomplished action outcomes derived from their efforts and keep them in mind for future actions.

Based on the assumption that having the intention to take on an action does not necessarily mean that it will automatically happen, the authors stated that "there are two necessary conditions for issuing an action-launching impulse: the availability of the necessary means and resources and the start condition"[55]. Once intentions are formed, they need to be operationalised, enacted and transformed into goals. This is possible thanks to a series of factors known as motivational influences, that can facilitate or impede goal-directed behaviour.

Some examples of the basic conditions for a positive learning experience are: the creation of a welcoming, pleasant and supportive atmosphere; the relevance and appropriateness of the course; the collaborative and cohesive

---

[55] Dörnyei Z., Ottó I., 1998, "Motivation in Action: A Process Model of L2 Motivation", *Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*, London Thames Valley University, p. 49.

qualities of the group (learners/teacher; learners/learners); the promotion of positive attitudes toward the language and the culture, the focus on motivational and constructive feedback. Of course, experiences are not always positive and negative outcomes can lead to demotivation, anxiety and failure.

The following table presents a series of factors that contribute to increasing the difficulties experienced by learners for what concerns maintaining motivation during a L2/FL language learning process.

Institutional	*Other*
External factors negatively affecting motivation	
Unhappiness with aspect of course content	Lack of time/other commitments causing worry re falling behind
Unhappiness with tutor/tutorials	Bereavement/illness
Isolation (studying through distance institution)	
Workload	
Technical problems	
Difficulties with understanding audio material	
Other difficulties with course, particularly grammar	
Internal factors negatively affecting motivation	
Concerns about speaking and being understood	Concerns re memory
Low scores/lack of progress	Loss of motivation
Difficulties with understanding audio material	Other difficulties with course, particularly grammar

Figure 5: Table of the negative influences on motivation (source: Murphy, 2011)[56].

---

[56] Murphy L., 2011, ""Why Am I Doing This?" Maintaining Motivation in Distance Language Learning", in Murray G., Gao X., Lamb T., *Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning*, Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto, Multilingual Matters, p. 113.

2.6.3 The L2 Motivational Self System

"L2 motivation is currently in the process of being radically reconceptualised and retheorised in the context of contemporary notions of self and identity"[57]: Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) recognised the significant changes that motivation was undergoing and their work began to shed light on new components of motivation related to self and identity.

According to them, when we talk about motivation we need to include the situational view, that contributes to the construction or deconstruction of motivation. This shows how the contextual surrounding can influence the motivation of a learner: the most important variable is the teacher's personality, who plays a vital role in creating a learning environment where "autonomisation" can take place: this term is used to describe the process according to which students learn in a determinate environment and experience autonomy in order to become autonomous.

They proposed that there is a three-tier system that make up the L2 motivation of an individual: the *Ideal L2 Self*, the *Ought-to L2 Self* and the *L2 Learning Experience*.

a. The *Ideal L2 Self* is the future image a learner has of himself/herself as an L2 speaker according to their own expectations.

b. The *Ought-to L2 Self* is the future image the learner has of himself/herself as an L2 speaker according to someone else's expectations.

c. The *L2 Learning Experience* comprises all the factors that intervene in the carrying out of the educational process.

---

[57] Dörnyei Z., Ushioda E., 2009, *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, p. 1.

To sum up, learners who experience Distance Learning through online courses may have other responsibilities to deal with and, although ICT makes it is easier for them to find materials and enter into contact with diverse people from different countries, they still need to schedule and structure their learning program appropriately. This is the reason why agency, motivation and self-determination play a significant role in this field.

"Autonomous learners are, by definition, motivated learners, but even autonomous learners experience setbacks or changing circumstances"[58].

---

[58] Murphy L., 2011, ""Why Am I Doing This?" Maintaining Motivation in Distance Language Learning", in Murray G., Gao X., Lamb T., *Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning*, Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto, Multilingual Matters, p. 107.

Chapter 3

The Use of Social Media in *eLearning*

It is no secret that social media forms an integral part of the majority of people's daily lives. In the last ten years, the conception of social media has been subjected to multiple debates regarding its nature and functions. Many think that its use has diminished the power of communication among people, who now tend to hide behind a screen and are no longer able to carry out face-to-face interactions; whereas others believe that it is an effective way to share opinions, stories and contacts with greater facility.

Another side of this argument can be explored if we reflect on the use of social media in *eLearning*, which is a reality that has gained ground in the last decade, especially with the rise of social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Google Plus and online learning platforms such as Duolingo, italki and so forth. One of the best outcomes of this new trend is the fact that learning experiences, educational materials and opinions can be shared, training programs and courses can be organised and feedback can be given in an immediate way.

In the previous chapter we talked about the concept of autonomy and how innovative was the intuition of creating a didactic process that is primarily learner-centric. Now, we will analyse the most popular social networks that can be used in the field of *eLearning* through ICT tools, taking into account the individual and community dimensions deriving from them.

3.1 Networked communities

> For learning to happen, L2 users must actively engage with others; social contact alone is insufficient. For this engagement to happen, the infrastructure of the global network is necessary of course, but it is the new tools and digital genres that create new opportunities for building relationships with other users, for developing collective identities, and for building community.[59]

The growing deployment of social networking sites (SNSs) within the educational field shows how important it is to shape and reshape virtual communities and multilingual practices in order to create effective *eLearning* platforms and provide a larger audience with similar interests, attitudes, learning purposes and experiences.

The first important notion to keep in mind when speaking of online communities is multilingualism. It refers to a common characteristic of said communities to produce and consume online texts in a language that is different from their L1 and use them as a means of communication and/or personal expression. The European Commission (2007: 6) defined multilingualism as "the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage on a regular basis with more than one language in their day-to-day lives". Since the web is also becoming increasingly multilingual, more networks are being developed following the principle of promoting language diversity.

Another important concept connected to networked communities that must be operated for a positive learning environment is the reinforcement of

---

[59] Vandergriff I., 2016, *Second-language Discourse in the Digital World. Linguistic and Social Practices in and beyond the Networked Classroom*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. 53.

the users' ability to negotiate norms of behaviour and knowledge, proactively participating in the learning process.

> What we learn with the greatest investment is what enables participation in the communities with which we identify. We function best when the depth of our knowing is steeped in an identity of participation, that is, when we can contribute to shaping the communities that define us as knowers.[60]

The relationship between social networks and *eLearning* was analysed by Mohd *et al.* (2011), who affirmed that the integration of social networking technologies into the educational system is largely widespread, especially in the age group between 18-24 years: based on this assumption, it was demonstrated that the highest percentage of social users was among students at the higher level of education[61].

According to Suraya *et al.* (2010), there are four distinct activities that, thanks to social networks, can be used in the language process: the creation of content information, the sharing of information, interactions and social partnership[62].

a. Creation of content information: users generate concepts and ideas regarding their learning program.

b. Sharing of information: users share their concepts and ideas with other users belonging to the same learning community, thus widening the content information and exchange.

---

[60] Wenger E., 1998, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, p. 253.

[61] Mohd S., *et al.*; (a cura di), 2011, "Social Network Learning: The Relationship between Characteristics in Social Network and e-learning Websites with Learning Activities", in *International Conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, p. 3.

[62] Suraya H., *et al.*; (a cura di), 2010, "The Use of Online Social Networking for Higher Education from an Activity Theory Perspective", Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems (PACIS), pp. 1414-1425.

c. Interactions: users carry out active discussions on specific topics, with the possibility of commenting, reviewing and giving their personal opinions.

d. Social partnership: users cooperate and collaborate among themselves in order to face some linguistic issues arising in the process.
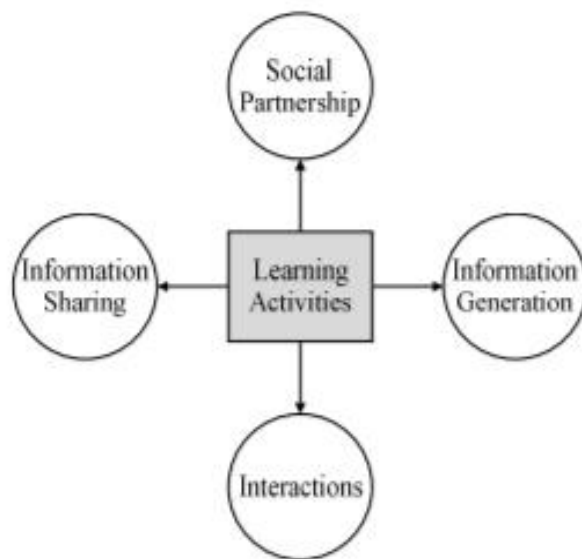

Figure 6: Learning activities (source: Suraya H., et al., 2010).

Given the key role of community in language learning, the next step is to analyse the most popular examples of networked communities and language-learning platforms that are associated with the expansion of online Glottodidactics.

3.1.1 Facebook, YouTube, Google Plus

Facebook
Apart from the usual primary function of promoting social relationships and gathering people from all over the world, Facebook is a social networking

website that can be used for educational purposes as well. Both students and instructors may rely on this rapid means of communication, posting data, materials, learning content, asking questions, providing explanations and feedback in closed or open groups.

YouTube

YouTube is another important website that has lost its primary purpose of entertainment and plays an additional significant role in the field of *eLearning*.

Thanks to its function of sharing audio and visual content, it can be used as a highly effective learning tool. A great amount of materials can be uploaded, and users have the possibility of accessing them without paying any charge. Moreover, the options to leave a comment and rate the content are present and are very useful for future uploads, because they give an insight into student perceptions regarding a specific topic. The most popular videos connected to education are language tutorials or complete course lectures, which the students can repeatedly watch, stop and rewind if necessary, according to the pace of their personal development and in the comfort of their own houses.

Google Plus

Google Plus is a multimodal platform that, thanks to its countless Apps, can be used for teaching and learning objectives. It entails: a rapid exchange of ideas between instructors and students thanks to Gmail; the creation of assignments and work materials paperlessly and the option to save them in Google Drive; the opportunity to share the content with other Communities; the possibility to create online questionnaires and have respondents filling them from all over the world thanks to Google Forms, etc. As we can see, the practises of this social networking platform are multiple and "E-learning

professionals believe that Google Plus is going to be the most popular social media that is used as a learning platform"[63].

3.1.2 Duolingo, italki, Livemocha

Duolingo

Duolingo is a language-learning platform that offers and organises the courses of several languages and includes a website, a series of apps, a forum and a final digital language proficiency exam. It is the most used online language education program in the world and it is completely free.

italki

italki is another language-learning platform that connects students and teachers. After deciding on a language to learn or master, the students can watch some teachers' video introductions, read reviews from previous students and choose one. Then, they can decide a date and a time convenient for them and, when everything is set, they can get in touch with their teacher and get their lessons through Skype sessions or other video chat software.

Livemocha

Livemocha was a language-teaching and learning virtual community that entailed the exchange of language competences between native speakers and language learners (peer feedback): one user who chose to learn a specific L2 could in turn teach his/her L1 to the user who s/he was learning the L2 from. Livemocha only offered free basic courses, whereas the more advanced ones required monthly or annual fees: because of this, it was closed down permanently a year ago and users were no longer able to access their accounts.

---

[63] Thabit H.T., Jasim Y. A. A., 2017, *The Role of Social Networks in Increasing the Activity of e-Learning*, Switzerland, Springer International Publishing, p. 41.

3.2 Advantages and disadvantages

The impact of social media in language learning has dramatically changed the way education is conceived today. Like any change, there are positive and negative outcomes that come with it and the specific topic of social networks daily faces different opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages that it can lead to.

One of the main advantages of the influence of social networks in the education field is the change in perspective of the classroom environment: the teacher-specific classroom that characterised traditional courses is substituted by a learner-centric modality, where students are forced to become more conscious and self-motivated in their learning process, creating accounts, blogs and joining communities and forums.

Another benefit is the fostering of freely available resources that minimise costs and maximise profits, guaranteeing an abundance and effectiveness of content without wasting money.

The drawbacks that are generally mentioned when referring to social networks in general were indicated by Thabit and Jasim (2011), who made a list of the eight main ones, of which we will analyse only three that can also be adapted to online learning. A social network can be disadvantageous because:

- "It wastes a lot of individuals' time and holds them back from communicating in other important activities".
- "It reduces real human activities".
- "It creates a wide gap between people who have access to the Internet and people who do not".[64]

---

[64] Ibidem, p. 40.

In the next chapter, we will analyse those parameters in a more detailed way, thanks to the formulation and observation of an empirical study that aimed at investigating the personal experiences of online users who carry out a language learning process through online platforms and technology tools. In this way, it will be possible to better explain the pros and cons of applying *eLearning* in a second/foreign language acquisition setting.

Chapter 4

Empirical Study: Online Questionnaire Survey

The objective of the following chapter is to provide an analysis of the data collected from the responses of 62 *Language Learner's Forum* users to a survey regarding students' motivation during online language acquisition and to examine the extent to which *eLearning* is accepted and how it is perceived today.

4.1 Methodology

The methodology used to carry out this study and shed light on the most significant aspects that come into play when experiencing online courses comprised of three simple steps:

- creating an online questionnaire with Google Forms;
- posting the link in a language learner-specific forum;
- gathering and analysing the data derived from the responses.

The responses were anonymous and the only personal information required to be selected were the participants' age, nationality, education level and current occupation. After these introductory questions, the following ones addressed to a number of issues regarding the respondents' experiences with foreign languages. The questions focused on which language(s) they were currently studying online, if they had already enrolled in an online course and, if they had, why it had been a positive or negative experience.

The survey involved required responses and optional responses: in the first case, the respondents were not allowed to submit the questionnaire unless those required responses had been given; in the second case, the participants could deliberately choose to skip a question and submit the questionnaire anyway. For instance, an optional response could be given in relation to the part in which they were asked to list some of the pros and cons of online language learning. Interestingly, some respondents gave their opinions based on their personal experience, thus providing the survey with greater authenticity and content diversity.

For what concerns the options provided for each question, they were structured according to different parameters: the binary *Yes*/*No* possibility, the choice of one single response among *Never*, *Rarely*, *Sometimes*, *Often*, *Always* and *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Neutral*, A*gree*, *Strongly Agree* to attitude statements, or blank texts to fill.

4.2 Summary of the responses

The following paragraphs will present the findings that emerged after the analysis of the data, which will be compared with the work of academics, researchers and linguists who gave their contributions to the literature review in the field of *eLearning*.

The genre of the questions and the subsequent analysis of the responses will be divided into six macrogroups: the demographic variables (age, nationality, education level, current occupation), the experiential variables (the respondents' language learning history), the technology proficiency and frequency of use variables, motivational variables (the enrolment motives in an online language course) and the autonomy variables.

The questions regarding the topics mentioned above were 24, 2 of which presented a grid layout and included one possible answer for each statement. Whereas the last 2 questions, which were optional, asked the respondents to provide a reason why, according to their opinion, online learning can be beneficial and a reason why it can be disadvantageous.

4.2.1 Demographic variables

Age was the first demographic question of the survey. Although the options proposed a generational diversity, the results showed that the age difference between the respondents was not very big. The number of people between the age of 18 and 25 was 34 and covered the highest percentage: 54,8%. The second position was occupied by 26 to 35-year-olds (22,6%) and the third by 12 underage youngsters (19,4%). The responses collected from the 36-45 age range were only 2 (3,2%) and the remaining age groups, 46 and older, were non-existent.
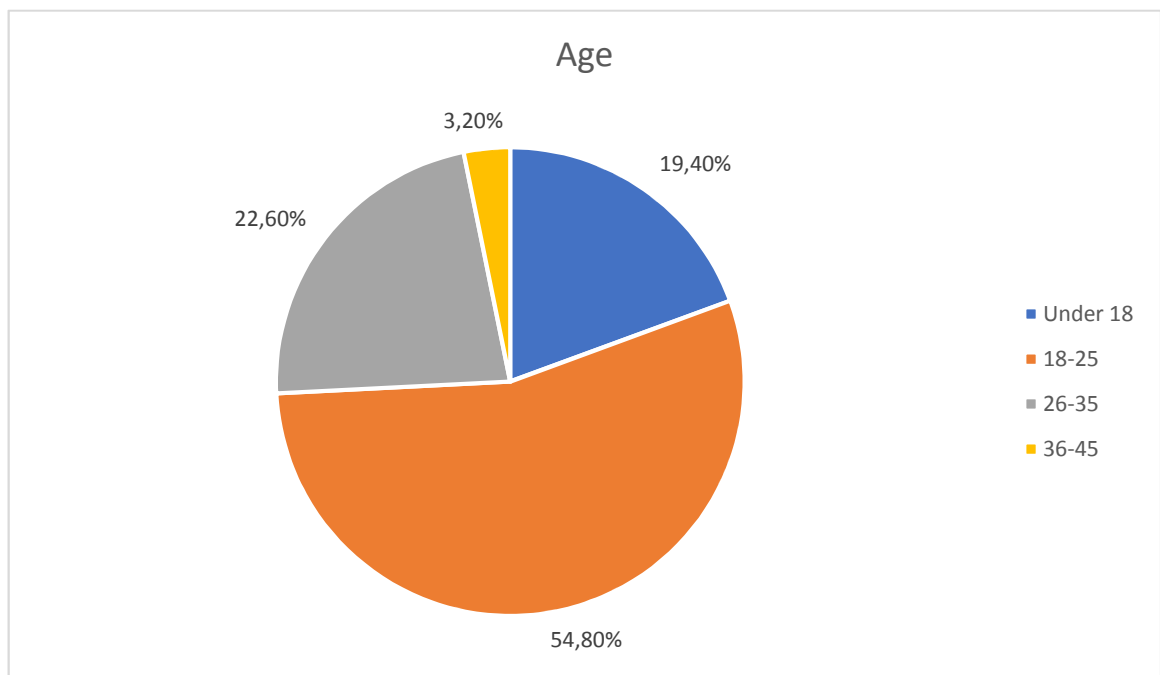
Chart 1: *Demographic variables: Age.*

Although Distance Education has the distinctive characteristic of giving attention to the needs of diverse clienteles thanks to its barrier-removal dimension, the results show that only relatively young age groups benefit from this. Why?

Initially, Distance Learning was mainly designed for older students who had other responsibilities and could not physically attend classes and face-to-face activities. But now, the number of younger students who join distance education settings is increasing and the reasons are explained in the following statement:

> The desire of many high school students to gain academic credits concurrently with their high school studies, as well as their attraction to highly demanded fields of study, […] have drawn, and will continue to draw, young students to highly acclaimed and reputable distance education providers.[65]

Of course, the results of the present survey must be interpreted warily because they represent only a minority of what is happening in the didactic field. Although the reluctance of especially older people to engage in online learning activities can be typical, it is not universal. The presence of generational distances and the possibility for older adults to adopt technological tools and social platforms as an acceptable educational method is a reality that is present and must be recognised.

The second demographic question regarded the survey participants' nationality. In descending order, the results showed a high concentration of Italians (27) and Americans (14); then, a smaller number consisted of British (5), Australians (4), Canadians (2), Dutch (2), Germans (2) and Swiss (2);

---

[65] Guri-Rosenblit S., 2005, "Distance Education and "e-learning": Not the Same Thing", in *Higher Education*, Vol. 49, Num. 4, p. 487.

and, lastly, 1 Austrian, 1 Irish, 1 Spanish and 1 Swedish submitted their responses.
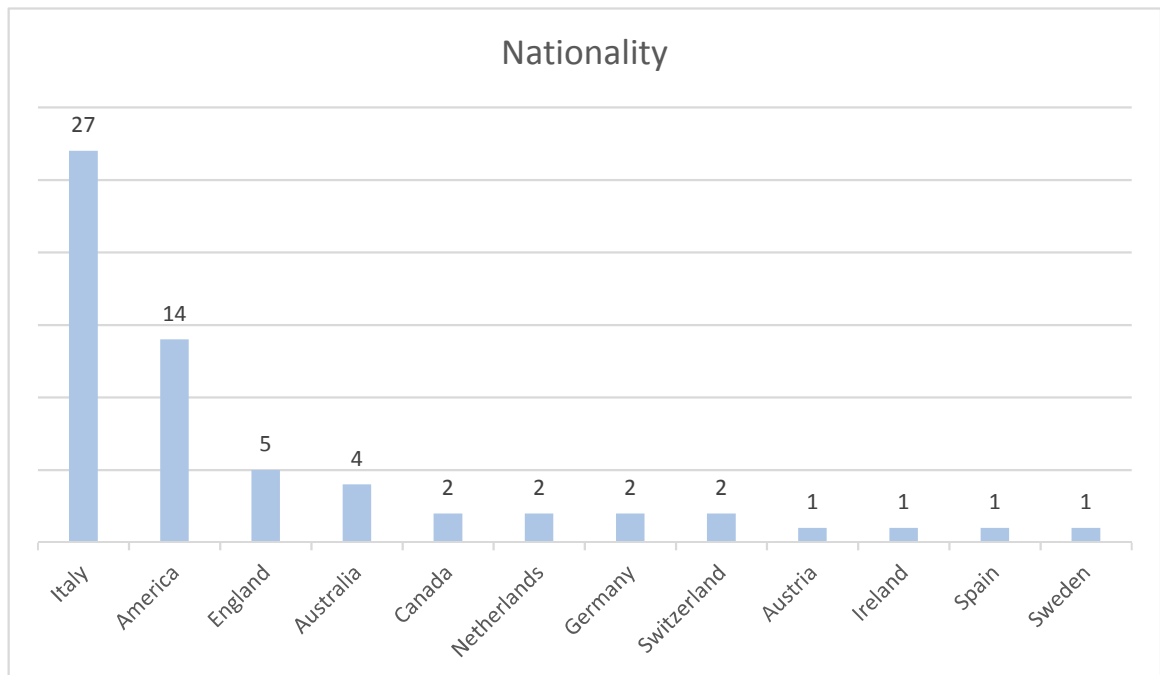

Chart 2: *Demographic variables: Nationality.*

Thanks to these findings, it was possible to have a better view of the different peoples' and cultures' opinions on Distance Learning, comparing their experiences and reaching more meaningful results in terms of authenticity, variety and personal learning.

The third survey question was related to the level of education completed by the respondents. The findings demonstrated that a great number of respondents owned a Bachelor Degree (26), a High School Diploma (16) and a Postgraduate Degree (8). Only 6 out of 62 owned a Secondary School Certificate, whereas the remaining 6 selected the option *Other*, not specifying a particular level of education.
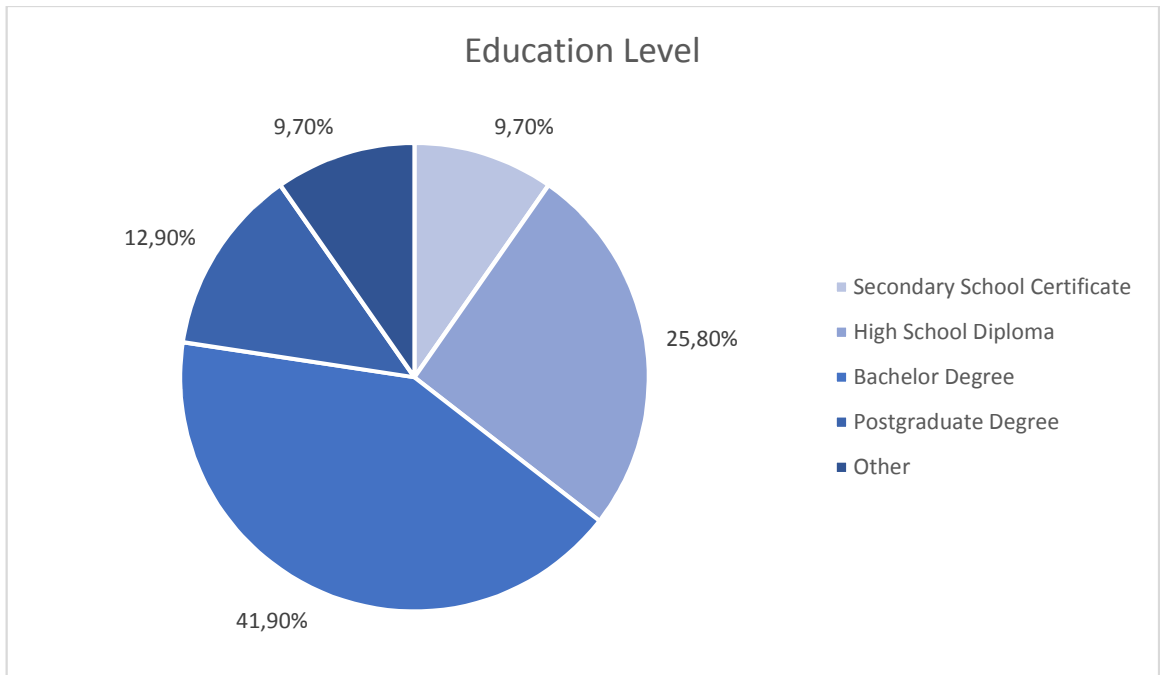
Chart 3: *Demographic variables: Education Level.*

The last demographic question was the one referring to the current occupation of the respondents. The options were numerous and so were the responses: the highest percentage (62,9%) was occupied by students, who – more specifically – were 39 out of 62. The remaining data saw the responses of 14 employees (22,6%), 3 self-employed (4,8%), 3 unemployed looking for work (4,8%) and, interestingly, 1 homemaker (1,6%). Only 2 respondents (3,2%) selected *Other* and did not specify their current occupation.
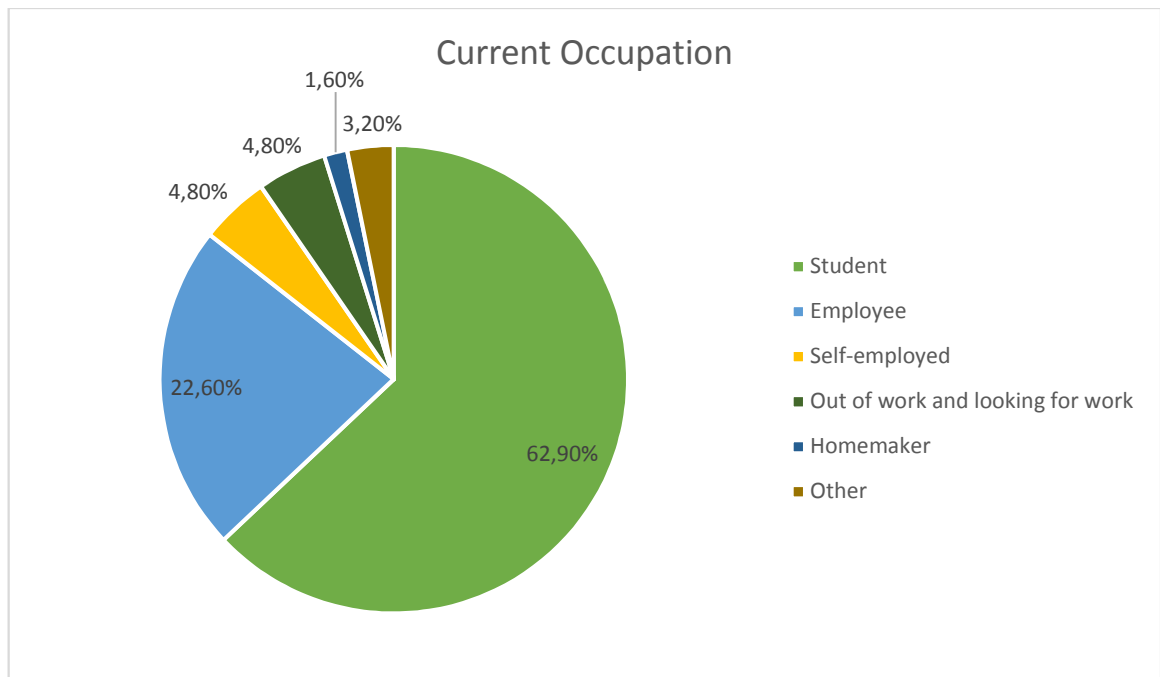
Chart 4: Demographic variables: Current occupation.

4.2.2 Experiential variables

The experiential variables refer to the previous experiences that the respondents had with second/foreign language acquisition, both with traditional methods or online.

The first question, *Which foreign language(s) are you studying online right now?*, was introductive and, thanks to the responses given by the participants, it was possible to have an overall picture of all the different idioms that were being studied when the questionnaire was filled in. The responses showed a large and varied number of distinct language families: English, German, Dutch, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, Norwegian, Danish, Czech, Swedish, Arabic, Chinese, Cantonese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Russian, Swahili, Esperanto, Hebrew.

The second question, *Have you studied other languages before?*, served as the basis for the following ones, because it showed that the times have changed and, while the majority (82,3%) had already had previous experience with language learning in general, for the rest of the respondents (17,7%) their first experience with second language acquistion was actually happening online, through an online course.
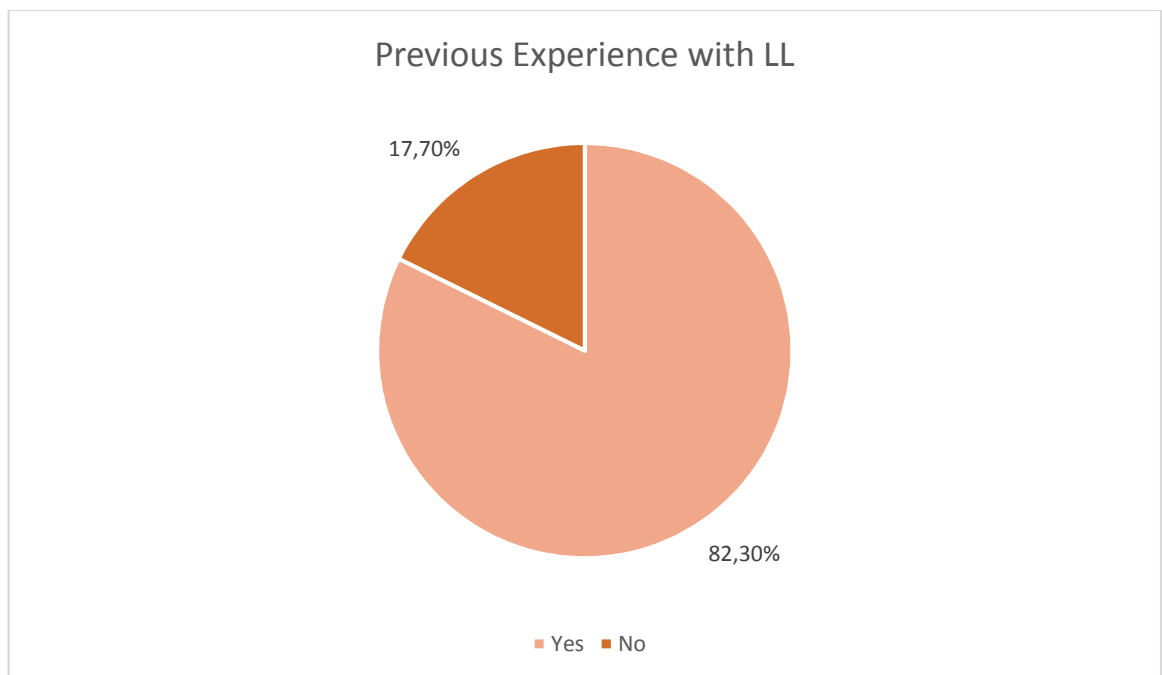

Chart 5: *Experiential variables: Previous Experience with LL.*

The fact that the survey participants belonged to a Language Leaners' Forum made the data more difficult to read because of their generality, but, at the same time, they provided a more universal evidence of the different modalities that occur in a language learning environment.

What was interesting to analyse were the findings of the following experiential questions and their consequent responses. The results collected from the third experiential question, *Have you already experienced online courses?*, demonstrated that 39 people selected *Yes* and the remaining 23 selected *No*. While the majority (62,9%) had already had an experience with

a second/foreign language through online courses, the minority (37,1%) had not until that moment.
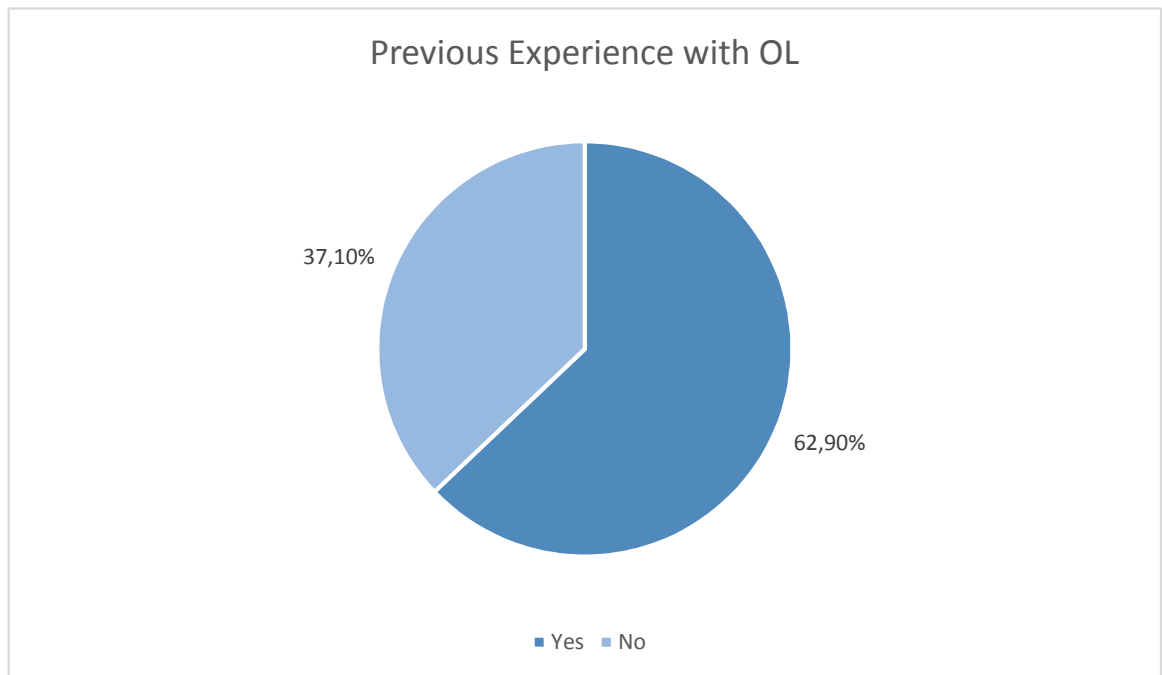

Chart 6: *Experiential variables: Previous Experience with OL.*

Then, whoever had selected *Yes*, was free to provide an additional response explaining if they had found their previous experience with online courses positive and explain why/why not. The 77,3% of the survey participants who had indicatated that they had already had a previous experience with online learning, responded to the fourth experiential question, *Did you find your previous experience positive*?, selecting *Yes*, whereas the remaining 22,7% selected *No*.

The data collected from the fourth and last experiential question were heterogeneous and eye-opening. The majority of the survey participants gave their personal opinions on what had or had not worked during their online learning process and the most significant content will be addressed in the following lines.
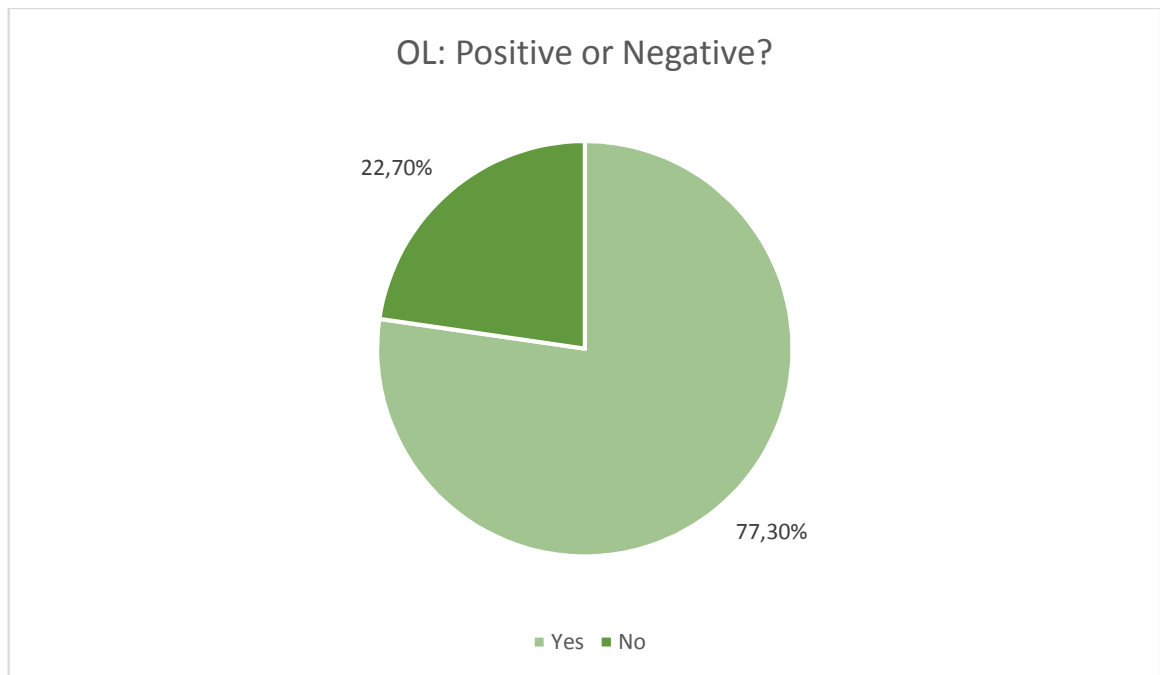
OL: Positive or Negative?

22,70%

77,30%

■ Yes ■ No

Chart 7: *Experiential variales: OL: Positive or Negative?.*

The main reasons why the respondents found their previous experience with online learning positive were: the possibility to choose from a variety of materials, the immediate availability of said materials thanks to technological tools, the cost effectiveness, the time and space flexibility, the opportunity to learn at one's own pace, not having a fixed schedule and being able to still fulfil external commitments.

If all the above features do not occur, the learning experience can result ineffective and unproductive and the students can find the tasks impersonal, boring and frustrating.

These are the pros and cons of *eLearning* according to the survey participants, which will be further explained and discussed in the last paragraph of the present chapter, taking into consideration the personal opinions provided by the respondents at the end of the questionnaire.

4.2.3 Technological variables

The technological variables were analysed on the basis of a series of questions on the participants' technology proficiency and frequency of use during their language learning process. As we can see in the following charts, the results were quite clear and homogeneous.

The first question was: *What are the average hours per week you devote for your study?*. 21 people (33,9%) selected the option *2 to 4 hours*, 19 (30,6%) selected *Less than 2 hours*, 17 (27,4%) selected *5 to 7 hours* and 5 (8,1%) selected *More than 8 hours*.
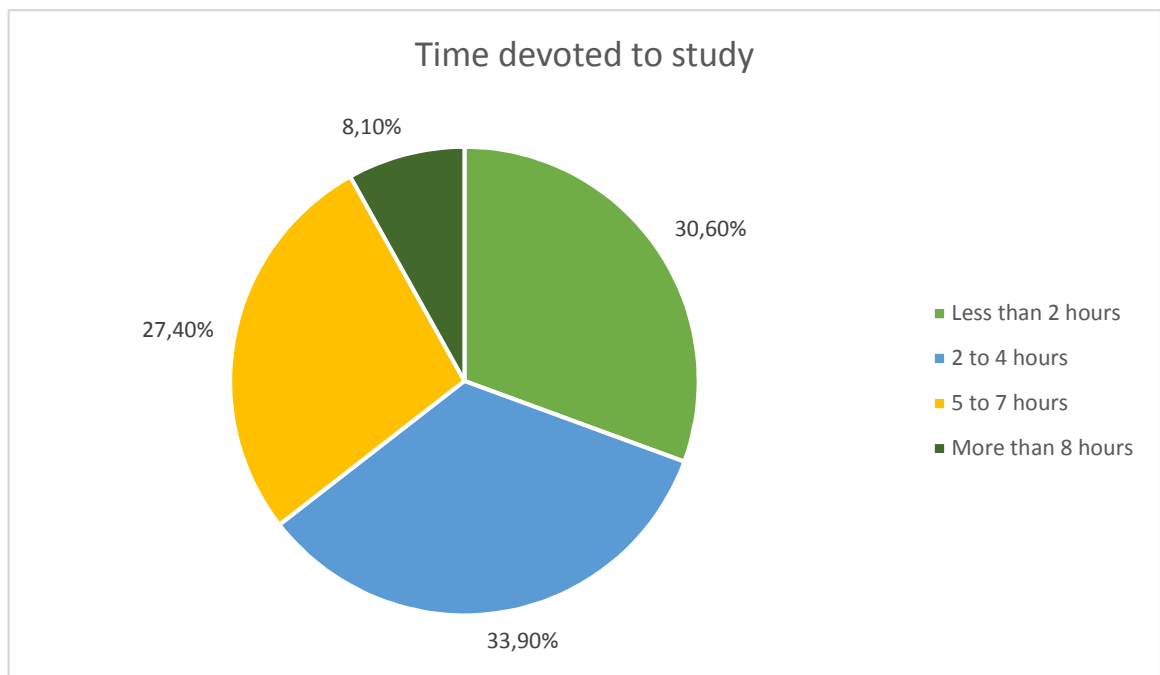
Chart 8: *Technological variables: Time devoted to study.*

The results to the second question, *How would you rate your technology proficiency?*, showed a very high computer literacy level for the majority of the participants who took the online questionnaire. In fact, as we can see in the following chart, 31 people (50%) responded to the question indicating

the option *Very High*, 20 (32,3%) indicated *High*, 10 (16,1%) indicated *Normal* and only 1 (1,6%) indicated *Low*. No one selected *Very Low*.
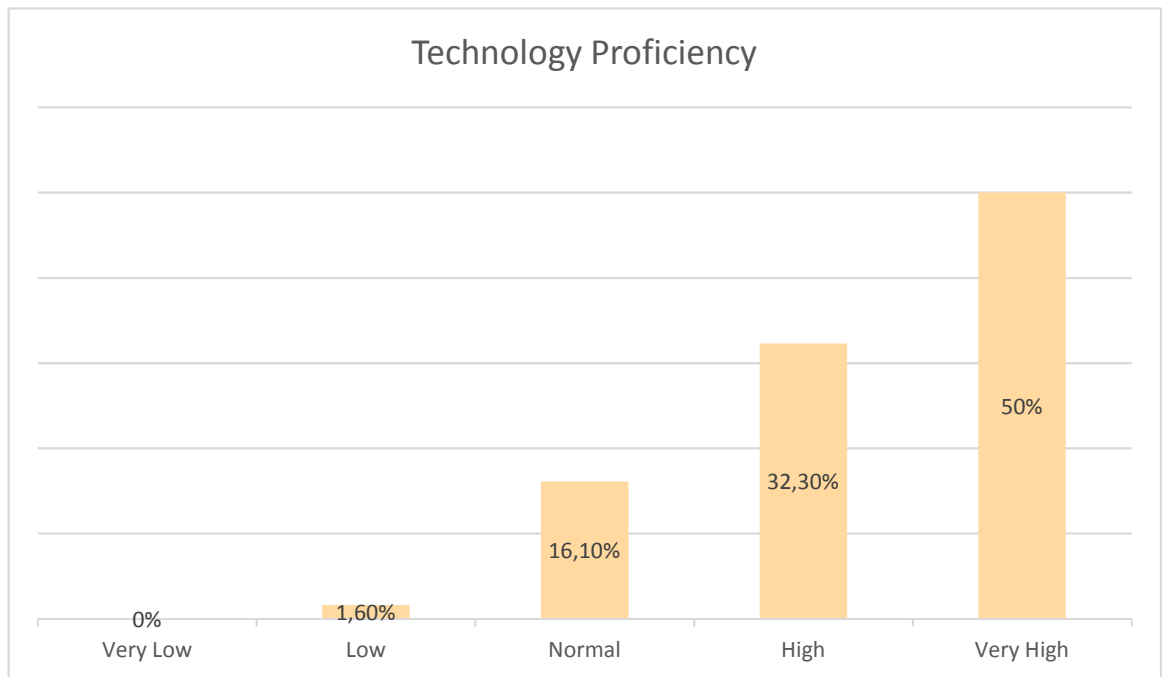

Chart 9: *Technological variables: Technology Proficiency.*

The results derived from the questions connected to technology proficiency and to the frequency of use of technological tools, which will be addressed in the following subparagraph, are very positive and optimistic because those variables tend to become a necessity for a positive conduct of online tasks. Of course, the analysis of this questionnaire presents a limitation as for what concerns an adequate measurement for the ability to use a computer and/or mobile devices in general, seeing that there is no actual proof other than a self-evaluation of said ability.

The third question was: *How would you rate the frequency at which you use technology (Internet, social media, smart phones, cell phone apps, etc.) every day?*. 42 respondents (67,7%) out of 62 selected the option *Very High*,

71

17 (27,4%) selected *High* and 3 (4,8%) selected *Normal*. No one selected *Low* nor *Very Low*.
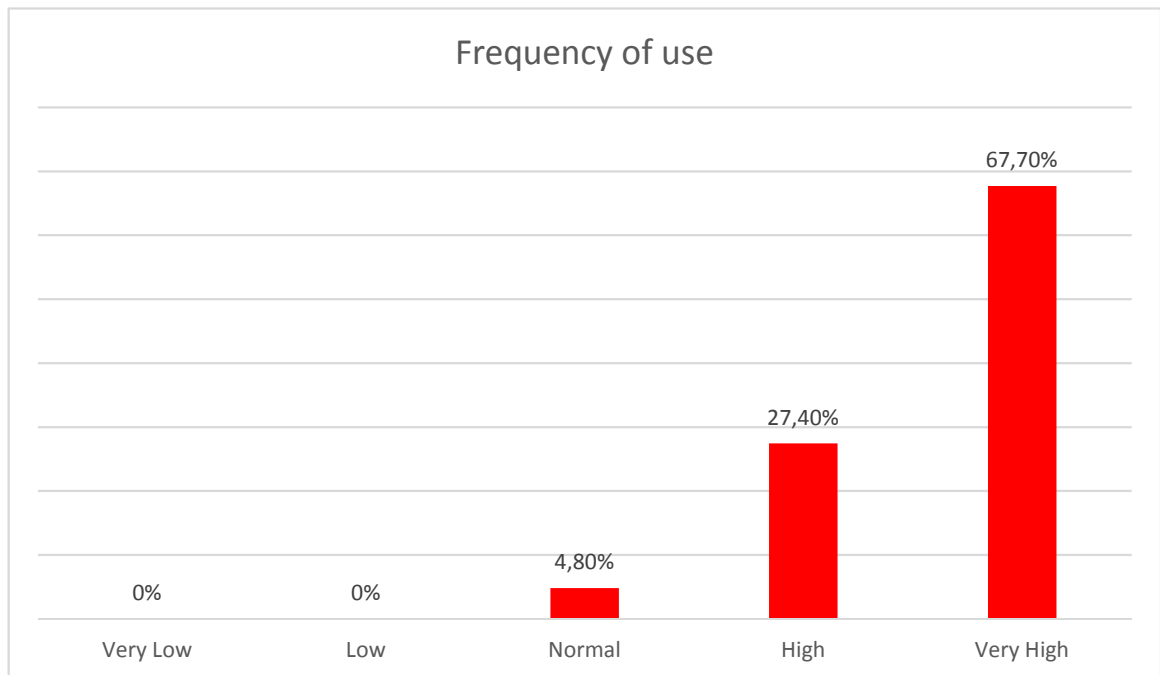

Chart 10: *Technological variables: Frequency of use.*

The answers to the third question required a different perspective than the answers to the fourth one, for the simple reason that the former investigated on the average amount of time people spend on the Internet in general, to post, interact with other people, listen to music, use apps and so forth; whereas the last one specifically referred to the amount of time devoted to the Internet for the completion of online educational activities.

In fact, the last question connected to the technological variables was: *How would you rate the number of hours you use technology to study?*. The data collected was wide-ranging: 9 people (14,5%) responded indicating *Very High*, 15 (24,2%) indicated *High*, the majority, 22 (35,5%), selected the option *Normal*, 12 (19,4%) selected *Low* and 4 (6,5%) selected *Very Low*.
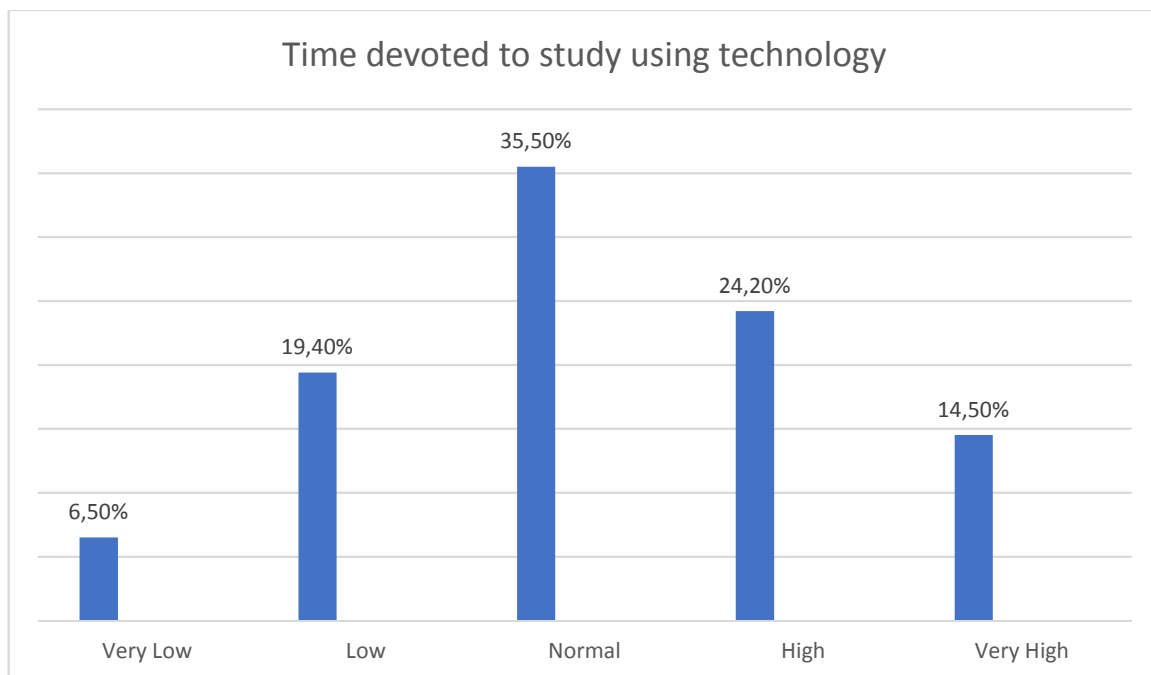
Chart 11: *Technological variables: Time devoted to study using technology.*

4.2.4 Motivational variables

In order to analyse the motivational variables that consider the factors that drive a language learner to complete an online course, a particular layout was used in the online questionnaire, which consisted in the formulation of an introductive statement, *I decided to learn a language online because of these factors:*, and six possible answers: *time and place flexibility*, *cost effectiveness*, *easy access to resources*, *rapid interaction with people all over the world*, *personalised learning* and *impossibility to travel*. The responses were measured in a scale that went from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* and some interesting results were found.

For each variable proposed in the survey, we will see to what extent the respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement. At that point, taking into account the respondents' actual words and opinions on the matter, we will

be able to draw a detailed and authentic picture of what learning online really means. For this reason, the layout will be divided based on a thematic choice.

Time and place flexibility. The concept of "anytime, anywhere" has already been addressed in the first chapter and consists in the main reason why students employ technology for Distance Learning. And, since it is also the first benefit enlisted in most of the literature reviews on *eLearning* encountered during our analysis, the results of the questionnaire confirmed a great percentage of agreement with the statement: in fact, 43 respondents selected the *Strongly Agree* option and 11 (17,7%) selected *Agree*, meaning that the time and place flexibility variable reached a level of agreement of 54 out of 62. Then, 6 respondents (9,7%) selected *Neutral*, 1 *Disagree* and 1 *Strongly Disagree*.
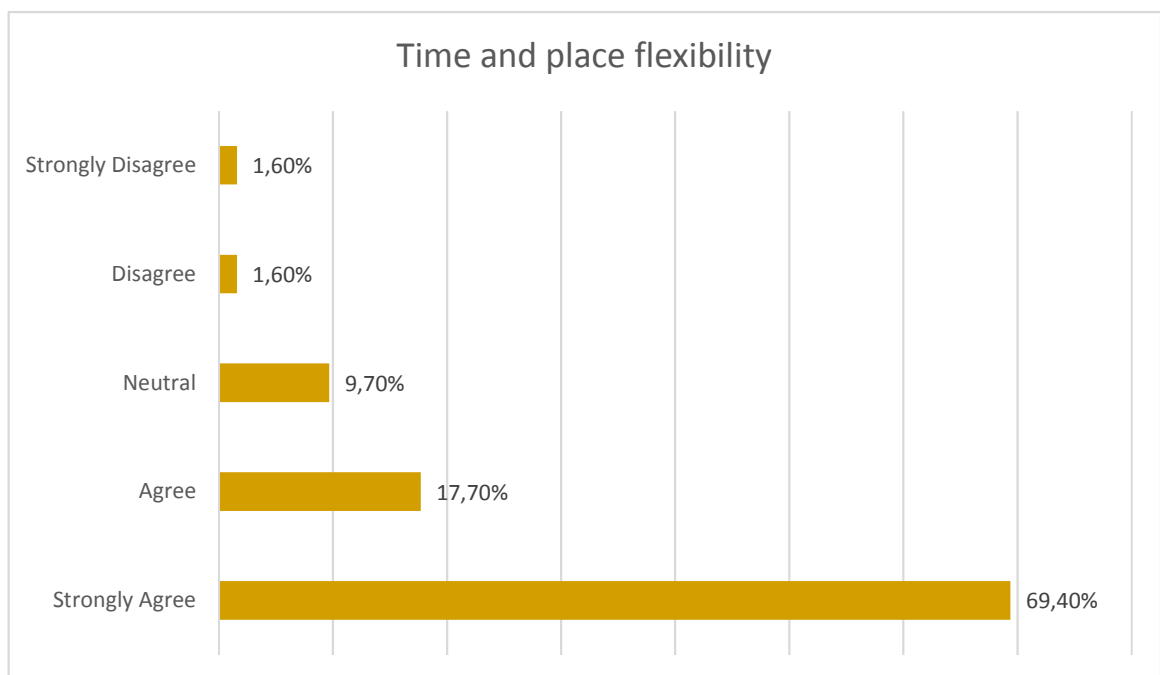

Chart 12: *Motivational variables: Time and place flexibility.*

With regard to this topic, some of the participants affirmed: "You can study wherever you want, whenever you want"; "You can learn in your own free time"; "Non si fanno spostamenti ed è più comodo"; "You don't have a

schedule, you can take the course during your free time"; "No space and time limits"; "Sono utili per apprendere velocemente e comodamente da casa"; "You can learn wherever you are, whenever you want. My Spanish teacher lives in my pocket!"; "You can adapt your learning habits to whatever else is happening in your life and it is not tied to a specific place"; "You can learn in your own free time"; "You can do it when and where you want".

Cost effectiveness. The data connected to this type of motivational variable showed a high percentage of people that view *eLearning* positively in terms of affordability and convenience. In fact, 22 respondents (35,5%) selected *Strongly Agree*, 18 (29%) selected *Agree*, 18 (29%) selected *Neutral* and the remaining 4 (6,5%) selected *Disagree*.
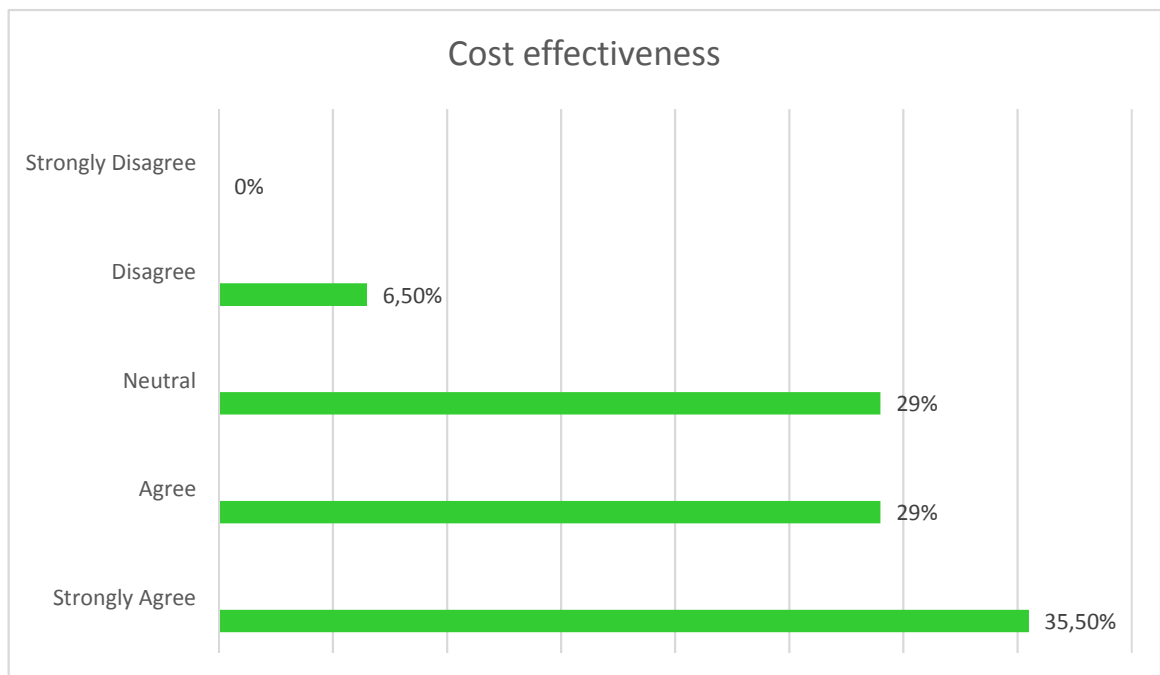

Chart 13: *Motivational variables: Cost effectiveness.*

For what concerns this specific aspect, most of the respondents referred to online courses as a cheap, affordable and convenient way to carry out a

language learning experience. As one participant put it: "Online tools are generally cheaper or free".

Easy access to resources. An important factor to take into consideration when developing or enrolling in an online course is the choice of the content and materials necessary to reach a specific learning goal.

In this respect, most of the respondents agreed that through any technological devise it is easier to access to educational resources, according to the learners' needs and personal features. 29 respondents (46,8%) selected *Strongly Agree*, 27 (43,5%) selected *Agree*, 5 (8,1%) were neutral and only 1 (1,6%) disagreed.
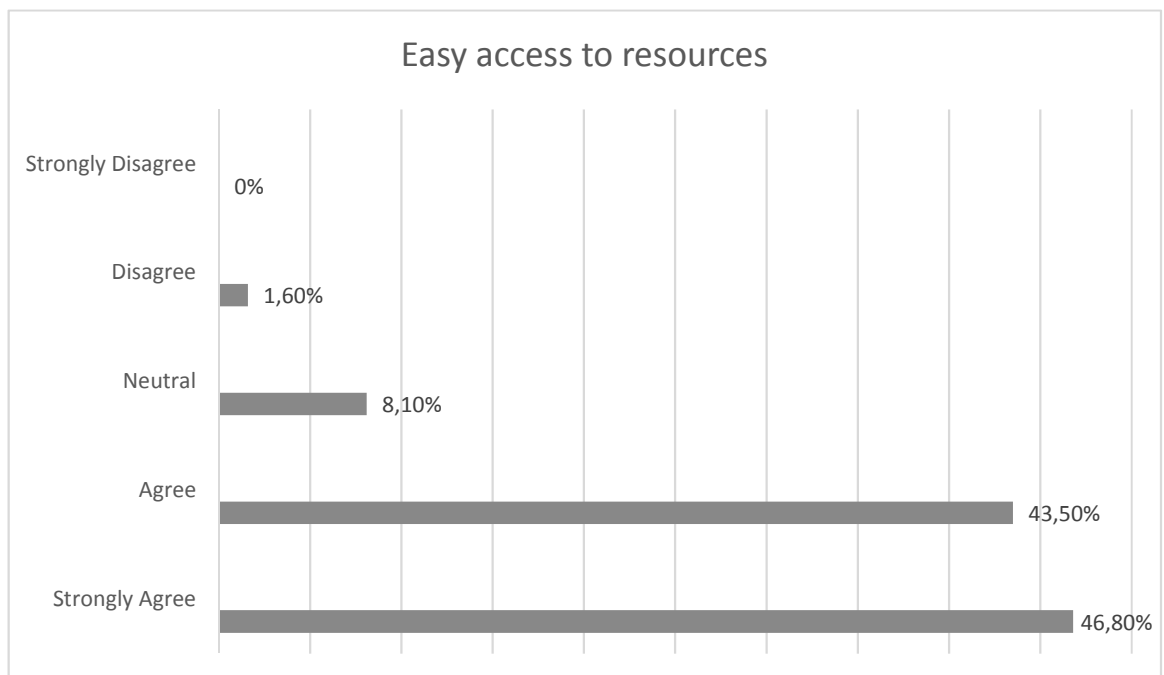

Chart 14: *Motivational variables: Easy access to resources.*

As some respondents stated: "A pro of learning a language online is essentially unlimited resources"; "There is a large choice of materials", "It's

so easy to do, there's so many resources"; "A lot of additional learning materials is just a mouse click away".

Rapid interaction with people all over the world. This variable refers to the interactive and collaborative dimension of the Internet. Online classes that provide community and communication among users are believed to enhance the language learning experience. Basing this statement on a series of literature analyses on *eLearning*, the participants considered this type of learning as an easier way to communicate and get more immediate responses thanks to more instantaneous communication modes, such as emails, instant messaging, videoconferences, etc.

The data collected demonstrated that 14 participants (22,6%) strongly agreed with the above statement, 18 (29%) selected the option *Agree*, 14 (22,6%) selected *Neutral*, 12 (19,4%) disagreed and 4 (6,5%) strongly disagreed.
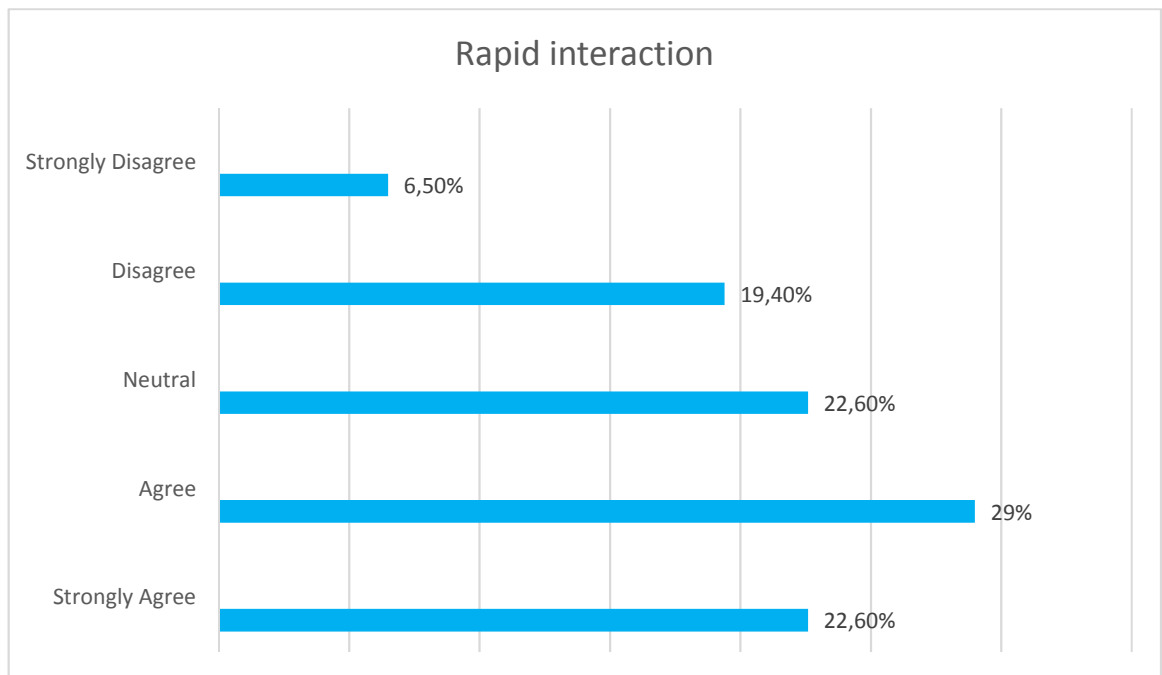

Chart 15: *Motivational variables: Rapid interaction.*

Regarding this matter, a respondent wrote: "You can often and easily get in touch with native speakers". Another one, similarly, talked about the possibility of having "an easier interaction with native speakers" and the availability of reaching people from all over the world who speak the same language that is being learned, without the need to physically be in that place. This concept it strictly linked with the variable *Impossibility to travel*, the results of which will be analysed shortly.

Personalised learning. This variable is related with the possibility for the learners to choose their own learning method and programme, understanding what is more suitable for their own personal traits and features, and developing competence, autonomy and knowledge. 32 participants (51,6%) showed agreement, 17 (27,4%) were neutral and 13 (20,9%) disagreed.
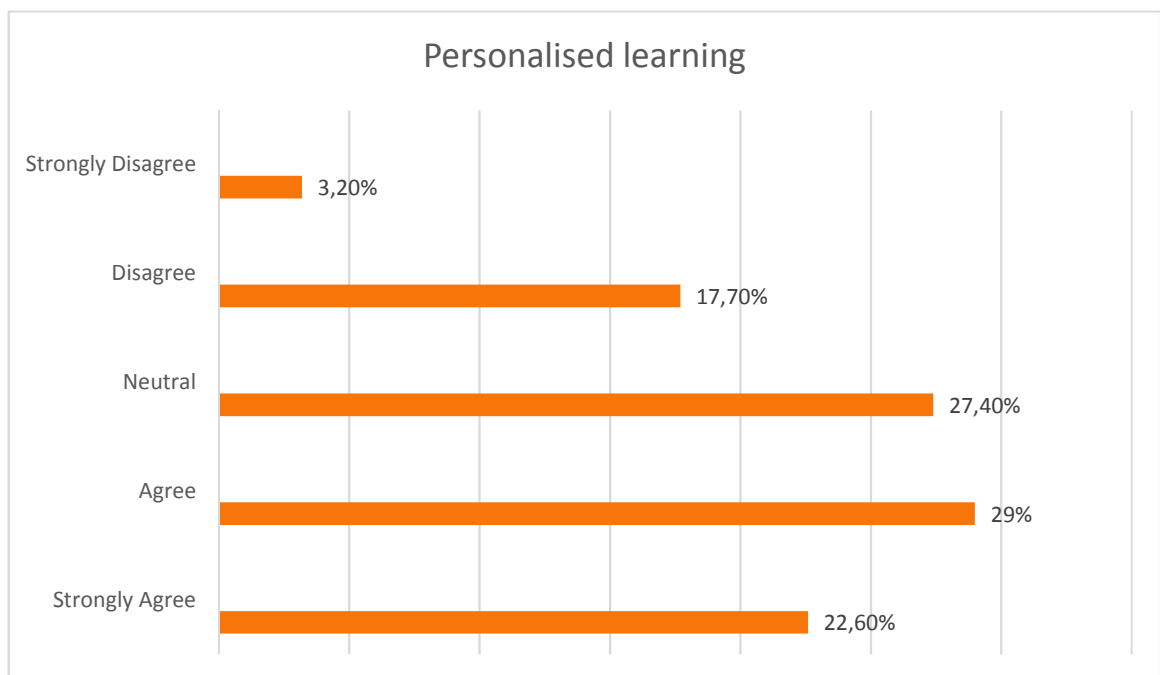

Chart 16: *Motivational variables: Personalised learning.*

The participants' contributions regarding this aspect were numerous: "You can decide your study schedule"; "You can learn in your own ways"; "You

can go at your own pace and can easily open a new tab and research something if you aren't understanding it"; "I am able to focus on what I need"; "*eLearning* ensures flexibility of schedules and methods"; "It allows me to be flexible in my commitments"; "I can spend more time on the topics I find most difficult without fearing to slow down the rhythm of the class".

Impossibility to travel. The results to this variable were discrete: a great number of respondents, 21, were neutral (33,9%), 11 (17,7%) selected *Disagree* and 6 (9,7) selected *Strongly Disagree*. 16 (25,8%) selected *Agree* and 8 (12,9%) selected *Strongly Agree*.
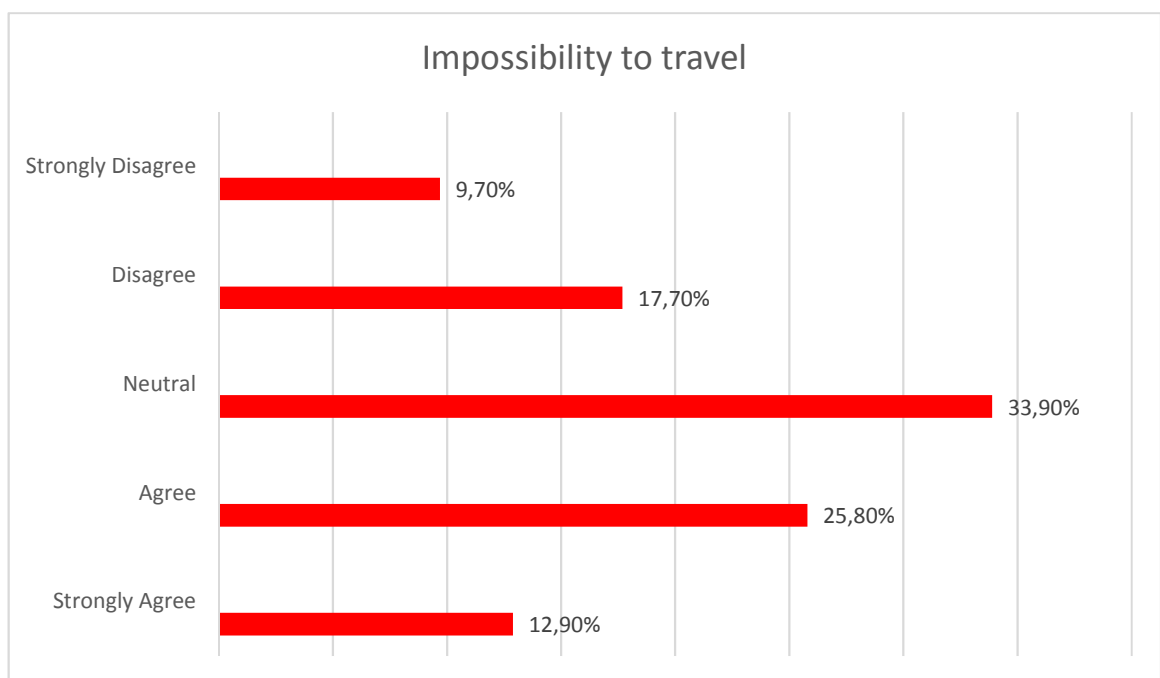

Chart 17: *Motivational variables: Impossibility to travel.*

Another series of statements related to the motivational factors that come into play during the activation of an online language learning process were the following: *I often think "Why am I doing this?"*, *Despite the difficulties, I am determined to keep going*, *I often think about quitting*.

79

Interestingly, the results indicated a low level of agreement with the survey statements, with most of the respondents showing a high degree of motivation even in autonomous settings. Respectively, 37 people (59,7%) disagreed, 13 (21%) were neutral and 12 (19,3%) agreed with the first statement (*I often think "Why am I doing this?"*); 10 respondents (16,1%) selected *Always*, 37 (59,7%) selected *Often*, 14 (22,6%) selected *Sometimes* and only 1 (1,6%) selected *Rarely* for what concerned the second statement (*Despite the difficulties, I am determined to keep going*); and, lastly, 41 participants (66,1%) indicated the option *Never*, 16 (25,8%) indicated *Sometimes* and only 5 (8,1%) indicated *Always* for what concerned the third statement (*I often think about quitting*).
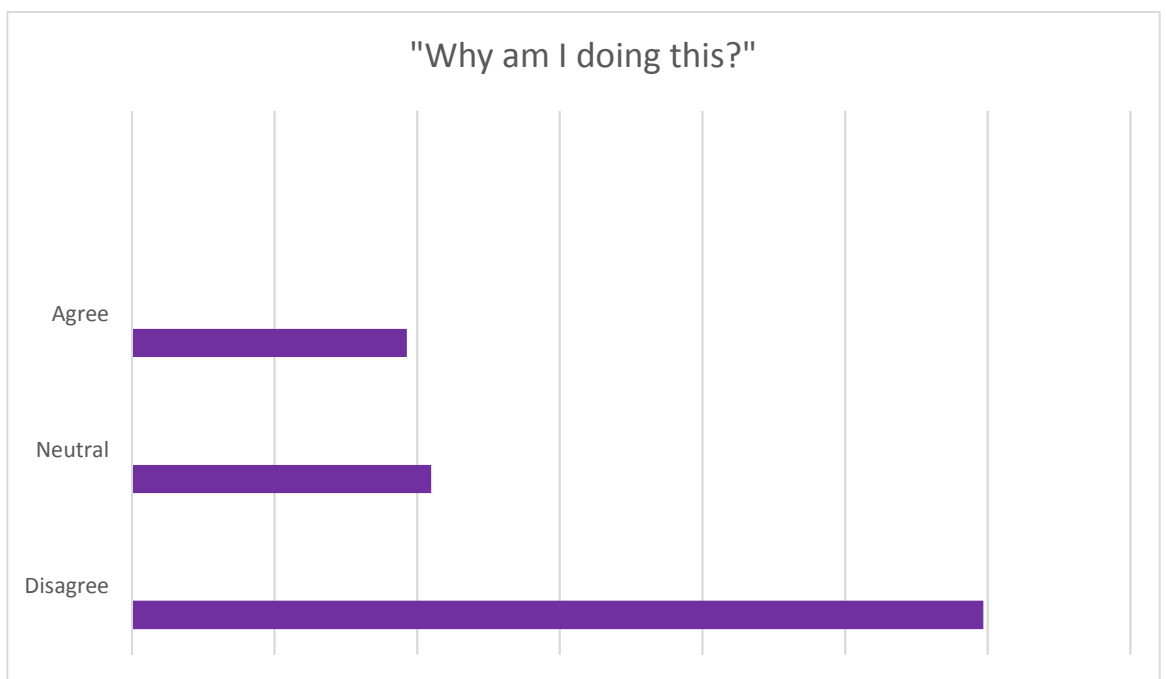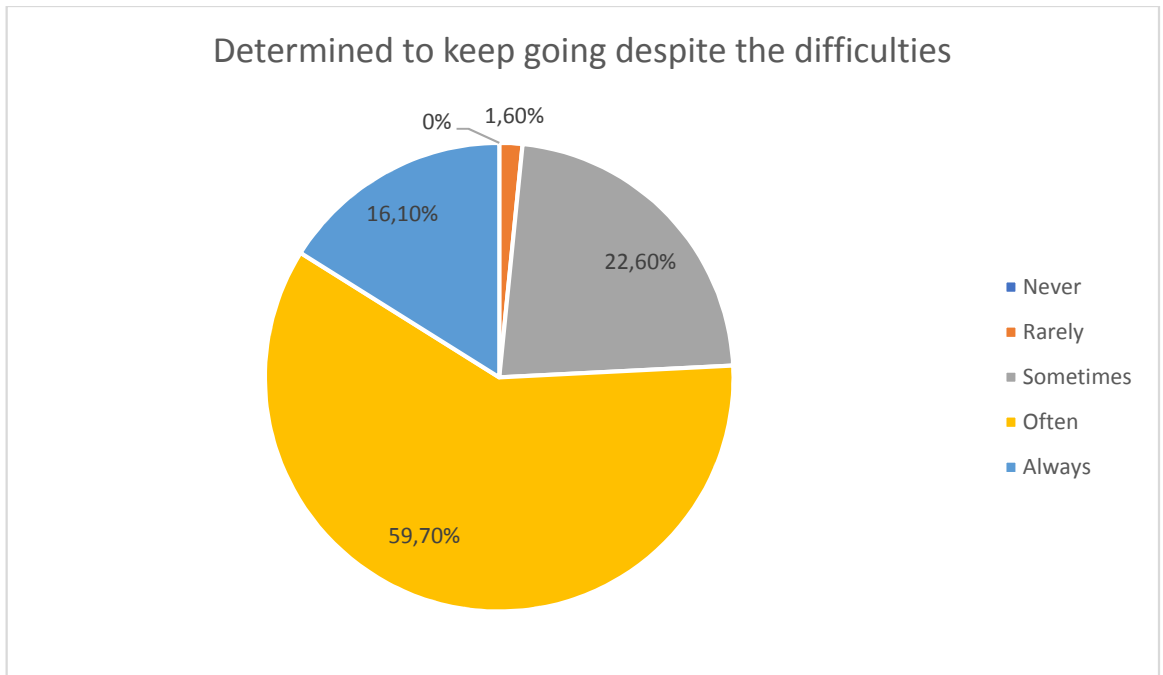

Chart 18: Motivational variables: "Why am I doing this?".

Chart 19: *Motivational variables: Determined to keep going despite the difficulties.*
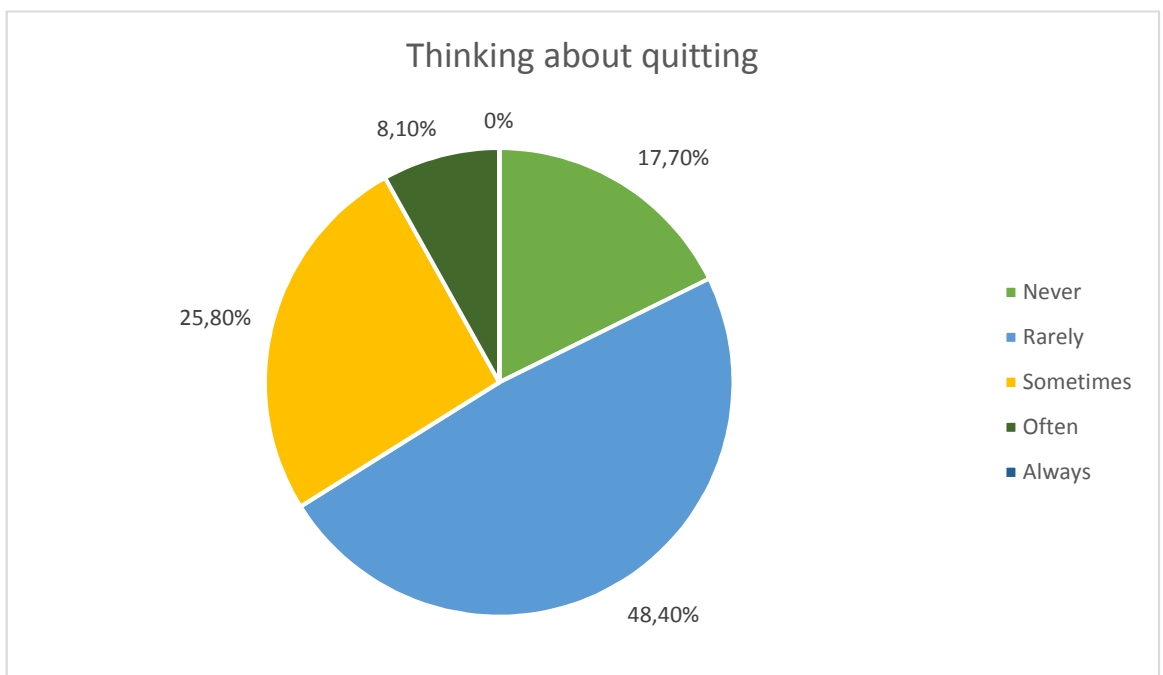

Chart 20: *Motivational variables: Thinking about quitting.*

For what concerns the difficulties that students may encounter in their learning venture in terms of motivation, a series of predictions were made and were included in the survey in order to explore and grasp the factors that determine students' lack of motivation during online courses.

The following data represent the results deriving from the statement: *I find it difficult to maintain my motivation under the following circumstances:* and its respective options: *unhappiness with the course content*, with 40 respondents (64,5%) agreeing, 14 (22,6%) being neutral and 8 (12,9%) disagreeing; *low scores*, with 22 respondents (35,5%) disagreeing, 19 (30,6%) being neutral and 21 (33,9%) agreeing; *lack of progress*, with 38 respondents (61,3%) agreeing, 13 (21%) being neutral and 11 (17,7%) disagreeing; *technical problems*, with 28 respondents (45,1%) agreeing, 21 (33,9%) being neutral and 13 (21%) disagreeing; *heavy workload*, with 25 respondents (40,3%) agreeing, 19 (30,6%) being neutral and 18 (29,1%) disagreeing.

Difficulties in maintaining motivation

- Unhappiness with the course content: Disagree 12,90%, Neutral 22,60%, Agree 64,50%
- Low scores: Disagree 35,50%, Neutral 30,60%, Agree 33,90%
- Lack of progress: Disagree 17,70%, Neutral 21%, Agree 61,30%
- Technical problems: Disagree 21%, Neutral 33,90%, Agree 45,10%
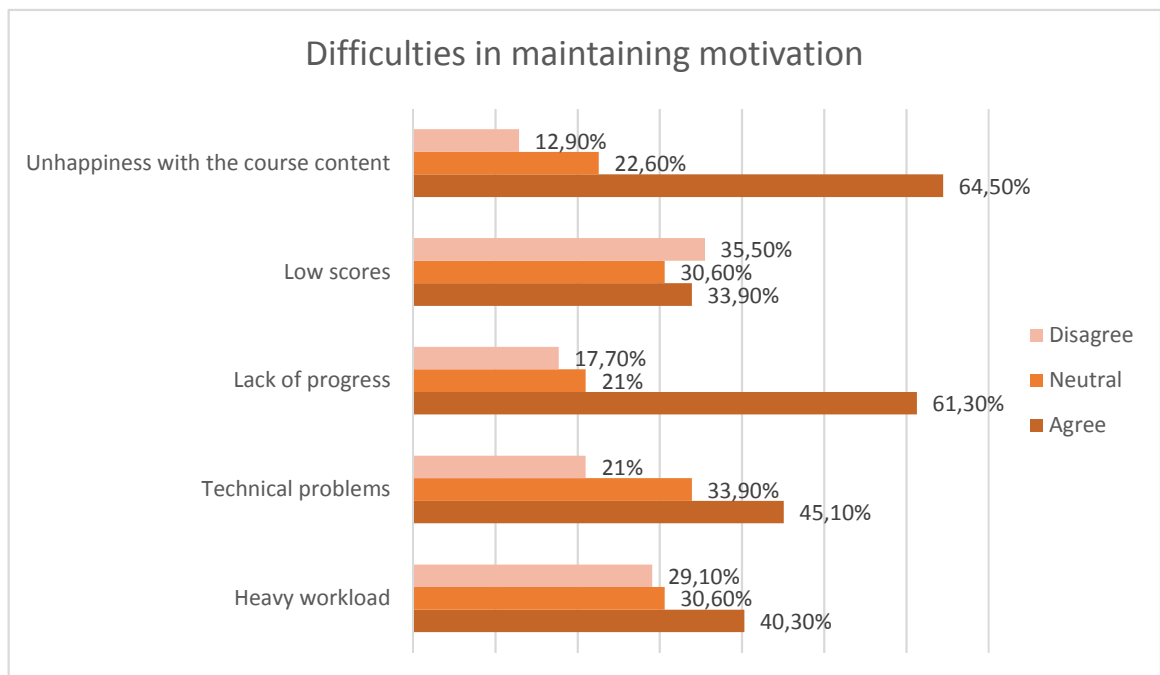- Heavy workload: Disagree 29,10%, Neutral 30,60%, Agree 40,30%

Chart 21: *Motivational variables: Difficulties in maintaining motivation.*

Unhappiness with the course content, lack of progress, technical problems and heavy workload showed the highest level of agreement. Whereas the option of having low scores and a consequent loss of motivation resulted to be disagreeable.

The following table illustrates a summary of the responses emerged in the survey referring to the motivation variables.

Motivational variables I decided to learn a language because of these factors:	S. D.	D.	N.	A.	S. A.
Time and place flexibility	1,6%	1,6%	9,7%	17,7%	69,4%
Cost effectiveness	-	6,5%	29%	29%	35,5%
Easy access to resources	-	1,6%	8,1%	43,5%	46,8%
Rapid interaction with people all over the world	6,5%	19,4%	22,6%	29%	22,6%
Personalised learning	3,2%	17,7%	27,4%	29%	22,6%
Impossibility to travel	9,7%	17,7%	39,9%	25,8%	12,9%
	S. D.	D.	N.	A.	S. A.
I often think "Why am I doing this?"	25,8%	33,9%	21%	14,5%	4,8%
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Despite the difficulties, I am determined to keep going.	-	1,6%	22,6%	59,7%	16,1%
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
I often think about quitting.	17,7%	48,4%	25,8%	8,1%	-

	S. D.	D.	N.	A.	S. A.
I find it difficult to maintain my motivation under the following circumstances:					
Unhappiness with the course content.	1,6%	11,3%	22,6%	43,5%	21%
Low scores	3,2%	32,3%	30,6%	27,4%	6,5%
Lack of progress	3,2%	14,5%	21%	41,9%	19,4%
Technical problems	6,5%	14,5%	33,9%	27,4%	17,7%
Heavy workload	9,7%	19,4%	30,6%	30,6%	9,7%

Table 1: Motivational variables

Lastly, strictly connected to motivation is the concept of autonomy. The next and final variables to examine regard specifically this aspect.

4.2.5 Autonomy variables

As we have already seen in the theoretical chapter of the present study, it is agreed that developing autonomy in Distance Learning is one of the most crucial and difficult processes to carry out when studying a second/foreign language.

The objective of the research was to understand how the participants perceived the concept of autonomy, seeing whether they viewed it as a teacher-less environment and connected it with self-instruction, or if they recognised the importance of the instructor as well, who, concomitantly with the students, contributes to the enhancement of learner social and personal development, promoting a friendly and open environment and facilitating the learning process.

The first question regarding the concept of autonomy, *I find it difficult to learn online in terms of self-autonomy*, aimed at collecting the point of view

84

of people who deliberately chose to take an online course and activate this capability.

The responses showed a high level of disagreement with the statement: only 11 (17,7%) agreed, 21 (33,9%) were neutral and the remaining 30 (48,4%) disagreed.
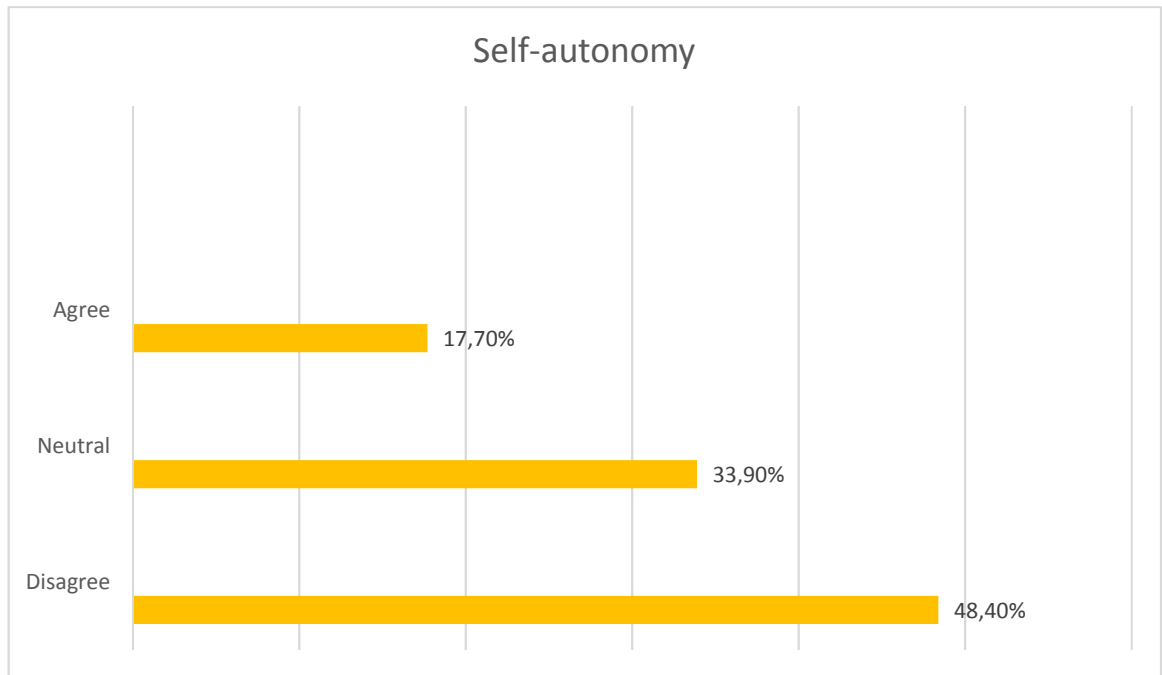

Chart 22: *Autonomy variables: Self-autonomy.*

The following statement, *I find that exchanging ideas with my instructor and peers encourages critical thinking and improves communication*, referred to the promotion of a teacher-student relationship and the importance of this condition. One respondent affirmed: "It is nice to have something/someone to be accountable to". From the results collected it appeared that this variable was important to most of the respondents: in fact, 30 of them (48,4%) agreed, 27 (43,5%) were neutral and 5 (8,1%) disagreed.
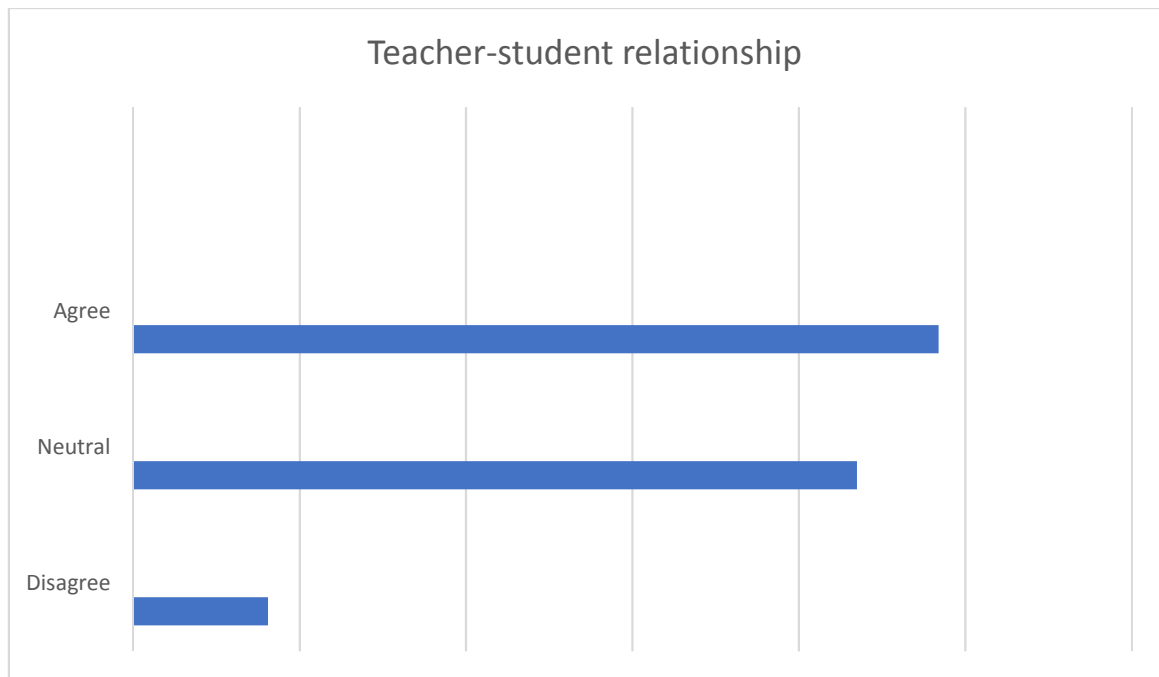
Chart 23: Autonomy variables: Teacher-student relationship.

The statement *In my opinion, autonomy can be reached when and if:* entailed five variables, respectively: *I don't need to conduct a collaborative relationship with the instructor*, *I recognise the importance of the instructor's feedback and use it to my advantage*, *I ask for help if needed*, *I can make conscious decisions about my learning*, *I am able to self-evaluate, set and achieve my learning objectives*, which will be analysed individually.

I don't need to conduct a collaborative relationship with the instructor. The majority of the respondents (40,3%) selected the option *Neutral*, 5 (8,1%) selected *Strongly Agree*, 17 (27,4%) selected *Agree*, 4 (6,5%) selected *Strongly Disagree* and 11 (17,7%) selected *Disagree*.

I recognise the importance of the instructor's feedback and use it to my advantage. 9 participants (8,10%) responded selecting *Strongly Agree*, 31 (50%) selecting A*gree*, 21 (33,9%) selecting *Neutral* and only 1 (1,6%) selecting *Disagree*.

86

I ask for help if needed. 6 respondents indicated the option *Strongly Agree*, 34 (54,8%) indicated *Agree*, 18 (29%) indicated *Neutral*, 2 (3,2%) indicated *Disagree* and 2 (3,2%) indicated *Strongly Disagree*.

I can make conscious decisions about my learning. The results showed a high degree of agreement: 21 respondents (33,9%) selected the option *Strongly Agree*, 27 (45,2%) selected *Agree*, 11 (17,7%) were neutral, 1 (1,6%) selected *Disagree* and 1 (1,6%) selected *Strongly Disagree*.

I am able to self-evaluate, set and achieve my learning objectives. 21 participants (33,9%) indicated the option *Strongly Agree*, 27 (43,5%) selected *Agree*, 11 (17,7%) selected *Neutral*, 2 (3,2%) selected *Disagree* and 1 (1,6%) selected *Strongly Disagree*.
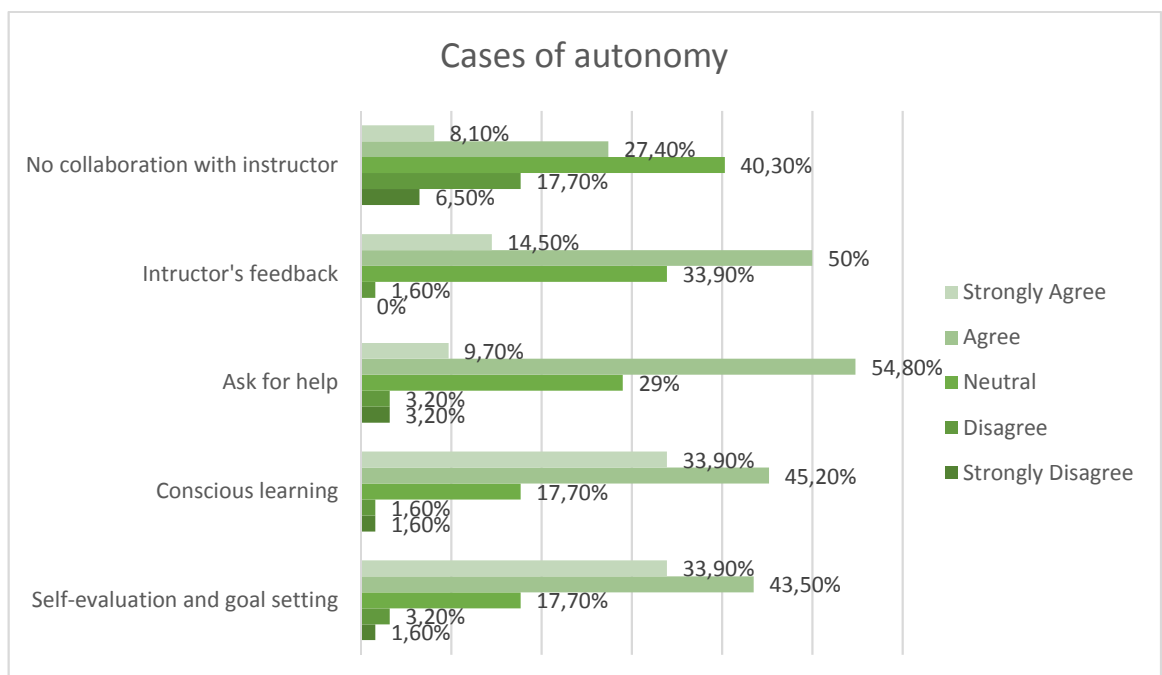

Chart 24: *Autonomy variables: Cases of autonomy.*

4.3 Experienced pros and cons of *eLearning*

The previous paragraphs have drawn a detailed picture of the main benefits and setbacks encountered when partaking in a language learning online course. Thanks to the findings of this empirical research, it was possible to witness a variety of personal opinions and experiences on the matter, which will be discussed shortly.

The procedure used to conduct the analysis of the survey conclusions will follow the literature reviews of some important authors who gave their contribution regarding respectively the benefits and drawbacks deriving from the unconventional methodology of *eLearning*, which will be combined with the survey participants' actual responses.

4.3.1 Pros

First, the respondents were asked to provide the main reasons why learning a language online could be considered an advantage and, as we have already seen in paragraph 3.2.2, the variables entailed: the possibility to choose from a variety of materials, the immediate availability of said materials thanks to technological tools, the cost effectiveness, the time and space flexibility, the opportunity to learn at one's own pace, not having a fixed schedule and being able to still fulfil external commitments.

For what concerns the provision of materials, it was studied that online content is easier to collect, organise and make use of. "*eLearning* provides immediacy of information, that is accessible 24/7, anytime and anywhere"[66].

---

[66] Pollard E., Hillage J., 2001, *Exploring e-Learning*, Brighton, Uᴋ, The Institute for Employment Studies, p. 23.

As for the economic factor, "*eLearning* is said to be much cheaper to deliver than traditional instructor-led/classroom training as it reduces delivery costs (trainer salaries, classroom booking fees, etc.) and training recipient costs (travel, subsistence and opportunity costs)"[67]. A consequence of this aspect is a learning compression in terms of personal learning time: "the time needed to learn particular topics is reduced as learning is tailored to the individual, thus the individual only needs to learn new material or select material which is relevant to them"[68]. As a matter of fact, some respondents claimed that thanks to their previous online language course experience they were able to carry out their learning process in their own way, reinforcing the idea that *eLearning* is a "just for you", learner-centric type of learning. One respondent provided an example for what concerned an online course that involved video viewings: thanks to the possibility to pause the video and rewind it whenever it was needed, s/he had the opportunity to comprehend what had not been understood during the first task, without interrupting the class or slowing down someone else's learning process, thus emphasising the possibility to adapt the learning process to individual needs.

According to some respondents, the originality in the delivery of materials, thanks to apps, interactive activities, roleplays, etc., made the learning process more interesting, convenient and effective. Many mentioned *Duolingo*, a free language-learning platform that provides free lessons for the enhancement of all the communication skills (see Chapter 3). The respondents affirmed they found their experience with *Duolingo* helpful and enjoyable at the same time, because it gave them the possibility to reach

---

[67] Ibidem, p. 23.

[68] Ibidem, p. 24.

their learning objectives all the while having fun and distancing themselves from the conventional educational methods.

Another important benefit of online learning recognised by the respondents was when the activity was accompanied by a constructive feedback. The interactive and collaborative dimension plays an important role in the quality of the learning, seeing that, apart from "engaging and stimulating learning experience with different types of media, […] *eLearning* also allows, and encourages, collaboration with tutors and other learners"[69].

4.3.2 Cons

When the survey participants were asked to fill in a blank text with their opinions on the cons of learning a language online, several data referring to the reasons why their experience was not engaging in any way, shape, or form were collected and will now be analysed in detail.

Two respondents affirmed that online courses do not guarantee a complete preparation and that through this technique they had only learned the basic rules of a language. Another one referred to his/her online learning experience as "not as good as class" because of the lack of a physical presence and communication between the instructor and the students.

Many respondents encountered several difficulties in keeping motivation because of the absence of teacher-imposed deadlines, uncertainty of the learning progress, less accountability than "real-life courses" and "face-to-face" environments. One respondent wrote that s/he had found ways to cut corners, not paying attention to what was being done, thus resulting in a self-

---

[69] Ibidem, p. 26.

sabotaging experience. Another respondent pointed out the difficulty to maintain motivation without having to meet harsh deadlines: this is one of the most challenging aspects of autonomous learning and there is a large literature devoted to it. In their chapter on the drawbacks of *eLearning*, Pollard and Hillage stated that the completion of a course of study online is "heavily reliant on self-discipline" and, because of this, it is not suitable for all the individuals: in fact, each learner has a different personality trait and carrying out activities on one's own "requires greater dedication and discipline than a traditional classroom learning, as generally e-learners complete learning in their own time, at their own pace"[70].

Furthermore, a couple of statements, which were taken from the questionnaire responses and referred to the major problems found with the technique of *eLearning*, better expressed this idea. The questionnaire requested a free answer to the statement: *A con of learning a language online is:*, and the responses were respectively the following: "Difficult to correct your mistakes"; "Not being completely sure about the result"; "Not having immediate feedback from a real person who knows the language and can correct usage/pronunciation errors"; "Sometimes unable to catch small details or errors as you would be able to in person"; "Limited interaction with others, unsure if what you're thinking is right"; "You can develop bad habits and make mistakes which are not corrected"; "You don't have the same "face-to-face" feeling you get from learning with an actual teacher"; "You don't get to face the language culture". "It's impossible to become completely fluent in a language without using it in everyday life. This can be hard online".

These negative factors certainly lead to negative learning experiences and because of these, one respondent wrote that s/he had given up after few

---

[70] Ibidem, p. 32.

lessons, showing absolutely no satisfaction with the course design and outcome.

Even though the results emerged from the survey cannot be taken as a universal principle, the present study shows a gradual change in the conception that individuals have of online learning and its consequent implications. The percentage of benefits deriving from this recent methodology is considerably higher than the drawbacks it can also register, thus demonstrating that there is concrete evidence of the acceptance of a multi-dimensional set of technologies, applications, methods and social relationships within the educational context.

In the next chapter, we shall draw some conclusions regarding the key elements that can be exploited in order to carry out simultaneously an effective development of online courses, a constructive deployment of *eLearning* and a positive language learning experience.

Conclusions

The acknowledgment of the new technology-based media and benefitting from them has attracted the attention of the new language learners, who can now adopt faster and more effective tools and improve their learning experience without time and space constraints. For this to happen, it is important to consider the teaching dimension.

The last chapter of the present analysis aims at proposing a series of didactic methods, tips and strategies that can be used for an effective online language learning experience. Taking the results derived from the empirical research as a starting point for future studies, some suggestions can be given to find a suitable solution to the main issues connected to online courses.

One of the first things to keep in mind when developing an online course is the design of said course. For a positive outcome, it is of great importance to create a structured and thoughtful design that focuses on the students' needs and objectives and, concomitantly, creates educational settings and experiences that are different from the traditional ones and, therefore, preferably subject to guidelines. A good way to start could be the creation of a lesson program including a detailed plan of how the content will be presented, where the resources can be accessed, what activities can be created, how the students' progress will be evaluated, etc.

As we have already analysed in the previous chapter, one of the most popular benefits of online courses listed by the respondents was the possibility to select and learn materials that were relevant to their specific scopes. Because of this, a second important quality for the development of an effective language learning online course is the attractiveness of materials in terms of lesson content: the more engaging the materials, the higher the

students' motivation. Some students who participated to the online survey had referred to their previous online experience describing it as boring, unengaging and without any shape or form whatsoever. This must be absolutely avoided and the ways to do so are countless.

The promotion of student-directedness thanks to a reciprocal confrontation and exchange of ideas with the tutor can, for one, instil a sense of self-agency and awareness in the learners, becoming a useful tool for a positive conduct of language acquisition. They realise that they are the real protagonists of their experience and, through a good balance between their own work and the instructor's, they are able to reach higher goals.

Secondly, the deployment of ICTs such as multi-media files, audios and videos, can guarantee a more variable and enjoyable learning experience: in this way, students distance themselves from the conventional methods of classroom-based lessons and carry out interactive activities that meet their needs.

Another issue that was raised in the results of the questionnaire regarded the students' dismay toward the absence of a "face-to-face" interaction among them, their instructor and peers. Of course, people who decide to partake in an online course are well aware of this particular feature, but nevertheless they are sometimes discouraged because of it and are given to considering it a great limit. So, a possible solution to this problem could be the implementation of video conferencing strategies that allow the learners to feel closer to the educational setting they are acquainted with and to enhance their speaking skills and expose them to real-time communications. Individual or group video sessions (MOOC)[71], chatboxes, online forums or conversations via email could be carried out, expanding the participation of

---

[71] The acronym stands for Massive Open Online Course and consists in an online course aimed at more people at the same time.

learners who share the same interests and learning goals and want to improve their critical thinking and communication skills.

Strictly linked to this aspect, is the necessity for the course designer to provide a constructive feedback in the process. Students need to be able to understand their mistakes and know if they are making any progress. One survey participant talked about the risk of developing bad habits if an error is not corrected immediately and this is something for an online instructor to keep in mind. Surely, mistakes are part of the learning experience and cannot all be corrected, but what is important to stress is the promotion of an error-friendly environment, where students can feel safe to clear their doubts or ask for clarifications, without having to feel shy, out of place or judged.

Another aspect that was mentioned in the questionnaire responses consisted in the cultural dimension. A respondent stated that through online courses the language culture is automatically excluded. On this matter, there are two sides of the same coin: one is the fact that online courses are simply more convenient when it comes to "reach", even if not physically, a completely different place in a mouse click. The other, which is interdependent to the former, includes the consequent impossibility to actually be in touch with the people's lifestyles, habits and traditions belonging to the second language and culture that are being learned. This does not mean that students cannot be exposed to them anyway: incorporating the local aspects of the L2 through readings, movies, songs and cultural activities could be a perfect way to feel closer to the reality that is being discovered.

The objective of the present study was to analyse the current topic of *eLearning* in Language Education from a theoretical and experiential point of view, thanks to the work of authors who predicted the importance of this

methodology and laid the foundations for its research, and to an empirical study exploring the main issues that arise when conducting said methodology.

An overall finding that emerged during this investigation entailed a gradual change of perspective on the digital learning environment, regarding the balance among the technological, social and individual aspects as a prerogative for an effective language learning.

People's new vision of *eLearning* could be associated to the necessity of keeping up with the times and trends of the 21st century, when the growth of globalisation and the ascension of ICT have led to the redefinition of glottodidactic practices in terms of engagement, personalised learning strategies, content distribution and fruition, learner and teacher roles, time and place perceptions.

The steps to be taken for *eLearning* to be considered as acceptable as a face-to-face learning experience are still numerous, but with more theoretical and empirical researches and a continuous emphasis on the positive aspects of this practice, a significant change can be made and new ways of learning can be adopted to support new ways of teaching.

References

ANDRADE M. S., 2012, "Self-Regulated Learning Activities: Supporting Success in Online Courses", in MOORE J. L., *International Perspectives of Distance Learning in Higher Education*, InTech: open science, open mind, Chapter 6, pp. 111-132.

ANDRADE M. S., 2015, "Effective eLearning and eTeaching: A Theoretical Model", in GRADINAROVA B., *E-Learning: Instructional Design, Organizational Strategy and Management*, InTech: open science, open minds, Chapter 2, pp. 33-59.

ANZALONE F., Caburlotto F., 2003, *e-Learning: Comunicare e formarsi online*, Milano, Lupetti, Editori di Comunicazione.

AUSTIN J. L., 1955, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University*, in URMSON J. O., SBISÀ M., Oxford, Clarendon Press.

BARTALESI GRAF D., 2016, "L'insegnamento della lingua e della cultura italiana in corsi blended e online", in *Italiano LinguaDue*, Vol. 8, Num. 2, pp. 54-84.

BATES A. W., 1995, *Technology, Open Learning and Distance Education*, London and New York, Routledge.

BENSON P., 2011, *Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning*, London and New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

CABURLOTTO F., 2012, "Le nuove potenzialità glottodidattiche del computer e della rete", in CAON F., SERRAGIOTTO G., *Tecnologia e didattica*

delle lingue. Teorie, risorse, sperimentazioni, Novara, De Agostini Scuola Spa.

CANTONI L., BOTTURI L., SUCCI C., 2007, *ELearning. Capire, progettare, comunicare*, Milano, FrancoAngeli.

CHIAPEDI N., 2013, *Modelli linguistici descrittivi e metodi glottodidattici*, ICoN: Italian Culture on the Net.

COLLISON G., ELBAUM B., HAAVIND S., TINKER R., 2000, *Online Learning. Effective Strategies for Moderators*, Madison, Atwood Publishing.

DICKINSON L., 1987, *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*, Cambridge University Press.

DONNELLY R., MCSWEENEY F., 2009, *Applied E-Learning and E-Teaching in Higher Education*, Hershey, New York, Information Science Reference.

DÖRNYEI Z., OTTÓ I., 1998, "Motivation in Action: A Process Model of L2 Motivation", *Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 4, pp. 43-69. London: Thames Valley University.

DÖRNYEI Z., USHIODA E., 2009, *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters.

DUGGLEBY J., 2000, *How to Be An Online Tutor*, Aldershot, Hampshire, Burlington, VT, Gower.

ELLIS R., 2006, *Current Issues in the Teaching of Grammar: An SLA Perspective*, New Zealand, University of Auckland, Vol. 40, Num. 1, pp. 83-107.

FISHMAN J. A., 1970, *Sociolinguistics: A Brief Introduction*, Rowley, MA, Newbury House.

FUTCH L., CHEN B., 2017, *Understanding Blended Learning*, BlendKit Reader, University of Central Florida (UCF), pp. 1-11.

GARDNER R. C., LAMBERT W. E., 1972, *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*, Rowley, MA, Newbury House.

GARDNER R. C., 1985, *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*, University of Western Ontario.

GILLIES R. M., ASHMAN A. F., 2003, *Co-operative learning. The Social and Intellectual Outcomes of Learning in Groups*, London and New York, RoutledgeFalmer.

GRAHAM R. G., 2006, "Blended Learning System: Definition, Current Trends and Future Directions", in BONK C. J., GRAHAM C. R., *The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global perspectives, local designs*, San Francisco, Pfeiffer Publications, pp. 3-21.

GURI-ROSENBLIT S., 2005, "Distance Education and "E-learning": Not the Same Thing", *Higher Education*, Vol. 49, Num. 4, pp. 467-493.

HELLEVE I., 2012, "Differences and Similarities in Approach between Classroom and Distance Learning", in MOORE J. L., *International Perspectives of Distance Learning in Higher Education*. InTech: open science, open minds, pp. 253-272.

HOLEC H., 1981, *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, Oxford, Pergamon, Strasbourg, Council of Europe.

HYMES D. H., 1972, "On Communicative Competence", in PRIDE J. B., HOLMES J., *Sociolinguistics. Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, pp. 269-293.

KAPLAN A. M., HAENLEIN M., 2010, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media". Business Horizons, Indiana University, Vol. 53, Num. 1, pp. 59-68.

KEARSLEY G., 1997, "A Guide to Online Learning", available at: http://gustavolarriera.tripod.com/doc/tech/online.htm, accessed on: August 30th, 2017.

KOHONEN V., 1992, "Experiential Language Learning: Second Language Learning as Cooperative Learner Education", in NUNAN D., *Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 14-39.

KOHONEN V., 2009, "Autonomy, Authenticity and Agency in Language Education: the European Language Portfolio as a Pedagogical Resource", in KANTELINEN R., POLLARI P., *Language Education and Lifelong Learning*, University of Eastern Finland, Philosophical Faculty, pp. 9-44.

KRASHEN S. D., 1987, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall International.

LITTLE D., 2003, *Learner Autonomy and Second/Foreign Language Learning*, available at: https://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1409#ref10, accessed on: August 30th, 2017.

MOHD S., *et al.*; (a cura di), 2011, "Social Network Learning: The Relationship between Characteristics in Social Network and E-learning Websites with Learning Activities", in *International conference on teaching and learning in higher education*.

MOORE M. G., 1989, *Three Types of Interaction*, American Journal of Distance Education, Vol. 3, Num. 2, pp. 1-6.

MOORE M., 2007, "The Theory of Transactional Distance", in MOORE M., *Handbook of Distance Education*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum.

MURPHY L., 2011, "Autonomy in Context: A Tale of Two Learners", in GARDNER D., *Fostering Autonomy in Language Learning*, Gaziantep: Zirve University, pp. 17-27.

MURPHY L., 2011, ""Why Am I Doing This?" Maintaining Motivation in Distance Language Learning", in MURRAY G., GAO X., LAMB T., *Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning*, Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto, Multilingual Matters, pp. 107-124.

NGUYEN L. T. C., GU Y., 2013, "Strategy-based Instruction: A Learner-focused Approach for Developing Learner Autonomy", *Language Teaching Research*, Vol. 17, Vol. 1, pp. 9-30.

NIPPER S., 1989, "Third Generation Distance Learning and Computer Conferencing", in MASON R., KAYE A., *Mindweave: Communication, Computers and Distance Education*, Pergamon, Oxford, UK, pp 63-73.

OKADA A., *et al.*; (a cura di), 2012, *Colearning – Collaborative Open Learning through OER & Social Media*, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.

PERATTON H., ROBINSON B., CREED C., 2001, *Teacher Education through Distance Learning: Technology, Curriculum, Evaluation, Cost*. Paris, UNESCO.

POLLARD E., HILLAGE J., 2001, *Exploring e-Learning,* Brighton, UK, The Institute for Employment Studies.

ROGERS C., *et al.*; (a cura di), 1967, *Person to Person: The Problem of Being Human: A New Trend in Psychology*, Lafayette, CA, Real People Press.

RYAN R. M., DECI E. L., 1985, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour*, New York, Boston, Dordrecht, London, Moscow, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

RYAN R. M., DECI E. L., 2000, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions", in *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, Vol. 25, Num. 8, pp. 54-67.

RYAN R. M., DECI E. L., 2000, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being", in *American Psychologist*, University of Rochester, Vol. 28, Num. 8, pp. 68-78.

SONG M. S., 2010, *E-learning: Investigating Students' Acceptance of Online Learning in Hospitality Programs*, Iowa State University.

SURAYA H., *et al.*; (a cura di), 2010, "The Use of Online Social Networking for Higher Education from an Activity Theory Perspective", Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems (PACIS).

TAYLOR J. C., 2001, "Fifth Generation Distance Education", Higher Education Series, Vol. 40, Num. 8, pp. 1-8.

THABIT H.T., JASIM Y. A. A., 2017, *The Role of Social Networks in Increasing the Activity of e-Learning*, Switzerland, Springer International Publishing, pp. 35-45.

URDAN T., WEGGEN C., 2000, *Corporate e-Learning: Exploring a New Frontier*, San Francisco, WR Hambrecht & Co.

VAN LIER L., 2008, "Agency in the Classroom". In LANTOLF J. P., POEHNER M. E., *Sociocultural Theory and the Teaching of Second Languages*, London, Equinox.

VANDERGRIFF I., 2016, *Second-language Discourse in the Digital World. Linguistic and Social Practices in and beyond the Networked Classroom*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company.

WENGER E., 1998, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

WHITE C., 1995, "Autonomy and Strategy Use in Distance Foreign Language Learning: Research Findings", in *System*, Vol. 23, Num. 2, pp. 207-222.