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The Educational Role of Media During 2020 Lockdown

Italian Families' Point of View with an Insight on Languages

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Introduction

Media are means of communication made possible by technology. Recently, they have assumed an important role for society: on the one hand, they influence people's habits and way of living, on the other hand, as for all realities, they need rules in order to be exploited in all their potentialities and safely out of risks. In welcoming this change, the educational field has been shaped by the digital environment, but it also has developed the power to shape it, by doing research and implementing innovative techniques into traditional learning.

In Italy, schools are used to dealing with technology, even if it is a constant work in progress and many objectives are still to be reached. Some areas, in fact, are waiting for investments in order to equip schools with the proper digital instruments.

In this context, a pandemic broke out in January 2020 and by March, Italian citizens went through a general lockdown until May. As a consequence, all schools were closed from February to June, thus ending the school year "online" and managing an unprecedented situation as best as they could. The objective of this study is to collect the experiences of high school students and their parents during the emergency. The questions that are posed to families are whether they perceived changes in their use of media before and during the emergency, what kind of experiences they lived and if they had suggestions in a future perspective. Moreover, this study also gives an insight on languages, by posing some specific questions to students about their distance language learning experience.

Before focusing on the interview, chapter I gives an introduction about media in the educational field. First of all, some definitions of media and media education are given, then, through a recollection of articles, the history of media education is traced back by analyzing its development in the world and in Europe. At this point, the focus is on Italy and on the progress made in recent years with the National Plan for Digital School. The Italian regional situation is presented with attention to Veneto, the region from where the sample is taken. Some challenges emerged and they are discussed from an educational point of view, before passing to chapter II.

In chapter II, the focus passes from a more general discussion on media to the specific topic of distance learning. After having defined the practice, some major features of distance learning are pointed out, like interactivity, active learning, visual imagery and effective communication. Following this train of thought the chapter enters the distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants. In explaining who digital natives are, the chapter takes into consideration

the position of students, and in particular, their role as distance learners. In contrast, the following paragraphs drive the attention to digital immigrants: the first being discussed are teachers, then the figure of site facilitator is mentioned as it assumes an important role in distance learning. A consistent part of the topic concerns parents: a category of digital immigrants who is at the center of this study. After assessing their importance as protagonists of distance learning, the issue of digital parenting is addressed in terms of parenting styles. Schools and parents communicate through the electronic register, which is illustrated as an instrument that connects families with institutes and, obviously, students. In the following paragraphs, the topics of media use and distance learning are inserted into the present context, where the breakout of the pandemic is briefly retraced. What emerges from the last sections of the chapter is that in literature it is possible to find advantages and disadvantages linked to distance learning: some of those are found in other studies related to the pandemic, so they are very useful in the passage to chapter III.

Chapter III opens with some reflections upon distance language learning, in order to give an exhaustive definition of the practice. Subsequently, some features of distance language learning are outlined and the discussion is on self-regulation, motivation and strategy use. It becomes clear that in order to practice these dimensions of distance language learning, a good organization of the language course is required. The different outcomes of synchronous and asynchronous modalities must be taken into account, as well as the importance of socialization for the sake of linguistic growth. An important paragraph explains how the emergency affected learning languages in detail and what kind of issues worried other realities in the Italian or international context. A division between positive and negative aspects of distance language learning is made and it leads to the completion of a suggestions list. Among the studies that are found in literature it can be possible to collect some common points of view that pushed the participants towards finding ways of improving the experience and being ready in case of a new lockdown. The aim of the present research is to enrich those points of view with other impressions, but also to welcome new suggestions about emergency-related measures in the educational field. As they have lived the situation firsthand, students and parents' opinions and will be a great starting point for similar future experiences.

Following the structure of the research, chapter IV is dedicated to the study itself. It illustrates the objectives, the research questions, information about the participants and the methods and

instruments that were used to collect data. By interviewing a small sample of parents and students from the north of Italy, this study compares their answers and retraces their struggles. The results are presented in chapter V, from which it is possible to infer that the distant learning modality had a great impact on families. They perceived a change in their use of media, both concerning time spent online, their most used device and their most frequent activity. Students' opinions covered more practical aspects of school life in its new distant connotation. For instance, they talked about content and duration of lessons, quantity of homework, difficulty of tests and parameters of evaluation. On the contrary, parents' interventions were more focused on preoccupation with their children's wellbeing and academic performances. Both points of view, however, found common ground in the suggestions for the future, which include finding a unique platform, planning a more accurate school schedule, guaranteeing internet connection, monitoring attendance, allowing a better interaction, introducing a mediating figure and, accurately, planning a blended modality to accompany the exit from the pandemic and the innovations of the educational system.

About the last objective of the research, distance language learning, what emerged is that some students appreciated the new modality in the context of languages and some others did not. The negative aspects concerned difficulties in interaction and an ineffective communication, as well as a perceived decrease in linguistic abilities. However, students also discerned some benefits, like a wider variety of sources and the presence of applicable strategies that gave significance to communication in the foreign language. Some participants also felt protected thanks to the screen and the comfortable environment, with the effect of being more courageous and proficient in the linguistic exchange.

Chapter VI compares the results of the present study to the interesting findings that are present in literature. The general conclusion that can be drawn is that the impact of distance learning was foreseen in literature by certain aspects, but it also had unique features linked to COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, testimonies collected during the emergency seem to differ from previous literature by some common traits, like problems of connectivity and interaction due to the wrong platform or the scarce connection, a sense of abandonment caused by the exceptional situation of lockdown and the intense hours in front of the screen that led to health issues.

In this context, digital parenting assumed an important role: school entered and modified the lives of families, so parents started monitoring screen time and setting rules. Even though a definite parenting style did not emerge from data, the major problems concerned privacy and

the use of the electronic register, which resulted to be necessary, on the one hand, but intrusive, on the other.

Despite the predominance of disadvantages over advantages, some positive aspects emerged too, confirming previous literature and finding resonance with COVID-19 related studies. The new modality seems to have led students to a more profound awareness about their role as protagonists of learning. It increased creativity, motivation and strategy use to the point that some of them became more self-regulated.

This statement seems to be true especially as far as languages are concerned. In fact, even though the subject might not be fit for a "distant" modality, this approach hides more advantages than expected and it could be considered for a blended modality to exploit all possible facets of language learning, some of them only being possible thanks to technology.

All in all, the hypothesis of a blended modality seems to be the next step: the general feeling is that it will emerge as the better solution after the limitations of the emergency, and families welcome the idea as far as the actual criticalities are resolved. Considering that the experience has left both good and bad impressions, this study will be useful in a perspective of innovation. If school systems could isolate the negative aspects and fully integrate media in the traditional modality of learning, there could be successful outcomes in the pedagogical field. The pandemic was in no way positive for the population, but it has at least started a revolution that projects the future into the present of education.

Chapter I – Media Education

1.1 Media in the Educational Field

According to Alexander Fedorov's "Media and Information Literacy Education Dictionary", media are "communication means of creating, recording, copying, duplicating, storage, distribution, and reception of information exchange between its subject (authors of media text) and the object (mass audience)" (Fedorov, 2017, p. 15).

It is not an exaggeration to state that, in the last two decades, media have become part of people's daily lives, from smartworking to food delivery, from online shopping to instant messaging. It is possible, then, to talk about a substantial change; a transformation that crosses the economic, social and political field in the shape of an interconnected web. In the light of that, in the article "Competenze digitali, nuovi ambienti di apprendimento e professionalità docente" Dipace (2019) talks about the new two-faced role that technology assumes in this picture: it is a vehicle for human habits and a means of producing and delivering messages.

It is, in short, a revolutionary process which has already changed reality; one need only think about how the world works nowadays: information is accessible, news is instantly shared and interactions are anywhere and at any time possible (Dipace, 2019). It is clear that this scenario calls for a superstructure capable of maintaining order: the educational field is affected by digital transformation too, but it also has the power to affect it, emerging both as a victim and advocate of change. In fact, the most remarkable effects of digitalization can be seen among the new generations, who happen to own technological devices earlier and earlier in their childhood, thus becoming – almost ironically – the experts of the situation.

New generations and education meet at school; that is why, in their article "Scuola, alfabetizzazione digitale e cittadinanza attiva. Verso un'educazione alla democrazia e all'incontro con l'altro", Antonietta Buonauro and Valentina Domenici reflect upon the essential role that schools play in such picture. Needless to say, they are faced with a challenge that involves all agents of the field: students, teachers, school personnel and families.

Neither of them is inherently born knowing how to use media effectively. Therefore, in order to manage the endless digital inputs that humans are surrounded with, the integration of media in the pedagogical and educational field becomes necessary and the promotion of digital literacy allows the peaceful co-existence between real world and virtual world (Buonauro, Domenici, 2020).

In 2015 Simona Perfetti goes deeper into the study of media and writes an article in the *Journal of Theories and Research in Education*. She describes media as characterized by three main features: portability, interaction and generativity.

- *Portability* refers to the inherent possibility of mobile devices of being carried and accessed in multiple ways;
- *Interactivity* is the multidirectional possibility of interpretation of messages that leads to interaction with other users;
- *Generativity* is a direct consequence of interactivity; it refers to the possibility for the user to switch from recipient to creator of a multimedial product.

These features of media create a whole new learning style to which schools and families must adapt, especially in recent times, when distance learning has gained a significant importance. Without knowing how something is done, it is harder to get it done properly at the first shot: it is a risk that schools cannot take.

1.2 Definition of Media Education

What is, then, the definition of *media education*? It is difficult to reach agreement among the experts of the field. On the one hand, this is a topic that still hides unexplored corners, on the other, it implies continuous updates and confrontations among researchers. Hence, the debate goes on, but in the meantime, it is possible to be satisfied with an exhaustive definition composed by Teresa Doni in 2015. In her article "Dalla media education alle new media education", she puts together three interesting points of view. In fact, according to Masterman and Rivoltella, media education is a multitude of theories and practices that allows to accomplish objectives and at the same time, to reflect upon them. More precisely, Media Education is "una prassi educativa, cioè un campo metodologico e di intervento didattico [e insieme una] riflessione teorica su questa prassi, cioè individuazione degli obiettivi, elaborazione di metodologie atte a conseguirli, messa a punto di strategie valutative opportune a considerarne gli effetti" (Rivoltella in Masterman, 1997, p.13, cited in Doni, 2015, p. 187).

What these experts observe is that not only does Media Education require action in the school context, but it also calls for a theoretical background, which must include the definition of objectives, a specific methodology and evaluation strategies that weigh up the effects of such action.

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Masterman and Rivoltella's insight presents the idea of *empowerment*: an individual who received a proper media education can easily avoid manipulation by exerting critical thinking and free judgment. Young people, then, should become aware of the power they can exert, which, if compared to Dipace's observations (2019), corresponds to the power of creating communication through all its multiple expressive forms. It is not easy, of course, to establish how critical comprehension and effective communication can be enhanced. Media are not only made of devices, but they respond to cultural and social structures, to codes and languages that make them an actual "living environment". Like Doni observes, mechanical features of the devices must be understood in order to decode messages properly, therefore the need of specialized figures is unquestionable. Schools and other institutions can only work well if they can count on media educators and qualified personnel (Doni, 2015).

1.3 Media Education in the World and in Europe

In 2007 Mark Warschauer, a professor in the Department of Education and the Department of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine, stated that "the future of learning is digital" (Warschauer, 2007, p. 41), implying that what was seen as the archetypical learning environment (schools, classrooms, laboratories) was bound to be replaced by a new, more abstract concept.

Author of books on technology use for language and literacy development, Warschauer had a vision that thirteen years later is still work in progress. Structural boundaries are falling apart in favour of a larger, unlimited space, which wants to guarantee flexibility for relationships, creativity and negotiation of meanings. In short, the school is becoming more and more resemblant the media environment, where in order to make communication effective, new competences are required. People must be able to manage data, negotiate meanings and collaborate, therefore they have to develop "digital competences". Active, critical and conscious use of media is essential for students, teachers and families, in daily life, at work and in all those situations that imply the processing of information and the creation of content (Dipace, 2019). Before focusing on today's condition of media education in Europe and in Italy, it is useful to briefly retrace the most important milestones at a global level. As Doni (2015) observes, before the Seventies the term "Media Education" was still unheard of. Of course, there had been discussions and debates on media in general, but it was not until Australia introduced this dimension into the school system, in 1982, that attention was drawn to the concept.

The first considerations on the subject were made at a broader level in the Grünwald Declaration during the International Congress on Media Education, in Germany. In that context, with the support of nineteen nations, UNESCO suggested a first approach on understanding the dynamics of Media Education, thus promoting a whole new border for the educational field (Doni, 2015). It was a step forward that laid the foundations to the rising of centers and agencies, like the CLEMI in France, which only one year after the Declaration, had already started to work for the citizens and their awareness on media education. The aim of the movement was to improve students' comprehension of the world and critical thinking, through dedicated formation and availability of sources. Notably, it is in 1985 that researchers were given clearer guidelines, thanks to the aforementioned Len Masterman's publication (the book *Teaching the Media*, 1985), which is followed by the 1990 worldwide conference on New Directions of Media Education, in Toulouse (Doni 2015).

What emerges from this event is that the original approach towards media, typically untrusty and diffident, was disappearing in favour of a more aware mentality. More steps were made on this path, until goals were met and the topic of Media Education was developed in literature in order to create models. People in fact are now treating this dimension attentively: they are learning to give sense to what they see and hear from media, to distinguish positive and negative messages. Research confirms that spectators seem to show an active participation, especially in

the educational field, and since students and teachers walk together on the same formative path, the gap between their roles seems to have thinned (Doni, 2015).

Doni proceeds with a focus on Europe, which joined in more actively ten years after the first steps were made. Between the Nineties and the very first years of the XXI Century, the campaign was pursued by summits (Toronto, 2000) and conferences (Vienna and Sydney, 2000), then Europe joined in with the 2004 conference in Belfast together with UNESCO's continuous promotion.

It was then when Media Education officially became a global movement. What was necessary for all countries was to shed light on the matter and receive general instructions. In 2008, Rivoltella reflected upon the changes in the educational field in terms of structures of learning. He problematized that as long as the focus stays on a transmissive level, the perspective is not completed. In fact, going back to Fedorov's definition of media, the relationship between media texts and mass audience (in this case, young audience) does not take into account the context in which these two elements operate. Media are modifying the environment and therefore the environment has to be adequate. In terms of structures and functions, it needs constant adaptation to make communication effective. At this point, what is left to understand is how schools can guarantee it, considering how they show different approaches, depending on their geographical, cultural and political background.

For this reason, a useful guideline was provided by the Declaration of Brussels for lifelong Media Education during a 2010 international conference in Brussels. In this document, what emerged was a clear definition of *media literacy*, which stated that to be considered "media literate", one had to have the possibility of accessing media, dealing with contents critically and producing communication. Moreover, according to the declaration, it was imperative to permanently integrate Media Education into institutions and provide access to all citizens, regardless of their conditions.

As far as the European situation is concerned, it is undeniable that big steps were made since the Seventies. However, there are still some member states that seem to be struggling to reach the average level that global Media Education requires.

In her literature review, Sherry gives a deeper look at schools policies. Even if she problematizes old structures' policies, her worries can still be applied at some school systems nowadays. Less avant-gardist systems, indeed, have to keep up with innovation, because like Sherry states "as opportunities arise, so do problems which must be dealt with" (Sherry, 1995, p. 359).

The principal spheres of action concern:

- **governance of schools**: cooperation between the government, the offers on the market and educational authorities;
- **regulation of finances:** in order to make quality equipment and technological training affordable;
- **courses for teachers:** courses on media and distance education with certifications that become part of teaching requirements;
- **forms of evaluation:** generally accepted standards that can be applied to digital testing.

The last entry seems to be particularly important if related to the issues of active learning and effective communication. Since the digital environment presents as many opportunities as temptations, it also offers a plethora of clever ways of eluding the system. Not all content produced by students may be original and authentic, even less in an interchange where it is much harder to realize if and where there are biases.

1.4 Media Education in Italy

After an overall account of the European and global background, Doni (2015) goes into the details of the Italian situation, where the media education movement had a delayed resonance. In the Eighties and Nineties, while the world was already enthusiastic about technology in the educational field, Italian schools did not seem as open to change as others. They had planned the integration of multimodal activities into their syllabuses (i.e. with audiovisual exercises), but it is not until the beginning of the 2000s that they started familiarizing with the term *media education* as "an educational activity promoted by schools in order to develop students' information and critical comprehension on nature, language, categories and types of media, the techniques implied to produce messages and make sense, along with the analysis of how media are influenced by economical, political and ideological factors and how the impact on the audience" (Doni, 2015, p. 193).

The National Plan for Digital School

In the article "Scuola, alfabetizzazione digitale e cittadinanza attiva", published for *Sapere pedagogico e Pratiche educative* series in 2020, Buonauro and Domenici describe how Italy has been dealing with digital learning for the last five years. First of all, they mention "The National

Plan for Digital School" (Piano Nazionale per la Scuola Digitale), which was approved by prime minister Matteo Renzi in 2015, as part of a bigger project called Buona Scuola (legge n. 107/2015). The aim of this initiative was to upgrade the Italian school system with a range of plans that included the digitalization of the learning process. Once the importance of digital literacy was stated, students became the center of all the investments, because, as experts like Rivoltella had already pointed out, it was fundamental to create the right learning environment in order to integrate media and technologies. Digital sources and devices like Wi-Fi connection, computers and tv screens had to be placed in pre-existing structures, thus demanding a re-organization of schools, from a practical to a more ideal level (Buonauro, Domenici, 2020).
Not only did this have to meet the local conformation of the territory, but it was also going to affect teachers' formation and families' needs. School had to become a student-friendly platform, able to connect with other schools and the world outside. The only accepted boundaries were going to be the safety rules set by teachers, adequately trained to manage media education.

Progress at a Regional Level

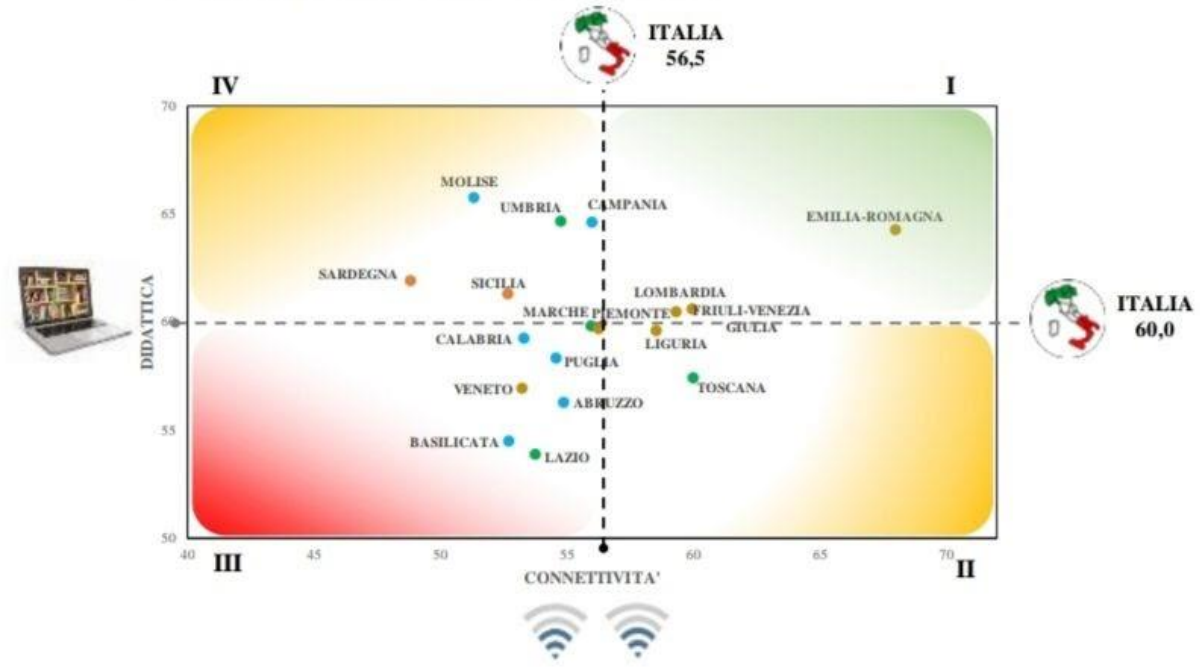
Due to its high demands, however, five years later the project does not seem to have come to its realization yet. On the contrary, it seems to be having a slow concretization especially when the Italian situation is compared to other European Countries' development. What Italy needs are resources that seem very hard to get and, in the meantime, teachers cannot put the Buona Scuola project into practice, without LIM (Lavagna Elettronica Multimediale, or electronic board), tablets and fast Wi-Fi connection (Buonauro, Domenici, 2020).
In the 2019 Agicom report, *Educare Digitale*, it is possible to read that while Italy is not a leader in progress, it shows, on the other hand, optimistic perspectives at a smaller level (Regioni ed Enti Locali), because public administration is willing to collaborate with local realities in order to reach digitalization. Of course, the process is still developing slowly, but the intentions are good and the common aim is to keep the system updated (Agicom, 2019).
For instance, in the last years, the MIUR (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca) has financed local interventions and a series of projects involving regions like Campania, Basilicata, Friuli Venezia Giulia and cities like Bologna and Milan. Schools of this area became the setting of great innovations in digital communication (creation of blogs and websites, promotion of digital journalism), coding and educational robotics, management of digital content (incorporation of ebooks, multimodal activities, videos and augmented reality), international

projects to promote inclusion, e-learning and digital safety (Buonauro, Domenici, 2020). However, in the specific case of Veneto, the region of Northern Italy where the present study took place, the situation is worth analyzing in the screenshot provided by the report. Agicom, or Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni (in English, Authority for Communications Guarantees) is the regulator authority for the communication industries in Italy. In their report, a possible way of monitoring the digitalization process in the region is based on the confrontation between two synthetic indicators, level of connectivity and educational innovation, which are created basing on features of the schools that operate in the territory.

The level of connectivity refers to the availability of an internet connection for educational purposes, if it is suitable for the educational needs of the students and what kind of upload bandwidth it presents. The educational innovation refers to the frequency of use of technology by the teachers during school hours and the type of activity proposed through it. The results are shown in a scatterplot and it is possible to notice in which areas of Italy digitalization is in progress and in which areas there is a risk of digital divide.

Image 1 – *Connectivity and educational innovation in Italy, from Agicom' report* Educare digitale *(2019)*

Figura 3.2: Macro obiettivi e strumenti per una scuola digitale: un'impalcatura metodologica per il monitoraggio del processo di digitalizzazione delle scuole



Fonte: elaborazione AGCOM su dati MIUR

The green areas (first quadrant) include the best equipped and most innovative regions, which present an average level of the indicators superior to the national value. As stated before, regions like Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Emilia-Romagna are included in this definition also thanks to the latest projects and investments that have been financed by the MIUR. The yellow areas (second and fourth quadrant) include the regions that present one indicator superior to the national value and one inferior to the national value. According to which of the two indicators is superior to the national value, they are collocated into the second or fourth quadrant. As it is possible to observe, Veneto is located in the third quadrant of the plot. The schools of the regions in this quadrant present, for both indicators, an average value inferior to the national value. These data indicate that the risk of digital divide is higher.

In fact, the third quadrant collects the most serious cases of the Italian situation: most regions belong to the South of Italy, one is in Central Italy and the only one in Northern Italy is Veneto. In this territory, according to Agicom's report, the need for investments is undeniable. Facilities need fixing and upgrading, competencies and digital culture must be enhanced: these aspects, then, walk parallel on a path that leads to the ideal objective of the Piano Nazionale per la Scuola Digitale. The process, however, is slow and uneven. Some regions, more than others, need to make an effort, unless they are willing to face the consequences of an internal digital gap that adds to an uncomfortable national situation.

1.5 Challenges for the Italian School System

Agicom's report also depicts the European Commission's concern about Italy, when talking about "Piano di Azione sull'Istruzione Digitale". This action plan, signed in 2018 in Brussels, has clarified that educational systems must use innovation and technology to encourage the development of relevant competences in an era of fast digital changes (Agicom, 2019). The plan was promoted in order to satisfy a broader project that the European Union has for its members: that one day, hopefully by 2025, they will have the possibility to benefit from a European educational space. Hence the decision to make the action plan effective by September 2020. In support of this cause, between 2014 and 2020, the European Community has also allocated about 45 billion euros, which are to be used to fulfill the above objectives. With this founding, the Community wants to focus on primary and secondary education of all the members of the Union, hoping to reduce the gap between the member countries and to integrate

digital learning in schools, not only with new equipment and structures, but also thanks to information campaigns and training for teachers and personnel (Buonauro, Domenici, 2020). It goes without saying that this kind of ambition will require a large availability of systems, but when the environment is not accommodating in that sense, it envisages a multitude of interventions that might slow down the project. In some areas, indeed, to modify one structure would imply the modification of others, hence creating a chain of obstacles almost impossible to overcome.

This kind of slowdown is typical of the Italian landscape. As a matter of fact, Buonauro and Domenici underline that, in 2018, the estimated coverage of internet ultra-broadband connection was just 64% of the national territory. Institutes in Italy have technical problems, lack of human resources and budget issues that get in the way of buying new equipment and investing upon workers training. Not only do these features form a barrier between schools and innovation, but they also add to the confusion generated by the endless offers on the market. This issue has an influence on personal choices: families must choose which devices are worth buying, which company is worth signing a contract with and what are the parameters on the usage of internet connection (allowed GigaBytes, modems, mobile routers). All of this has to satisfy a main condition: that families can afford to equip themselves with the right instruments to meet digital education's demands. The problem is that also this kind of management depends on the geographical distribution of population in Italy and in some areas the probability of meeting the school standards, for citizens, is higher than in other areas.

As for institutions, Buonauro and Domenici (2020) observe that, when it comes to school personnel, the MIUR generally administers funding at a centered level, but other aspects concerning material and services (books, computers, furniture) are left to the single regions. This is why geographical distribution also has a strong relevance on this matter: as demonstrated in the previous paragraph, the process of digitalization generates gaps and as a result, it keeps going on more gradually than expected.

In Agicom's report all these aspects are summarized in three main factors that represent a challenge for Italian schools that are trying to adopt a more technological approach:

- the dimension of the school;
- the school level of instruction;
- the geographical area in which schools are placed.

The bigger and more centered the school is, the more likely it is that it offers broadband connection (in Italy, small villages and some cities in the South still have serious connection problems). High schools appear to be more interested in digital equipment and in urban and densely populated areas innovations are brought about much easier than in rural areas (Agicom, 2019). Technology is the vehicle of media education and the precondition through which, willingly or unwillingly, education happens nowadays. Not merely in an academic perspective; in fact, technology is recognized as an essential component of life at all levels. In the light of that, as Buonauro and Domenici (2015) observe, it becomes clear that digital literacy must be sustained since childhood and adolescence by a fit environment, which needs to react and adapt to changes, as fast and urgently as possible. In the 2019 Agicom's report it appears that all the above points are still valid when talking about a present reformation of school policies. What Italy is trying to do with the "Piano Nazionale per la Scuola Digitale" is exactly putting this theory into practice, but it appears that the school system is struggling to become an "integrated" environment, which originates from the awareness that technologies, before being means of education, belong to and shape social and familiar contexts of the students. "Per quanto riguarda gli obiettivi didattici e di performance propri di una scuola digitale" – reports Agicom (2019, p. 42) – "i risultati dell'analisi suggeriscono che sarebbe opportuno intensificare le iniziative a sostegno dello sviluppo di competenze e di cultura digitale, in particolare quelle che mirano ad affinare le capacità tecniche di docenti e studenti, quelle volte all'apprendimento e all'approfondimento di nuove metodologie didattiche e pedagogiche, più costruttive e con le quali migliorare i processi di apprendimento, le esperienze e il saper fare."

Hence, not only does Italy have to invest in structures and equipment, but also in formative policies: the percentage of teachers that actually use digital sources during lessons revolves around 47%, which compared to the ambitious perspectives of the European Union seems to be too little. This observation also poses other interesting questions: how many teachers are actually capable of using digital sources? How is interaction between teachers and students guaranteed, in a distance learning situation? What can families do to support their children's learning through media?

Chapter II – Distance Learning

2.1 Definition of Distance Learning

As it occurred for the definition of *media education*, a plurality of opinions is necessary to put together an exhaustive idea of the concept of *distance learning*. Useful to the purpose is Lorraine Sherry's review of literature, "Issues in Distance Learning" published in 1995. Even if it dates back to twenty-five years ago, what the author found still has a resonance on the actual situation. As a matter of fact, she defines distance learning as characterized by "the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time (Perraton, 1988), the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor (Jonassen, 1992), and noncontiguous communication between student and teacher, mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1986; Garrison & Shale, 1987)" (Sherry, 1995, p. 338). Similarly, Maria Vittoria LoPresti, in her 2020 article, "Second Language Distance Learning: The Issue of Language Certification in the Time of COVID-19", asserts that distance learning is "a form of teaching that does not take place in the presence of a teacher and within institutions such as schools or universities, but at distance and within one's own home, and the transmission of contents is mediated by the Internet" (Lo Presti, 2020, p. 90).

The same features of distance learning were relevant in 1995 as well as they are in 2020, and in both cases it is implied that the desirable outcome of this separation is a "mediated" communication. In this vision, it is possible to say that, rather than being hindered by media, distance should be positively fulfilled by them, in a dimension where students promote their own learning as protagonists. Only by following these features, can distance learning effectively be considered "learning"; otherwise, it could be reduced to a merely noncontiguous exchange of incomprehensible content via some unknown form of technology.

In this regard, Sherry's review of literature, together with Perfetti's framework on the features of media (2015), can give a more detailed description of what media are and which features have to be considered when using them for an objective as important as distance learning. First of all, it is imperative to guarantee accessibility. This property could be considered as a prerequisite that all devices and applications must show, because in order to find a common ground on needs and goals for distance learning, students and teachers must possess the devices that give access to it. With that stated, what emerges from Sherry's review are four other main points that can elaborate on Perfetti's list when talking about media in distance learning:

- interactivity;
- active learning;
- visual imagery;
- effective communication;

What follows is a more specific explanation of these features, which will come handy to interpret the results of the present study.

Interactivity

Almost all definitions of interactivity, including Perfetti's (2015), revolve around the idea that interactivity is the process of two sides working together and influencing each other. In the media education field, this is exactly the purpose of media: make interaction possible through processes that are evolving at an impressive rate. In distance learning, however, this feature does not only happen just between two poles, but it also involves:

- teachers and students;
- students and their peers;
- students and the digital learning environment (Sherry, 1995).

Not to mention, of course, the importance of families, who constitute the surroundings of distance learning. For instance, only by walking around the computer while doing their chores, or by accidentally overhearing what happens in the studio, they have a way of influencing the learning process. Actually, it is possible to state that, during online learning at home, the presence of family members acquires a weight that students do not feel within the traditional school system.

As Sherry illustrates, researchers in the Nineties were concerned with students' feelings about interactivity during online courses and what they found was that the comparison between face-to-face classes and distance learning highlighted a dangerous lack of dialogue (Sherry, 1995).

Further studies established that interactivity in distance learning refers to a mutual communication that needs participation on both sides of the screen. When one of the two sides is absent, the medium stops carrying out its task and all the educational process is at stake. Families can sustain students' side, while media educators and facilitators can sustain teachers' job. What is important is that neither of them loses interest and enthusiasm: "without connectivity, distance learning degenerates into the old correspondence course model of independent study. The stu-

dent becomes autonomous and isolated, procrastinates, and eventually drops out. Effective distance education should not be an independent and isolated form of learning" (Sherry, 1995, p. 345).

Active learning

What has been discussed in the above paragraph leads necessarily to the concept of "active learning". Many researchers in this field argued that in the dichotomy of "teaching" and "learning", one risks falling into passivity when the other appears too "distant". That is why it is harder to maintain learning active, especially when students are given much more autonomy than inside the classroom. They become fully-fledged responsible for the time spent on learning and for its management, not only before and after lessons (as it occurs at school) but also *during* the lessons.

The way they decide to dispose of information is crucial: while within the school walls they are constantly monitored and encouraged to participate, in online learning they have the actual possibility of muting microphones, turning off cameras and cheating. It is impossible to do so in class; one cannot disappear or find plausible expedients to avoid lessons and tests – or at least, not every day. Sherry found interesting observations on how the sense of "ownership of the learning goals" keeps students' motivation active, even in a treacherous environment like media. In order to avoid passivity, in fact, they "must be both willing and able to receive instructional messages" (Sherry, 1995, p. 345).

Obviously, this aspect would not be stressed, if it were so easy to achieve. It is clear that whenever accessibility is not granted, motivation immediately runs out. The medium has to be within the reach of young (students) and adults (teachers) and the content should not be too unusual, or it risks tricking students' perception of their own abilities and discourage their participation.

Visual Imagery

Diving more and more deeply into the implication of technology in learning, another aspect that is examined in Sherry's account of media features is the one of visual imagery. While so far many have argued about the importance of maintaining interest at both sides of the screen, now the other side of the coin shows how hard it can be. Notably, digital structures trick their users into distraction, especially from a visual point of view. The richness of moving imagery, pop-

ping up and endearing with provocative slogans is something that belongs to digital environments, but not to reality. In a traditional classroom, in fact, this aspect is often absent, to the point that, sometimes, it must be encouraged by colourful and original ideas by the teacher. However, this is both a strength and a weakness in the online dimension. Nowadays, the issue is not only "visual", but it extends to a larger scale, including all the temptations that media are filled with. When surfing the net or using technological devices, users are overwhelmed with inputs: audible notifications and messages, banners in motion, interactive advertisement and surveys and quizzes popping up everywhere. In addition, the more devices people own, the more occasions they have of transferring files, connecting multiple screens, creating accounts and sharing their products. That is why it could be possible to talk about "multimodal imagery"; a whole sensorial superstructure that could "distort" or "distract" students' attention, by driving it away from the real structure of the message.

Mary Alice White was an American Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Education and Director of the Laboratory for the Psychological Study of Telecommunication. In the last decades of the Nineties, she investigated digital learning in a perspective of change, by talking about the integration of computers and television in school curricula. Her point was that print had gradually been substituted by imagery. In fact, in 1987, she wrote the book *What Curriculum for the Information Age?*, where she discussed the "oversimplification" and "superficiality" of visual imagery. In Sherry' review, an interesting observation from the book is mentioned: "Students must learn to discriminate between "junk" information and quality information, to judge its reliability or bias, to identify distortions and sensationalism, to distinguish facts from persuasion, and to understand how the technology itself shapes the information it carries" (White, 1987, p. 60, cited in Sherry, 1995, p. 346).

This is undoubtedly what is demanded not only to the student but also to the whole system: an organization able to circumnavigate the insidiousness of the digital environment but at the same time, a system that gives students the right mindfulness to manage digital learning on their own. When they are asked to learn through technology, they can feel confused and overwhelmed by "junk" information, or they can spot quality information thanks to their digital skills; a set of abilities that school can and should encourage.

Effective Communication

All the above features give way to what researchers of media education have supported for years: the importance of effective communication. The message that travels from one side of the screen to the other can encounter many obstacles because of the medium and thus be received in a distorted manner. Moreover, the lack of face-to-face interaction hides the risk of misinterpretation, which is very dangerous for learning. Therefore, as it is explained in Sherry's work, it takes more than a few adjustments for communication to be effective in distance learning.

First of all, there must be devices and apps specifically designed for instructional purposes. The users in this field have requirements that are different from ordinary online activities and the aim of designers is to make it easier for them to fulfill their needs. In their article "Media Appropriateness: Effects of Experience on Communication Media Choice", Ruth King and Weidong Xia argue about this concept. They suggest that, in the field of effective communication, the appropriateness of media is influenced by an individual's experience, also considering temporal variables (King, Xia, 1997); that is why video calls can result more or less effective than chat rooms or Cloud shared folders, according to the students' needs or the design of the single courses. In the digital education field, successful communication depends on how the medium can adapt to the task (or in general, the school subject), but also on how it can adapt to its target: if it can reflect students' experiences, then they will perceive it as appropriate.

All in all, it is possible to state that in order to promote effective communication, what needs to be considered is:

- that media guarantee accessibility and interactivity;
- that learning is active with participation on both sides of the screen;
- that multimodal imagery is manageable by teachers and students;
- that the medium is the most appropriate.

2.2 Digital Natives

As Perfetti (2015) suggests, the new generations are "multitasking generations", which means that they are capable, by definition, of doing several activities at the same time, while virtually interacting with other people from all over the world, both in the role of spectators and agents. Another way of defining these attitudes is suggested by Teresa Doni (2015), talking about

"screen generation" or "digital generation" and clearly referring to a generation that is used to screens and digitalized reality. Since media constitute their real habitat, technology is no more a novelty for kids, but rather a constant of the world they were born in. Thinking of these two definitions, what emerges is that people who were born in the last twenty years appear to be more at ease than older generations when using technology: they are, in fact, "digital natives" and they understand languages and rules of media, along with skills and abilities that they acquire earlier and earlier in life. As Doni observes, in the end, it all sorts out into a whole new and complex culture (Doni, 2015).

Young people today spend time and organize their time online: they talk through videocalls, chat on Whatsapp and Telegram, share their experiences on Instagram and their opinions on Twitter. They search for followers, film their skills and post them on YouTube, they make tutorials, play together on all kinds of platforms and record TikToks, everywhere at any time. Between 2017 and 2018, EU Kids Online network published a survey that involved several European countries in the investigation on children and teenagers' use of media. The network, being a globally recognized source of quality data, had already proposed statistics on the matter. Indeed, in 2010 it promoted a one-of-a-kind survey involving 25.000 kids aged 9 to 16 and their parents in twenty-five European countries (Mascheroni, Ólafsson, 2018).

The questionnaire was then updated within the next few years and between 2013 and 2014 it was proposed to seven European countries (including Italy), with the supervision of professor Giovanna Mascheroni of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. In a longitudinal perspective of data collection, the newest survey took interest in Italy, where researchers based their questionnaire on a representative sample of 1006 kids aged 9 to 17. In Mascheroni and Ólafsson's report, the first results were presented and confronted with 2010 and 2013-14 data, in order to give a screenshot of how the "digital generation" was changing.

On that note, some interesting percentages emerged in the most recent study: in Italy, 84% of the interviewed declares using their smartphone to go online at least once a day. For the same purpose, 42% avail of computers, 20% of tablets, 18% of smart TV, 12% of video games consoles and 3% of wearable devices, like smartwatches or fitness trackers (Mascheroni, Ólafsson, 2018).

There is proof that adolescents, in particular, use the internet for a big variety of purposes. While social media is at the top of the chart, other implications still get small percentages. Between 24% and 5% of the interviewed, in fact, searches the net for information, produces creative

content and participates in collective discussions (Mascheroni, Ólafsson, 2018). Reading the news, writing blogs, sharing content and signing petitions are then just a small part of the activities that the digital natives carry out online, but it is enough to understand that it is no more just a matter of *if* media meet education, but *when* and *how* they do.

2.2.1 Students in Distance Learning

From Mascheroni and Ólafsson's report it appears that nowadays the device that kids use the most to go online is the smartphone (97% of the interviewed) and that suggests that space-time coordinates of internet usage might have expanded. In fact, 88% of Italian kids use the internet every day at home and 74% of teenagers use it outside. Unsurprisingly, an increasing percentage concerns the use of media at school, which amounts to 49% for adolescents aged 15-17.
The survey also investigated the most common activities that kids do online. As it was specified before, media are mostly used for communicative and entertaining purposes. Half of the sample, however, declares using media also for learning purposes, especially in doing homework. With these premises, pedagogical research must be prepared to handle the impact between media and education in the most productive way. As Michele Baldassare and Valeria Tamborra highlight in the article "Education with media, education to media. A reflection about the teaching and learning practices with media", there are plenty of devices that can be implemented in teaching and learning practices. The usage of all these instruments is continuous, free and non-directed, therefore in the learning environment, users need habits and procedures to follow (Baldassarre, Tamborra, 2019): it is important that they are capable of "putting information together, reaching their tutors, and completing and submitting assignments. They also need tools to help them monitor their progress and obtain timely feedback on their activities" (Sherry, 1995, pp. 352-353).
Up to now, it seems that when schools exploit digital sources, learning is perceived as easier, but this might be a delusion, since there are underestimated side-effects that could be triggered. In point of fact, even the "active learning" and "multimodal imagery" issues warn that students tend to be less involved and to commit less when surrounded by a virtual learning reality. The more inputs the more distractions, which have led to a sort of *statistical stagnation*: no significant improvement has been registered lately in terms of successful digital learning. The authors suggest that this data may be associated to the lack of preparation in technology use: when

digital learning is implemented, it should come with functional changes (Baldassarre, Tamborra, 2019).

On the basis of their observations, it seems that combining digital and traditional sources could be the best solution in promoting the use of media in a school environment that can amplify and maximize students' abilities. This solution, then, does not imply that traditional ways of teaching are eliminated and replaced; it just means that schools need to be equipped to gradually welcome digital sources into a more analogical world. With figures like site facilitators and media educators, students can then benefit from technology, as long as it implies a conscious, critical and productive usage of media (Baldassarre, Tamborra, 2019).

What can be inferred also from Sherry's findings (1995), is that students in distance learning are more students than ever. If the aim is to promote active learning and effective communication, everything has to be taken into consideration: from learning styles to students' preferences, from curriculum decisions to group and individual projects. All in all, the praxis is the same as the traditional one and as such, it needs to be thought of in advance by a team of experts: teachers, facilitators and in the case of distance learning, also families.

As it was argued before, it is a matter of matching media and learning objectives, with particular attention to the protagonists of the project. Not always figures like families and facilitators really facilitate the transition between learning in presence and distance education, but even so, it is clear that "students need support and direction to enable them to make the transition from traditional classroom environments to self-directed learning — particularly tools to help them monitor their progress and obtain timely feedback on their activities" (Sherry, 1995, p. 352) All things considered, it is unquestionable that guidance and feedback are necessary in this kind of experience and no other than adults can give them to students. This poses, however, an interesting question: how are adults doing on media education?

2.3 Digital Immigrants

Once the concept of "digital natives" is clear, a complementary definition can be introduced. It is the case of the expression "digital immigrants", which, in Doni's article (2015)+, is referred to as an older generation that, as opposed to the younger one, appears to be less hands-on with technology and media. Even if the classification does not necessarily involve every single member of the "older generation", it applies to it in general terms. In a comparative perspective, research has observed that digital immigrants are separated from digital natives by a cultural

gap. This part of society, which paradoxically has lived longer than the younger one, was not born in a world where digital media already existed; they have seen them rise and develop and it took time to get familiar with the idea. Some have accepted it and adapted to changes, but there are still many that feel left behind in the process of technological evolution. This portion of society continuously stands between a sense of disorientation and a sense of fear, almost like they are in a foreign land without knowing useful geography or language. In fact, not only do they find it difficult to become "aware" about the online reality, but they also have to look after their children, who explore it much more easily and freely.

That constitutes the origin of the gap: in this exact juncture of life, adults and kids' experiences differ so much that a discrepancy keeps them apart. Apparently, until technology is totally accepted in humans' life, the gap will continue to exist. Of course, as generations keep sequencing, the separation will get thinner and thinner, but up to now, still a large proportion of digital immigrants worry more about the younger than they do for themselves. This focus, however, might lead to a mismanagement of the problem, in fact, literature explains that the category that needs digital literacy the most seems to be the older one. As Levy points out, it is easy to feel discouraged when the topic seems so easy and yet still so out of reach. Years and years of different opinions have fostered the idea that, in the technological field, immigrants would never keep pace with natives, and it is not an hopeful perspective, both for parents and teachers. The latter, in particular, have to accomplish a mission that seems to be more difficult as distance increases.

2.3.1 Teachers in Distance Learning

It is now clear that distance learning has some unique characteristics to which teachers must adapt. But what qualities must they possess in order to accomplish the mission? As Sherry points out in her review, they are expected to show confidence, have experience, be at ease with the equipment, make a creative use of media and, most of all, keep the interactivity with the students (Sherry, 1995). In addition to that, Lokanath Mishra, Tushar Gupta and Abha Shree publish an article in 2020, "Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic", where, among other interesting aspects, they also focus on teacher's abilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent online mode of learning. They state that teachers must show "clarity of expression, emotionally connect with the students and […] resolve small issues during and after the online classes" (Mishra et al., 2020, p. 5). As

the emergency prolonged, they also found other fundamental emergency teaching skills: "virtual classroom experience, patience, empathy, care for students, excellent presentation skill with addressing to the point of a given topic, proper handling of teaching-learning tools available with user-friendly features" (Mishra et al., 2020, p. 5).

Of course, teachers that are specialized in teaching distance courses result to cope easier than ordinary teachers. In fact, they are already used to thinking the lesson through media, thus maintaining a higher level of interaction and a quick response to potential technical problems. They might also possess certifications about distance education theories and strategies and they are provided with pre-made digital material that ensures lessons to be successful. Moreover, they use *ad hoc* evaluation criteria to assess students' progress, thus creating equal and fair conditions that consider the presence of the technological vehicle (Sherry, 1995). Not every teacher knows how to apply these procedures, provided that the majority of them do not receive adequate training. In fact, what they seem to have is great experience in managing students within the classroom walls and in making use of tangible materials (books, photocopies, the blackboard). "In presence" educators do lessons off-camera, not always with the help of multimedial presentations, and they often monitor students directly when having tests. In this case, feedback follows different rules that guarantee equity and fairness.

That is why, when switching from face-to-face to distance learning students and especially teachers may feel disoriented. Regardless of their level of experience in the class, they risk being taken off guard. Practice is necessary to deal with audio, video, graphics and text; a "live" multimodal environment that, in the end, may not be as different as the classroom, once it becomes known. As a matter of fact, many educators still happen to see media as an obstacle, more than as a helping hand. What they really lack is training and "field experience", in order to be able to face any emergency or abrupt change. Before 2020, in fact, most of them had never had to modify the way they delivered a course.

One good solution to this problem is suggested in Sherry's review: teachers with more experience in distant learning could function as role models for other teachers and share what they know (Sherry, 1995). Communicating with other people who have already gone through that process may be helpful for teachers who feel disoriented or even scared of technology.

2.3.2 Site Facilitators in Distance Learning

Another figure that finds great purpose in this scenario is the site facilitator. In 2019, when talking about distance learning, researchers like Borup, Chambers and Stimson highlighted the importance of site facilitators as school employees that help teachers, families and students get acquainted with a digital experience of learning.

They are not necessarily certified educators, but they must have competencies that are applied in the following situations:

- when learning is based on platforms, they facilitate their use by sharing technological knowledge;
- when virtual communication between families, teachers and students is difficult, they monitor and encourage it by promoting participation and solving doubts;
- when students and teachers find it hard to interact, they propose strategies by adapting traditional practices to the new learning environment (Borup et al., 2019).

As Sherry (1995) points out, communication between distance learning teachers and students is not direct. On the other side of the digital medium, it would be useful to have another person taking responsibilities for the course. The weight of management would then be reduced and many issues would be addressed to the site facilitators: equipment, homework and tests, group work, emails, etc.

As Borup and Stimson noticed in 2017, site-facilitators, when present, also help "orienting students to the online learning course, supplying and troubleshooting technology, building relationships with students, […] monitoring and motivating student engagement facilitating instructional support from the online teacher and local content experts […] proctoring exams, using a variety of rewards and punishments to encourage students to finish the course, and recording grades" (Borup et al., 2019, p. 258). Moreover, they are a point of reference when teachers cannot guarantee full presence or when they do not understand the needs of the class: a third perspective is always useful when the view is not enjoyable in presence but only on screen. Borup et al. also state that the presence of site facilitators benefits the relationships with families: if students feel understood and protected on all fronts, they are more likely to have a positive online learning experience.

Unfortunately, the sore point with the matter is that not every school can provide such a figure among their employees. It is the case of Italy, for instance, which leads to the thought that, if

the lack of site facilitators is negative in normal conditions, it might become a real problem when dealing with distance learning.

2.3.3 Parents in Distance Learning

It is now clear that, if school represents a substantial part of adolescents' lives, then family is the most influencing factor. The household is the place where children share their learning experience, even more so when it comes to distance learning, but not always each member has their own personal space and so the sharing becomes almost a constraint. Riesmeyer, Abel and Großmann, in their 2019 article "The family rules. The influence of parenting styles on adolescents' media literacy" stress that in using media not as frequently as their children, parents do not really comprehend the dynamics that shape their world, the concepts of "privacy", "trust", "independence" and "control" that might modify kids' digital learning experiences. (Reismeyer et al., 2019)

From their point of view, the risks that their children run into are too many and too uncontrollable. As for Italy in particular, Mascheroni and Ólafsson (2018) show some interesting results on the time spent on the internet by teenagers: it seems, in fact, to be causing quarrels in the household for the 16% of the sample. A percentage of 13% admits not putting enough attention and energy to homework, friends and family because of the internet, while 10% feels uncomfortable not being online and another 10% has tried to lower their online time without success. The research also shows that the reasons for adults' preoccupation comprehend the risk of seeing "digital activities" substitute their children's passions, face-to-face relationship and obligations such as homework or sports.

If friends and parents still seem to be the major sources of support during online experiences, then they have to measure their interventions with the right balance. Especially for families, it they need to upgrade their own knowledge on digital matters and adapt their parenting styles to the new virtual dimension. Such task is certainly not a simple one, because, as Eleanor Levy highlights in 2017, also the architecture of media has changed: one computer in the shared studio passed the torch to personal computers, usually one for each member of the family, then again these bigger devices shrank and became even more "portable" and "personal". This is the case of tablets and smartphones, from where, as it was specified before, the internet is accessible anywhere at any time. Independent use of the internet made parental control and blocking apps

pointless (Levy, 2017) and so the only option left seems to be the direct influence of parents in media use.

Starting from these considerations, in 2017 Parent Zone carried out a survey addressed to children in the UK, collecting their opinions about management of media in the household. Parent Zone is an online portal collecting research and articles by experts in digital family life, through which they give support to parents, schools, local authorities and industries based primarily in the UK. A thousand people aged 12 to 16 were interviewed and the data collected were revealing. It appeared that over 60% of parents set screen time rules and 80% of respondents think that those rules are unfair. Online privacy turned out to be a delicate matter for 71.3% of the respondents. Because of the various expedients parents use, like blocking apps, reading messages or direct interaction, adolescents feel that their personal digital space is not respected (Levy et al., 2017).

However, 51.3% of the interviewed stated that they found it helpful to talk to their parents about digital experiences; these findings suggest that nowadays it is fundamental to live in a family where there is information and support, without exaggeration. To avoid exaggeration, parents are not expected to copy children's habits or to intrude in their profiles, but undoubtedly to support them by leaving them space and respecting their own rules. Easier said than done, it would seem; nevertheless, they are still responsible for the environment they create around digital issues, for the encouragement of media literacy and for the participation in their kids' learning process, especially in times of distance learning (Riesmeyer et al., 2019).

2.3.4 Parenting Styles and Digital Parenting

A quick insight on parenting styles could be useful, at this point, to better understand the dynamics of the issues presented above. In pedagogical literature, the expression "parenting styles" is defined as a set of approaches that determine how parents bring up their children, by showing certain attitudes and behaviour. In particular, in Riesmeyer et al.'s article, it is possible to find theoretical distinctions between four parenting styles:

- **Authoritative-democratic:** an approach where the level of support is high, but rules are set clearly. In this context, communication is encouraged, so that rules can be discussed together until a compromise is found. In doing so, autonomy is maintained but parents still keep the responsibility of the environment.

- **Negligent:** an approach where parents do not seem to be interested in their children's lives. Control and interaction are low, in fact while childrens' independence level is high, parents' presence in their lives is not perceived.
- **Authoritarian:** in this kind of approach, the level of control is very high, to the point that it becomes restrictive for children. Their independence is not stimulated and communication is not encouraged.
- **Permissive:** the high levels of affection let children behave freely, generally without too many rules. While independence is granted, direct control is often absent, thus increasing the possibility of purposefully running into risks.

Opinions seem to indicate that the *authoritative-democratic style* has been, so far, the most effective for children's improvement in media education. This kind of approach is thought to create an ideal environment for their independence, while, on the contrary, the least effective seems to be the negligent parenting style, as it does not create a positive context for child development. In between, there are the permissive and authoritarian styles: the former seems to have a better influence on children's lives than the latter (Riesmeyer et al., 2019).

It seems almost unnecessary to state that parenting styles have a high resonance in media education, too. Obviously, they must be redefined and adjusted to the context, for instance by talking about the measures that parents take in order to protect their children from negative online experiences. Depending on how they apply them, it is possible to make further distinctions to accompany parenting styles, that are also illustrated in Riesmeyer et al.'s article:

- **Restrictive measures:** parents set rules that must be respected, at the cost of receiving sanctions. The control level is high, while trust is low.
- **Active measures:** when it comes to digital content, parents are open to discussion. These measures can be negotiated among the family members, thus control and independence are balanced, with a high level of mutual trust.
- **Accompanying measures:** parents and children make a common use of devices and media, so everything is under the control of the adults.

In their article, Riesmeyer et al. present the results of twenty-eight qualitative interviews carried out in Germany in 2018. Thanks to their findings, it is possible to verify that the way parents apply the above measures influences kids' approach to technology and their level of media education. What emerges is that the higher the trust level the more likely children will involve their parents in doubts and questions regarding their virtual experiences. The most effective

approach is then an active one, where rules are present, but negotiable and there is no shame or fear in talking about media content of all kinds. If families can establish mutual trust, then kids are less likely to follow "digital" models (like influencers) and prefer going directly to their parents for advice. Those considerations do not imply that indulgence is key to success: rules are still needed, in a balance between trust and control. In fact, parents can be confidants, as long as they still guarantee supervision. As Riesmeyer et al. notice in their article, too many restrictions may trigger curiosity, especially during adolescence, and push kids towards acts of rebellion. As a result, then, it is possible to confirm that the perfect balance is located between authoritative and democratic parenting styles, with a set of active measures applied on media use (Riesmeyer et al., 2019). In this way, kids can find the space to navigate autonomously in the virtual reality, without losing sight of the safe path that parents have already laid down for them.

All in all, it is clear why "digital parenting" is defined as a complicated task. Parents cannot back down from it, but what they can do is try to fill the so-called "digital gap" as best as they can. Digital literacy has to be promoted, especially in the prospect of distance learning, because if parents are not there in the most appropriate way, the risk of failure, for students, might be right round the corner.

2.3.5 School Meets Parents: The Electronic Register

Hopefully, parents should not be alone in this task. Teachers and schools are expected to interact with families and promote teamwork in order to support students in their learning process. However, the triangle "school – family – student" is notably difficult to manage: it requires supporting equipment that, in the era of distance learning, is essential. In particular, Agicom's report focuses on one of the most useful innovations in this field, by describing its history, functions and importance.

We are talking about the "electronic register", a digital source of information, news, programs, projects and events regarding school and students, which is consultable anywhere at any time by the three summits of the abovementioned triangle. The aim of this device is to create a community around the school. Before the electronic register existed, institutions were equipped with the paper version of the register: a notebook for the teacher and one for the classroom, which was not accessible to families unless they explicitly asked for it.

In Italy, the shift from paper to digital version dates back to 2012, when the Decree-Law No 95 aimed at streamlining administrative procedures, thus demanding the "digitalization" of this practice. Starting from 2012-13 school year, the adoption of this new method became official and it was further financed by the abovementioned PNSD (Piano Nazionale per la Scuola Digitale). Thanks to this commitment, almost every Italian school (84%) has adopted the electronic register. Obviously, it always depends on the type of school: for higher level schools the percentage of adoption was 94.3%, with 92.4% of schools choosing to let families check the electronic register at will (Agicom, 2019).

In Italy, up to now, the electronic register is one of the most representative media on the frontiers of digital and distant learning. It is an indispensable instrument that serves to guarantee not just a simple communication, but even a ubiquitous and immediate one. School then becomes more manageable for families and not just a "students' business". Depending on how the electronic register is used, it could assist and facilitate distance learning. Interaction can thus involve not only the dichotomy student-teacher, but the entire triangle and call every member to participation.

On the downside, it is highlighted in Agicom's report that if it is not used wisely, it could trespass privacy limits. If on the one hand, parents can actively partake on their children's education on a digital level, on the other hand, students risk losing autonomy and awareness. They could feel untrusted to the point they become tired of the "controlling situation" created by the electronic register. The need to find balance involves this medium, too, and it has a weight on the advantages and disadvantages of digital evolution that will be presented in the next paragraphs.

2.4 Covid-19 Health Emergency

A situation that put special attention on distance learning is COVID-19 health emergency. Started in February 2020, the coronavirus epidemic spread all over the world quickly, soon becoming a pandemic and forcing many nations to declare a general lockdown. In fact, as an infected person is very likely to infect others by air, restrictive measures were necessary and traditional ways of interaction underwent severe changes. Therefore, educational systems were overwhelmed by a shift in modality: in Italy, from February 24th to the end of the school year, lessons were no more delivered in presence but in a modality called *DaD*, the acronym for

didattica a distanza (in English, "distance learning"). Obviously, up to now it has been a widespread issue with continuous updates, but since the focus of the present study is on the Italian school response to the March-May lockdown, observations will mainly concern this time-space window. At that time, in fact, the necessity of abandoning school in presence was fundamental to avoid movements and limit the contagion, but it was certainly very difficult to manage from a didactic point of view. In paragraphs 1.4 and 1.5, the situation of the Italian school system was briefly illustrated; hence, it is easy to understand how these measures could result in great confusion and frustration. Almost overnight, teachers and students who had never tried distance learning had to shift from traditional learning and not on the basis of a personal choice. The lockdown period ended at the beginning of May, but schools did not re-open: the school year was carried out in the DaD modality until the end. In addition to that, it is important to observe that, since the beginning of the emergency it had not been clear if and when it would have ended and that constant waiting for certainties lead to the lack of firm decisions. Every institution dealt with the problem in its own ways, with its own resources, and this had a high resonance within families and students. Interesting in this case are two articles: the first one is "Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic" written by Lokanath Mishra, Tushar Gupta and Abha Shree in 2020 and the second is "College students' use and acceptance of emergency online learning due to COVID-19" written by Patricia Aguilera-Hermida in 2020, as well. The first paper is a research on online teaching-learning modes adopted by the Mizoram University (India) during the virus outbreak. As it collects teachers and students' perceptions on the matter, this study could be helpful to understand the circumstances and create a common thread with the present study, as it goes deeper on the classifications of pros and cons of distance learning. Similarly, in Aguilera-Hermida's research, perceptions of east coast US college students are collected and they concern adoption, use, and acceptance of emergency online learning. Among the delineation of advantages, disadvantages and suggestions about distance learning, the findings of this study show that students' academic results during lockdown distance learning were influenced by it in terms of motivation and self-efficacy.

2.5 Advantages of Distance Learning

It is no doubt, at this point, that distance learning comes with pros and cons. It is useful to examine both in order to have a full vision of the matter and contextualize the present study. To

help in this task, Raut and Patil's article, "Use of Social Media in Education: Positive and Negative impact on the students" (2016), has proven very useful for some interesting observations. Some of their points, in fact, will be taken into consideration in listing how distance learning can benefit students:

1. **Further dimension to learning:** many digital tools like apps, websites and devices themselves can amplify and give further dimension to the learning experience. In fact, also in Aguilera-Hermida's study (2020) the presence of new activities proved to be beneficial for students;
2. **Learning new skills:** new skills are built and the younger students are, the less they will struggle with technology in the future. This was also noticed by Aguilera-Hermida (2020), who found that by using new apps like Zoom, students were experimenting with a better and more disciplined organization of their learning. Indeed, some of them discovered new opportunities and became interested in taking up courses and obtaining certifications;
3. **Discovering talents:** talents have more opportunities to be discovered: the multimodal conformation of distance learning gives more space to ways of expression and sharing of ideas; in her study, Aguilera-Hermida (2020) collected perceptions about personal improvement, which was described as an advantage of distance learning by students;
4. **Enhanced creativity:** customization of profiles can enhance students' creativity and uniqueness, an aspect that may not emerge as easily during lessons in presence;
5. **Production and promotion of talent:** content can be downloaded, uploaded, modified and shared in no time (unlike paper books or photocopies, for example); a practice that motivates students to produce and promote (multimodal imagery is strongly implied here);
6. **Essential feedback:** is instant and shareable: it may be easier for someone to compare opinions and make adjustments on their works. What also Stella Hurd notices in her 2006 article "Towards a better understanding of the dynamic role of the distance language learner: learner perceptions of personality, motivation, roles, and approaches" is that feedback is essential for students in a distance learning situation because not only does it give them indications on how to carry out their performances, but it can also encourage and motivate them (Hurd, 2006).

7. **Shared content:** Classes that maybe never had the chance, now can create a shared drive on Google Drive or cloud, as well as groups on social media to share and exchange information;
8. **Increased family time:** among other positive aspects detected by Aguilera-Hermida's study (2020) is the benefit of increased family time. If lessons can be attended from home, then travel time is saved, or, even more plainly, one can be in the same room or sit at the same table as their relatives in order to be close to them in a task that usually keeps them separated.

2.6 Disadvantages of Distance Learning

Following Raut and Patil's (2016) insight on the disadvantages of distance learning, it is possible to line out some interesting points concerning the negative aspects of media use in the learning environment:

1. **Distorted messages:** in a perspective of effective communication, the change in delivering messages can sacrifice the quality of the message. Spelling and grammar may suffer from it, spell check features may make written production "lazier" and misinterpretations may alter contents;
2. **Ineffective communication:** on the same chain of thought, Mishra et al. (2020) found that one of the major disadvantages during the lockdown distance learning was communication: the connection was unstable, unless students turned off their mics and cameras, but that sacrificed interaction, in fact, teachers felt like their class was absent (they could not see their expressions or interpret their mood) and students felt like their class was too "mechanical";
3. **Lack of meaningful interaction:** moreover, in Mishra et al.'s research (2020), the participants lamented the lack of meaningful interaction. In fact, the risk of exchanging information in an ineffective way may lead to a loss of scope in the very exchange;
4. **Worsened memory capacity:** the effort made to retrieve information is lightened by the large availability of notions on the internet. Students could become less and less used to making this effort and feel disoriented without their devices. As a consequence, relying on the net as the only storage of information, could worsen memory capacity and the ability to hold data;

5. **Distractions:** media, especially social media, can be a distraction during (online) lessons, as they can be opened and utilized in background, without teachers noticing and parents monitoring;
6. **Sacrificed socialization:** also socialization can suffer from excessive concentration on the digital world; it could affect body language, tone, voice inflection, facial expressions. In addition, empathy could be put at stake, in favour of a less "human" approach during everyday interactions;
7. **Privacy at risk:** privacy is one of the most debated topics: it goes without saying that the use of several devices and the creation of profiles filled with sensible data cannot guarantee a safe continuation on the net;
8. **Standoffish participation:** another point made by Mishra et al. (2020) is that during distance learning it was difficult to determine students' participation. Some were just present for the namesake and then going somewhere else, but there was not a surefire way to find out;
9. **Tricky media design:** as it is underlined in Sherry's review (1995), sometimes also the design of media can become an enemy. Not all items are thought with a didactic implication; the learner's needs cannot always be fulfilled by technology (Sherry, 1995). In Mishra et al.'s account of the experience, they reported that "despite having a variety of digital modes of teaching-learning, almost all the teachers and students both were using WhatsApp/ Telegram and Email for educational interactions, submission of assignments, clarification of doubts and conducting class tests" (Mishra et al., 2020, p. 4).
10. **Elimination of laboratories:** another area that was penalized by distance learning, according to Mishra et al.'s recount (2020), is laboratory activities, as they could not be performed, for obvious reasons.
11. **Sense of inequity:** as Mascheroni and Ólafsson discovered from data collection (2018), in Italy, online experience tends to be more and more private. The smartphone is the most used device to go online, but mobile-based and computer-based experiences are not interchangeable. As a result, this can generate even more confusion and gaps in digital literacy, as discrepancies can take place among people that possess only one type of device (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2018).

12. **Compromised health:** moreover, the prolonged time spent in front of the screen, as Mishra et al. (2020) wrote, could bring damages to one's general state of health, both from a physical and mental point of view.
13. **Exaggerated workload:** in fact, in Aguilera-Hermida's research (2020) what came to light was that students felt stressed. Not only because of the context they were not familiar with, but also due to the excessive workload that teachers sent them.

It is clear that distance learning includes positive and negative aspects, even though Mascheroni and Ólafsson (2018) state that it cannot be reduced to lists of pros and cons. Research has shown that good and bad implications go side by side according to a logic that can be translated into the phrase: "the more, the more". In fact, the more students become familiar with technology, the more they experience the benefits of it (Livingstone et al., 2011 cited in Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2018). By exposing themselves to the risks, they are forced to deal with them, which is not necessarily a negative fact: it could help build resilience and self-awareness, both aspects that can develop by facing and overcoming dangerous virtual situations. As Mascheroni and Ólafsson point out, Italian adolescents use the internet as a main source to socialization and entertainment. In fact, 79% of the interviewed in her research use it to communicate with family and friends, watch videos online and visit one's own social profile (Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2018). These data denote that, even if they had experiences of online school activities (paragraph 3.1), they were not used to doing long periods of distance learning. At this point, since the issues about communication have been discussed, it could be interesting to dwell on the backbone of communication: languages. In order to have a glimpse on how students deal with languages in distance learning, the following chapter will present the topic according to what has been found in literature up to now.

Chapter III – Distance Language Learning

3.1 Perspectives on Distance Language Learning

From the screenshot made by Mascheroni and Ólafsson in 2018, it would seem that the Internet is quite well integrated in Italian schools, especially in higher education. There are students aged 15 to 17 that are already used to learning through media (as it appears in Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 49% of the sample uses them with a didactic aim) and this poses the questions of if and how they have already experienced digital *language* learning. This topic is largely debated in literature, but the occasions in which the Italian educational system has faced distance language learning are still very few. From a theoretical point of view, what is clear is that this way of dealing with languages through technology may be either positive or negative, according to the points of view. In Blake's opinion, for example, learning languages through a medium triggers a sort of chain effect where doing encourages doing. In the 2011 article "Current Trends in Online Language Learning", he observes that the medium has the power to stimulate students "to spend more time engaged with the second language (L2) materials, which ultimately promotes greater learning" (Blake, 2011, p. 3). According to this theory, the more time students spend learning languages online, the more they are likely to spend.

In the literature landscape, there are, however, other studies that present a different perspective. In 2006, Stella Hurd published the article "Towards a better understanding of the dynamic role of the distance language learner: learner perceptions of personality, motivation, roles, and approaches" where she highlighted the alleged incompatibility between the two concepts of "language learning" and "distance". It has been established that the technological environment can be as constructive as it can be constrictive: as a school subject, languages may not be fit for digital barriers as they tend to compromise not only language acquisition but also the development of extra-linguistic competencies. As Hurd explains, the most obvious evidence against successful digital language learning is the following: the teacher is not physically present, the student is isolated and so the interaction lacks data belonging to proxemics, vestemics, gestemics and all the other aspects that define the whole sphere of communication. Nonetheless, the reality of distance language learning (or DLL, for reasons of convenience) touches more than some schools all over the world. Sometimes it follows a methodological choice, sometimes a language course, or part of it, is delivered online for geographical reasons.

Anyway, what is fundamental for any type of education is that the outcomes are satisfying, so how is it possible to guarantee that, in a situation of remoteness?

In 2017, researchers like Chin-Hsi Lin, Yining Zhang and Binbin Zheng focused directly on the student, by proposing the article "The roles of learning strategies and motivation in online language learning: a structural equation modeling analysis". Considering the responsibility of teachers and the importance of material and technological equipment, they also observed that, in order to learn languages efficiently in a remote situation, students must actively regulate their learning, apply strategy and be motivated. Based on studies on virtual schools or online high-school level language courses, they start from the hypothesis that there is a connection between these three factors and the learning outcomes. A student, in short, should be as autonomous as possible; that is why the next paragraphs will explore what circumstances can guarantee this condition.

3.1.1 Self-regulation in DLL

Thanks to the work of Lin et al. (2017) the definition of self-regulation can be summarized as a set of self-directed practices aiming at learning. The compliance with these rules is ensured by motivation and organizational skills, that, on their turn, lead to the reaching of the decided goals. In a few words, it all comes up to the students: in languages, their autonomy in distance learning seems to be the key aspect of success, even more than other aspects that have already been discussed.

Self-regulation has already proven to be crucial in traditional approaches, but as a more technological perspective is gradually overtaking educational systems, several studies have taken an interest in testing it on online learning. In the 2011 commentary "Learner Autonomy And New Learning Environments", Reinders and White argue about ways to measure autonomy. In fact, if it is true that self-regulation is crucial to distance language learning outcomes, then how is it possible to recognize and enhance it?

The researchers start from some observations in literature: being autonomous seems to be a matter of "internal affordances", a capability that could not be taught but only apprehended autonomously through experience. It is thus very hard to define, but its effects can be seen throughout the whole learning process. Depending on their level of autonomy, some students can set their own learning time, studying pace, improvement goals etc. – and this is recognizable as a high level of autonomy. Talking about the roles of the distant language learner, in her

investigation on DLL learners in a UK University French course, Hurd (2006) also analyses the centrality of the student in a conscious process of learning. Self-regulation is not just a matter of organizational skills but also of "metacognitive awareness". By more than quarter of the sample in her study, being active, aware and self-regulated is judged to be the most important role that students took during DLL (Hurd, 2006): it was through experience that they realized what their internal affordances were and they reflected upon them in terms of how and when they were able to put them into practice. As for enhancing and improving them, however, the question is more complicated. On that matter, Lin et al.'s study (2017) goes deeper into the variables of motivation and strategy use.

3.1.2 Motivation in DLL

There are uncountable studies on this topic, so when it comes to languages, some already made distinctions must be taken into account. Language is part of one's identity, but at the same time, it also allows communication and socialization, thus becoming necessary at both a personal and interpersonal level. One's motivation in language learning, then, can be influenced by personal and social factors and can be divided into two main types, which Lin et al. (2017) have retrieved from precedent literature:

- **Intrinsic motivation:** when the willingness of accomplishing a goal depends on one's own satisfaction and desire.
- **Extrinsic motivation:** when the willingness of accomplishing a goal depends on one's desire to obtain rewards from external sources (Deci and Ryan, 1985; 1995 cited in Lin et al., 2017).

From the point of view of regulation, this type of motivation can be divided into three subcategories:

- **Identified extrinsic motivation:** when language learners accept that what they are doing is good for them and start caring for the regulatory process.
- **Introjected extrinsic motivation:** when language learners do not accept the value of what they are doing, but persevere in regulating their learning on the account of guilt or pride.
- **External regulation:** when there is no self-regulation of any kind and the urge of learning a language is totally given by external sources (Deci and Ryan, 1985; 1995 cited in Lin et al., 2017).

It is possible to observe that this distinction depends on the level of autonomy that the student presents. It is considered high when motivation is identified, while it is low in external regulation. This is what emerges from Lin et al.'s literature review (2017), but in addition, Hurd (2006) found that the most common situation in a student is the combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Especially at a high school level, students are not likely to start learning languages only for one reason over the other: on the one hand, they are forced to do so by the school system, on the other hand, they may start to like the process and develop intrinsic motivation. However, Hurd (2006) also suggests that motivation is in constant adjustment, going from extrinsic pressure to intrinsic impulses, in a combination of aspects that influence and change this balance: the context of learning, the personality, culture and attitudes of the students and more. On a more concrete note, in 2020, Aguilera-Hermida's study has shown that, during the spring lockdown distance learning, the registered lack of motivation caused a mismanagement of time in students who did not feel engaged with this modality. At this point, it is easy to understand the correlation between motivation and self-regulation, in a digital framework of language learning: when one may be undermined by technological barriers, the other is necessary to scaffold it, and vice versa. The question is: how can a student maintain motivation and self-regulation? There are strategies that can be implied, also and especially in the digital environment.

3.1.3 DLL Strategies

It is now clear that the more self-aware students are, the best they can apply strategies for their learning. However, the previous paragraph showed that, as opposed to traditional realities, online language learning requires a higher level of autonomy and self-awareness, so how can students coordinate their own learning, administer their time and control their acquisition pace? In traditional learning, school schedules are the very operating array of educational activities. In Italy, for example, students go to high school from about 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and that is the part of the day dedicated to the actual teacher-assisted learning. Then, in the afternoon, they exploit time to do their homework or study for the tests that are to be done in the mornings. Thus, they perform a routine where the only real self-regulated section occurs in some hours of the afternoon. But what happens when all the schedules disappear and time management is in the hands of the students? What if lessons in the mornings and studying in the afternoon become all just a matter of synchronous and asynchronous learning modules? What if the day is no longer

marked by going to school, then coming back and doing homework between the daily meals? When students are left to themselves, strategies seem to be one of the most useful options to maintain a main role in their own learning process. There are literally no more school bells ringing, but only "internal alarms" that can be set in the light of self-regulation and motivation. If one enhances the other, then Lin et al. also found that an actively self-regulated student is able to "plan, set goals for, organize, seek helpful resources for, monitor and evaluate their learning at different points during knowledge acquisition" (Pintrich, 2000, p. 435 cited in Lin et al., 2017, p. 76).

Of course, on the practical side there are different implications of this sentence, all concerning the various ways of exploiting technology, the different learning styles and the level of awareness that puts it all together. Even though it is a valid point for learning in general, the focus is still on languages, so, having a good acquaintance and familiarity with media, what a DLL student can do to guarantee a successful outcome is examined by many researchers:

- **Fragmentation:** in their 2008 article "An overview of mobile assisted language learning: From content delivery to supported collaboration and interaction", Kukulska-Hulme and Shield observe that a good starting point for successful DLL is the fragmentation of the studying time. As the level of attention tends to lower drastically in front of a screen (also due to the many distractions discussed in paragraph 2.5) it would be better to avoid long-term sessions: not only for synchronous lessons, but also and especially in all the planned asynchronous activities. With shorter modules attention levels remain high and every task is completed more easily (Kukulska-Hulme, Shield, 2008).
- **Audio contents:** Richard Harrison and Michael Thomas wrote an article in 2009, "Identity in online communities: social networking sites and language learning", where they examined some online tools that can sustain strategies. For example, all the applications that involve audio contents: recorded voice messages, pronunciation practices etc. (now apps like Whatsapp or Telegram allow users to also share such content for feedback).
- **Peer review:** in this regard, the researchers also talked about "peer review", a strategy that exploits students' interaction (thus enhancing social learning styles) in allowing "other members to read, review and leave comments for other learners" (Harrison, Thomas, 2009, p. 117). Another implication of this practice is group chat sessions, where scaffolding from peers is a strategy to correct and have mistakes corrected at the same time (especially for those who feel safer addressing fellow learners rather than the

teacher). Nowadays it can happen via written chat, but also "live", in a way that can strengthen written or oral production, according to one's needs.

- **Vocabulary memorization:** other strategies for DLL are suggested by Blake (2011) and Syodorenko (2010) and plan to incentivize vocabulary memorization by involving respectively the use of multimedia word glosses and the implementation in the learning materials of videos with subtitles in the target language.

Combination of Text and Video

Special attention will be driven to the strategy of combination of textual and visual sources. In Syodorenko's 2010 study, "Modality of Input and Vocabulary Acquisition", it is found that this expedient stimulates information processing and acquisition. In a context where the students are unable to attend lessons in which they can physically see a person talk and move according to the language that is taught, this could be a good alternative capable of filling the lack. It also takes into account the target culture (which can shine through dialogues and scenes in the video) and all the extra-linguistic aspects that Hurd (2006) underlined to be essential in effective communication. The cultural sphere is stimulated by authentic inputs, images help memory storage and subtitles in the L2 are an added benefit, unlike during lessons, where they cannot be implemented. Syodorenko's findings (2010), then, have a good resonance in the present situation: nowadays there are applications that allow subtitles to be generated automatically, so both the recognition of written and pronounced words is facilitated. This solution can be applied to all kinds of online speeches, even simultaneously, thus becoming a great strategy for students who struggle with synchronous streamed lessons.

This practice, in conclusion, is a good strategy to reinforce multitasking abilities, even though Hermida-Aguilera's research (2020) is a reminder of the fact that, sometimes, too much variety can generate confusion and slow down the processing of information. The result can be that of cognitive overload, so it is important to try one strategy at a time and monitor its effects. Watching a captioned video means that students have to deal with numerous and various kinds of inputs at the same time: the more they practice, the more they can exercise control over their skills, thus enhancing autonomy and the perception of the central role of the DLL student. In this sense, strategy use, along with motivation and self-regulation, can be key to success in a remote situation of language learning.

3.2 Organization of the DLL Course

All in all, the results of Lin et al.'s research (2017), confirm that in DLL one key aspect concerns the students and their approach to the situation. Their research involved an online language course, primarily made of asynchronous material, so they suggest other studies to investigate students' level of motivation and its correlation with materials and format of the course. The present study will in fact deal with synchronous language lessons and students' reactions to them, but before, some considerations must be made.

In Sherry's 1995 review of literature, a concept is presented that is still valid at present times: "though more than one medium may deliver the same message effectively, different media present different learning stimuli and accept different types of student responses" (Sherry, 1995, p. 348). It is important then, to choose wisely and select the most appropriate delivery system for each task, because depending on how media are structured or designed they can either facilitate or undermine learning. In an era where the variety of media is limitless; the risk is of choosing the wrong one or too many to accomplish an objective. This may generate confusion; strategies are less likely to be applied and motivation is bound to decrease. As much as inventiveness and flexibility are merits of a self-regulated learner, it can become difficult to self-regulate when the right requirements and conditions to do so are absent.

Given the demonstrated importance of this aspect, the responsibility cannot be only in the hands of the learners: designers should propose alternatives that are suitable for DLL and teachers, or tutors, must provide students with the instruments to ensure self-regulation. How can they do so, if self-regulation cannot be taught? As it is a direct effect of strategy use, they can then "seek effective ways to incorporate instruction about online learning strategies into their online courses" (Lin et al., 2017, p. 84). To promote the chain effect advocated by Blake and illustrated at the beginning of the chapter, students should be able to expand their time spent on learning even after the online lesson or the exposure to language material. The ways in which teachers can help students are many, starting from the selection of the modalities and materials of the course.

3.2.1 Synchronous and Asynchronous Modalities

As seen before, strategy use and motivation can be related to the format of the course, in terms of what kind of material and lesson delivery are included. As Blake (2011) illustrates, among

asynchronous materials it is possible to find e-mails, forums, blogs, websites, but also pre-recorded videos or podcasts, quizzes, etc. The synchronous modality, on the contrary, is made of live lessons (now primarily delivered via Skype or Meet) or instant messaging applications. In a review of Blake's 2008 book *Brave New Digital Classroom: Technology and Foreign Language Learning*, Ching-Ni Hsieh explains that the main difference of the two modalities is the "real-time" factor. In Lin et al.'s research (2017) it was argued that the lack of real time interaction of the asynchronous modality may discourage motivation. The synchronous modality is a better expression of media potentiality, of the "here and now" concept, made possible by a range of tools that make learners produce language in a way that is more similar to traditional learning, but also to the real-world interaction (Blake, 2008).

Like what Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) describe regarding WBT (web-based training), in asynchronous learning, learners take time to prepare in front of the computer, with all the material at their disposal, in order to easily retrieve it and accomplish a task. In a synchronous modality, however, there is not much time left for preparation. As it was argued in paragraph 2.2 the "here and now" theory is typical of the nature of media and it seems to find its best expression with synchronous modality. If this approach benefits motivation, then the asynchronous modality, as it was described, is a great starting point to strategy use and application. What emerges, all in all, is that the best solution lies in the balance of the two modalities, where an ideal modality is one where synchronous and asynchronous activities share a 50-50 percentage. To integrate these two dimensions, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) find in the use of mobile phones one possible solution: from their point of view, the most portable device par excellence could make learning happen even on spare or waiting time and partly resolve problems of scheduling meetings. In fact, what they highlight is one problem that seems to be quite common also for the present study: if the device used during distance learning is shared, it can become difficult to arrange synchronous activities and accomplish asynchronous ones in the most comfortable hours of the day. Obviously, it penalizes motivation and all the linked aspects, relapsing on language learning and interrupting the chain of acquisition.

3.2.2 Socialization

Another important aspect in the organization of distance language learning can be found in the sphere of socialization. As it was stated in paragraph 3.1.2, languages are learnt to interchange information and so it is fundamental that this dimension is maintained, even when the context

makes it difficult. Many researchers start from the vygotskyan notion of ZPD, "Zone of Proximal Development", according to which, the learning process is divided into stages and in order to move from the lower to the higher, the learner needs a "significant other" who can help solve problems and make a step forward (Harrison, Thomas, 2008).

As much as interaction is important, when Blake (2011) inserts it in a digital environment, difficulties immediately start to emerge: many are the disturbances that can interfere with remote communication, so what is necessary is an even more careful negotiation of meanings. If it shall be put in vygotskyan terms, who is then the significant other? The person at the other side of the screen, according to Blake, has the role of scaffolding and assisting the students, even if they are in a virtual classroom. If all the opportunities given by media are considered, then the negotiation of meanings can happen between students and teachers, but also peers and native speakers (Blake, 2011).

To enhance communication in L2 and guarantee the reaching of the following stage, the possibilities are numerous. Among them, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) underline the prevalence and potentiality of audioconferencing, by suggesting activities that combine autonomy with interaction. They can be inspired by real experience, but they must be adapted to the medium, in order not to create just a mere and ineffective reproduction of traditional, in presence, learning. For example, they suggest drill-like activities in synchronous modalities, where tutors or teachers can intervene directly or that are just between peers. The experts can monitor learning, for instance by indicating mispronounced words and when the interaction is also possible via text, the mispronounced words can be highlighted. Other techniques may provide texts to be read out loud during synchronous online meetings. The tutor, or peers, can take note and then share mistakes, both in synchronous or asynchronous modalities, according to the students' needs (Kukulska-Hulme, Shield, 2008).

Other strategies documented by this and other studies in literature are not different from the ones that have already been illustrated in paragraph 3.1.3. Podcasts, audio-visual material, videos, presentations that really reflect the essence of socialization, especially, as Kukulska-Hulme and Shield notice (2008), with the possibility of sharing projects and productions not only with the teacher, but with a wider audience. Motivation can be boosted by this possibility: on the one hand, learners may find an internal urge of doing the assignment the best they can and, on the other, they can find a way of expressing themselves and be curious of receiving others' feedback. Moreover, the material can be shared online and edited by others (maybe their classmates)

and so with each one's intervention, the final product can be publicly posted. Lately, the mere storage in drivers has been replaced by a more dynamic and social use of language, in a perspective of distance language learning that could be integrated in a more traditional one. All in all, technology is not only an instrument that helps us accomplish objectives, but also the access to instant communication. This is a key aspect for languages, as also Reinders and White notice, for autonomy. Looking at how DLL works it is clear that being self-regulated language learners is not just a question of independence but also of interdependence (Reinders, White, 2011).

3.3 DLL During COVID-19 Health Emergency

Up to now, what has mainly been studied is distance language learning in courses or schools that were chosen by the learners. One interesting study that focuses on the suddenness of change due to COVID-19 emergency and its influence on the learners is Lo Presti's. In "Second Language Distance Learning: The Issue of Language Certification in the Time of COVID-19", published in 2020, the author frames the situation in terms of pros and cons of the presence-distance shift. To the present study, this research is important because the starting condition of the sample is very similar: it consists of students who enrolled in a language course (Italian as a second language) in presence and had to quickly and unwillingly adapt to a new modality in the middle of their experience. Even though they have different features (in Lo Presti's study, students are not high school learners, but adults in a course for a language certification), they still have started it without contemplating the possibility of distance learning. In particular, this research concentrates on language learning and has recognized three main problems that came up as soon as the method of delivering changed:

- **continuity issues:** how could damages of such abrupt interruption be contained?
- **content issues:** how could language material be adapted to distance learning in such a short time? How much and what kind of new material would be effectively useful?
- **motivation issues:** considering the mood of the learners, how could they be motivated? What would prevent them from giving up the course?
- **guidance issues:** how could students manage the unexpected amount of autonomy given by the situation?

When a course is devised as an online one, these issues are a starting point in the design and by resolving them, the layout, syllabus and methodologies of the course are set. However, as Lo

Presti notices (2020), what was missed during the COVID-19 emergency was time to deal with these issues, from the students, teachers and especially, institutions' point of view. As Mishra et al. stated in their research (2020), the educational system had to undergo a revolution: so many changes in such a little time gave rise to unprecedented outcomes ad even though Lo Presti's area of interest is not the same as high school, it has detected common issues that affected all the people involved in the situation.

Therefore, Lo Presti's findings (2020) are very interesting in order to draw up a list with the most relevant pros and cons of the experience, as well as other studies prior to COVID-19 that faced similar questions. For instance, Stella Hurd's 2006 research investigates the online experience of French learners of a UK University and collects data about:

- personality traits which constitute an advantage in DLL;
- the perception of motivation and its role in DLL from a students' perspective;
- the role and perception of the tutor;
- the role and perception of the students;
- if DLL leads to better results than traditional learning and how.

All these elements complement and sustain Lo Presti's findings, as well as previous studies that have already been cited. In the next paragraph they will be summarized in a list of advantages and disadvantages that characterize not only distance learning, but distance language learning in particular.

3.3.1 Disadvantages of DLL

For graphical reasons, all the disadvantages will be listed in points below:

- **Motivation issues:** from what Hurd observes, motivation seems to be distance language learning's Achilles heel and the three major threats to motivation are linked to feedback, technical problems and interaction. In fact, what Hurd notices is that feedback may not always be perceived as commensurate to the "digital environment" as it requests different kinds of efforts compared to the traditional one. Technological problems such as interferences, lack of connection or malfunctioning devices may not be solved and keep hindering communication. For this and many other reasons, group practicing and direct sharing of the learning process may become so difficult that it results in a general decrease of motivation (Hurd 2006).

- **Time-space issues:** time and space also play a crucial role in DLL, from Hurd's point of view (2006). These are the elements that push the 42.1% of the sample in her study to state that their lack of motivation is due to external factors. Precisely, the more commitments one has beyond learning the harder it is to manage time for synchronous and asynchronous activities, especially when they include mixed media to support them. Moreover, space is a problem when the student shares it with others; privacy and silence are needed but not always granted, as the members of the household, as opposed to classmates, have different tasks and priorities to accomplish during the day. Obviously, the more numerous the household, the more difficult it is to find one's own time and space. In this regard, what Aguilera-Hermida notices in her research (2020) is that the concept of accessibility has changed concurrently with lockdown distance learning. It is no longer referring exclusively to availability of devices and internet connection, because now also the composition of the household has an incidence in this factor.
- **Interactivity issues:** on the issue of interactivity, specifically concerning language learning, Sherry (1995) argues that it can be compromised by technological hiccups like the loss of signal that slows down or manipulates communication. As it was stated before, it can be dangerous not only for language acquisition, but also for all the extra-linguistic aspects that revolve around it. From the distortion of pronunciation to the impossibility of replicating proxemics concepts; from the difficulty in following lips movement to the slowness of the repartee, back-and-forth dimension that guarantees fluency. Moreover, what Mishra et al. report in their article (2020) is that other kinds of problems have risen together with lockdown distance learning: in more abstract and discursive subjects the explanation is flattened and concepts that need physical presence, mimicking and embodiment cannot arrive properly to the students. The same goes for laboratorial activities and demonstrations, so the more practical side of learning becomes more penalized than ever (Mishra et al., 2020).
- **Privacy issues:** privacy has always been a delicate matter involving technology. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) present the problem also from a linguistic point of view, noticing that sometimes students rather use just the audio function than the video one, which worsens the quality of synchronous language learning.
- **Usability issues:** furthermore, their research draws attention to the aspect of usability of the devices and apps that are chosen to conduct the course or the lessons. Sometimes,

there are so many options that it takes time to discover all of them and sometimes some of them remain unexplored. In that sense, there are media with huge potentiality that are not exploited a hundred percent, and for not knowing that some functions are present on the same network, the tendency may be to adopt a useless plurality of media.

- **Material issues:** continuing on that path, Reinders and White (2011) explore the risks of having so much material at disposal that learners could feel lost and disoriented. As it happens with paper material, also digital sources must be selected and, if it is the case, facilitated: sometimes there is not the possibility of having a digital version of a book, so teachers manage with a selection of links. It is crucial to avoid too dispersive portals and homepages, to prefer material that does not require printing and to ascertain the validity of the digital sources. Authentic material is gold for language learning, but despite being so easily retrievable on the net, it needs the same attention as it would receive in a paper version, with the due explanations and instructions.
- **Academic performance issues:** as it was argued in chapter II, the effort of the brain is inversely proportional to the accessibility of information on the net. In the case of languages, the sphere of vocabulary acquisition may be encouraged thanks to the visual contribution of media, but also compromised by the facility of information retrieval. As Reinders and White (2011) point out, technology is also an advocate of false perception of making progress. Digital learning is a good excuse to develop some areas of language learning (for example, vocabulary thanks to watching movies or playing video games), but it is also limitative for other areas where improvement may be stagnating (synchronous communication).
- **Adequacy and appropriateness issues:** finally, going back to Lo Presti's article, it is interesting to explore the negative aspects of distance language learning linked to COVID-19 emergency. They were: dissatisfaction with the media chosen to deliver lessons (e.g. Skype), problems with internet connection and, in general, the lack of adequate tools that could support and guarantee success in distance learning. To make an example about the importance of using appropriate media, it is reminded that, among the results of Syodorenko's study (2010), learners showed the desire of having more control over the options of the videos. In that case, they wished they could have watched the videos over again more often, which leads to other considerations about the many functions of this source, like the possibility of pausing the video, slowing it down, going

back at a specific playing time, etc. Some resources should be then as user-friendly as possible to be enjoyed to the full, but in the case of emergency it is not only a matter of exploitation of media: some could not even be used, as they presented an inadequate or insufficient configuration to accomplish the essential tasks. Not only did distant learning prevent language students to make the most out of this experience, but it also put obstacles were they normally do not exist, spoiling their effort to reach a satisfying linguistic competency.

In the previous paragraphs it was clear that many factors influence distance learning: from teachers to families, then institutions and policies, to media education in general. In this scenario, however, it appears that the tools available to face the lockdown phase were the main cause of discontent.

3.3.2 Advantages of DLL

Some of the disadvantages of DLL were established by literature years ago, some others were confirmed by the latest developments of the health emergency, but there are also advantages that have been explored by researchers and that have found a realization during the 2020 lockdown.

- **Autonomy goals:** what Hurd underlines, along with the negative aspects she found, is that DLL inevitably stimulates autonomy in languages. Students who were not self-regulated and depended from the teacher and the school schedule, in experiencing DLL are likely to become "more self-aware and acquiring new skills, for example, in self-monitoring and reflection, planning and prioritizing, self-discipline and taking responsibility" (Hurd, 2006, p. 22).
- **Personal growth goals:** this leads to a sort of more enjoyable experience, as also Kukulska-Hulme and Shield point out in 2008. In fact, in such a different approach compared to a traditional paradigm, DLL leaves students more opportunities to become responsible for their learning. They define their own learning in terms of time, materials and space: they can make choices and personalize what the traditional system does not include, thus living the experience of learning a language at a more personal level.
- **Portability goals:** in this framework, tools can also be a choice made by the students. In courses that allow it, they can select the devices according to preferences, be them personal computers, laptops, tablets, mobile phones, or other alternatives. In particular,

as it was argued in paragraph 3.2.1, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) observed that the use of mobile phones in DLL can be particularly beneficial. For being among the most portable and user-friendly devices, they could help students be active in their learning and feel motivated to access language sources more often, more easily.

- **Variety goals:** the risks of too much and confusing material have been presented, now another interesting focus is to be found in Lo Presti's research (2020), where the other side of the coin shows some positive outcomes. Since it was not possible to base the synchronous lessons of the sample course only on the textbook, many materials were proposed to the students, who, in the end, found them very useful and stimulating. Maybe they would not have had the opportunity of such a quantity and variety of material if the modality of the course had not changed. Videos, podcasts, language apps and websites enriched the learning experience in an unexpected way.
- **Comfort goals:** on the practical note, another aspect was recognized by Lo Presti (2020). As obvious as it may seem, it concerns the appreciation of the more comfortable aspects of DLL. Following the course from home, for those who were not already used to it, was a significant advantage, because it allowed students to feel more relaxed. Starting the lesson in an already positive atmosphere where everyone was at ease, allowed it to flow without obstacles: a very valuable element to communication, which is necessary in language acquisition.
- **Interactivity goals:** a new interpretation was given to feedback, which, although still represents an improvable factor in DLL, at least takes a soothing overtone in the context of COVID-19 emergency. For as much as it was considered discontinuous and inadequate for many DLL researchers, in Lo Presti's results (2020) it represented a great source for encouragement and motivation. In a situation that calls for autonomy, where a commonly experienced dark side is solitude and demotivation, every occasion of confrontation was essential. The importance of knowing and using the language for interpersonal aims was stressed by this emergency.
- **Motivation goals:** to conclude, an interesting point is made by Hurd (2006) when she found that, as opposed to face-to-face interaction, having a screen between two poles of a communications might give a sense of relaxation. In the former situation, students are confronted with questions or requests that they do not really have the time to process, especially during oral interaction. This may cause anxiety and thus become upsetting.

In a digital environment, however, it almost seems that interaction is muffled by the screen and many activities, left to the asynchronous modality, become much easier for the shiest or weakest students. Both written and oral production are encouraged and students that before did not show the courage to go for it, now find in the digital dimension a safer environment (Hurd, 2006).

3.3.3 Suggestions for the future

Lo Presti's research presented some reflections on the Italian situation during the March-May 2020 lockdown, but also some suggestions on how to improve it for the future, both for distance (language) learning in general and for a potential extension of the emergency. What is interesting is that the suggestions came directly from the course students; those who, together with teachers, found themselves in the middle of an unpredictable situation. Along with this data, also Aguilera-Hermida's study brought to light interesting observations that add to Lo Presti's findings, which will be presented below in a synthetic list.

- **The fewer the students the better the interaction.** The learners involved in the language course observed that the idea of dividing the students into two groups was successful. Indeed, participation was encouraged as well as oral production, when the students admitted to a videochatroom were fewer.
- **The shorter the explanation the greater the attention.** As also Kukulska-Hulme and Shield sustain (2008), students found that short modules were the most effective in digital learning, especially in synchronous modality. In fact, long explanations seemed like monologues and attention was likely to decrease quickly, in addition to the fact that due to the use of digital media, it was extremely easy to get distracted. What was found useful were interactive lessons with several simulations: the students found it more engaging to intervene rather than to listen passively, even if it could seem easier for the teacher given the hindrance of the digital medium.
- **The more prepared the students the quicker the organization.** Students found useful to know what the content of the lesson would be in advance. In a situation like digital learning, where interaction needs to be rethought, a way to encourage it in a synchronous, traditional-like way was to inform the students about the next topics and exercises as to let them prepare their material, open folders, or slides, or blank documents to take

notes, etc. In this modality, fewer obstacles got in the way between teacher and students and communication was easier and more effective.

- **The more the awareness the happier the students.** It is now clear that motivation and self-regulation are key to successful language learning, that is why in her research, Aguilera-Hermida (2020) lingers on the concept of awareness. She found that in order to help students manage their skills and learning process, they must be aware of it and in order to keep up their motivation, they must be encouraged. Therefore, using meta-cognitive conversation and a solicitous reminding of students' abilities, teachers and students should collaborate and engage in discussions that make them aware of their roles in the learning process.
- **The better working technology the leaner the work.** As it was observed before, a very felt and shared problem was that of videocalling programs. In paragraph 1.5, the issues regarding the digitalization of schools in Italy were presented. Therefore, it is easy to understand why, for Lo Presti's area of inquiry but also for other Italian realities, availability and adequacy of tools was a really sore point in the emergency context. Obviously, this affected the experience of distance learning heavily, if not entirely. In Lo Presti's study, the tool used and reported to be malfunctioning was Skype, which was "the most immediate and easily available solution" (Lo Presti, 2020, p. 100), but at the same time a very compromising one, for language learning.

Harrison and Thomas (2009) argue that the more media are used the more they are modified and transformed by the users. If the users are learners, then it is necessary to adapt technology to the people who, more and more often, must deal with education digitally. Specifically, in the field of languages, Harrison and Thomas refer to a sort of "technical sophistication of the learner" (p. 121): either they choose or not to take the course online, learners need the tools to ensure active self-regulated learning and for this reason, tools must measure up to the students. In Hsieh's review of Blake's 2008 article, it is argued that the problem is not about *what* is used to do distance learning, but more precisely about *how* it is done. Considering all that has been said about this topic, it is possible to agree with that consideration, but in the case of Italy, the *what* might still represent a big obstacle, as its technological development, compared to other nations, cannot be put at the same level. If the case of a language course brought up so many

considerations, then it would be interesting to explore what happened in high schools and especially in language subjects during the lockdown. The present study will then be presented in the following chapter.

Chapter IV – The Study

4.1 Objectives

According to all that has been found and analyzed in literature, there are three main points that this research aims to explore. Based upon the distance learning experience in the 2020 spring lockdown, the study takes into consideration families' use of media, their observations and suggestions about distance learning and the singular experience of distance language learning from the students' point of view.

1. **Objective One: Students' and Parents' Perceptions on Media Use**
   The first objective of this research aims at collecting students and parents' perceptions on their use of media before and during the 2020 spring lockdown. This first step is made in order to give a qualitative screenshot of the situation, in which it will be easier to insert further data and observations.
2. **Objective Two: Opinions and Suggestions about Distance Learning**
   The second step of the study is to collect students and parents' opinions about distance learning during the 2020 spring lockdown. In case this modality is needed again, or integrated in traditional learning, the study also aims at gathering suggestions, both from students and parents, in order to find shared and common ideas or details that are perceived by the single members of the family.
3. **Objective Three: Students' Experiences of Distance Language Learning**
   On a final note, this research lingers on students' experiences in order to go deeper into the topic of distance language learning. The third objective, then, aims at giving a small insight on DLL, by collecting observations of high school students who faced it for the first time, in hopes of expanding literature on this topic.

4.2 Research Questions

In order to pursue the objectives of the study, some questions have emerged that found origin in literature. When people were faced with an unprecedented health emergency, suddenly all that had been researched about distance learning came into practice and schools had to deal with it as best as they could. This generated different kinds of struggles, observations and opinions, as for the first time school literally entered the life of families. Sometimes it did so by

subverting their habits, sometimes by bringing to them unimagined discoveries. It is right from families, then, that this study took its origins, by posing questions that put households at the center.

1. **Question One: Do students and parents perceive that their use of media has changed during the 2020 spring lockdown?**

   This question seems almost mandatory to understand the situation at the moment of the interviews. To pursue the first objective and find out the perceptions on the new modality of learning, the study investigates the possible changes that families have noticed. The fact that they might be linked to the emergency restrictions is an implicit part of the question: according to how parents and students felt their habits change, conclusions can be drawn and suppositions can be laid down for further investigation.

2. **Question two: What are students and parents' opinions and suggestions about DaD during the 2020 spring lockdown?**

   The second objective of this research is to collect opinions and suggestions in order to make confrontations and find common points in the respondents' realities. That is why, in its formulation, this question gives space to conversation and enrichment. The aims of the interviews are clear, but they cannot be reached without the collaboration of the participants. In this phase of construction of the research, the focus was on keeping the door open to every idea that came from the interviewed. It is from the very anecdotes, comments and lamentations that qualitative data acquire dimension and intertwine with what has been found in literature up to now.

3. **Question three: What are high school students' perceptions on distance language learning during the 2020 spring lockdown?**

   The third question comes naturally after what has been presented in literature about the topic of distance learning. Comparing some observations with the latest experiences of students exposed to DLL seems the most logical way of confirming or discarding theories and searching for new points of view. What is known in this field is never enough, so the answers to this question may provide useful information and add interesting inputs for research.

4.3 Participants

The participants of the study are fifteen high school students aged 14 to 19 from the North of Italy (eight females and seven males). Every student participated with one of their parents (the mother or the father), so there are thirty participants on the whole. The sample is then made of fifteen couples, where each couple is made of a student and their mother or father (thirteen mothers and two fathers). It is a non-probability sampling survey, so the participants were selected on the basis of convenience. The criteria of the choice were: reachability of the family and mutual knowledge between them and the researcher. All the participants gave informed consent before being exposed to the interview.
Useful information about the sample is gathered and displayed in the following table.

Table 1 – *Information on the participants*

Name of the student[1]	**Age of the student**	**Attended school year**	**Attended school**	**Parent**	**Parent on smart working**	**Possessed devices**
Lorenzo	14	1	Liceo scientifico	Mother	yes	smartphone, tablet, computer
Jacopo	14	1	Istituto tecnico tecnologico	Mother	no	smartphone, computer
Anna	14	1	Liceo scienze umane	Mother	no	smartphone, computer
Irene	15	2	Istituto tecnico economico	Mother	no	smartphone, tablet, computer
Chiara	15	2	Liceo linguistico	Mother	no	smartphone, tablet

[1] The real names of the students have been replaced with fictitious names to protect their privacy.

Maria Vittoria	15	2	Liceo linguistico	Mother	yes	smartphone, computer
Sara	15	2	Istituto alberghiero	Mother	no	smartphone, tablet, computer
Aurora	16	3	Liceo artistico	Mother	no	smartphone, computer
Alberto	16	3	Liceo scientifico	Mother	yes	smartphone, tablet, computer
Alina	17	3	Istituto tecnico economico	Mother	no	smartphone, computer
Paolo	17	4	Istituto tecnico economico	Mother	no	smartphone, computer
Luca	17	4	Istituto tecnico tecnologico	Mother	no	smartphone, tablet, computer
Emma	18	5	Liceo classico	Father	no	smartphone, tablet, computer
Mattia	18	5	Liceo linguistico	Mother	no	smartphone, tablet, computer
Edoardo	18	5	Istituto tecnico per geometri	Father	yes	smartphone, tablet, computer

High school in Italy is made of five academic years: three students are in the first year, four in the second year, three in the third year, two in the fourth year and three in the fifth year. They come from different fields of education in which their schools focus: Languages, Classic Literature, Art, Human Sciences, Economics, Technology, Science. About the parents who took the interview: four of them had a smartworking experience during the lockdown and eleven of them did not. Every family possesses at least a smartphone, ten families possess a tablet and fourteen

families possess a computer. Seven families possess either a tablet or a computer in addition to the smartphone.

4.4 Methods and Instruments

After the identification of the objectives and a research in literature, the first step was the preparation of the instrument. Many were the suggestions found in other works, but neither seemed to be applicable to the situation of lockdown. Therefore, the method that was chosen was a semi-structured interview with two different addressees: one interview was exclusively addressed to the students and the other one to their parents. The interview for the students was made of twenty-two questions, divided into five categories. The interview for the parents was made of twenty-two questions, divided into four categories. All the categories can be inscribed under four main categories, valid both for parents and students. The interview was conducted through video calls (except for one that happened via audio call), where the researcher read the questions aloud and the respondents' answers were recorded. According to the families' availability, the apps that were used for the interviews were: Skype, Google Meet and Whatsapp. The interviews were collected between May and June 2020.

The first part of the interview was prepared by following two models: Mascheroni and Ólafsson's "Eu Kids Online" (2018) and Ciboci and Labaš's "Digital Media Literacy, School and Contemporary Parenting" (2019). Both studies were based on questionnaires and interviews, so some of the questions were selected and adapted to this study for reasons of consistency with common aims in the educational field. However, the situation investigated was unique, especially for the Italian territory. That is why the questions of Mascheroni and Ólafsson and Ciboci and Labaš's studies had to be selected and adapted. Other sources were useful to trace the context of media education, digital learning and in particular distance language learning, but fewer ones were found at the time, with a specific focus on students in the shift from in presence to online lessons during the March-May 2020 lockdown. Therefore, most of the questions of the interview were created *ex novo* to go deeper into the topic of DaD and DLL linked to the COVID-19 emergency in Italy.

In particular, Lo Presti's "Second Language Distance Learning: The Issue of Language Certification in the Time of COVID-19" (2020) was useful to explore the DLL area of interest and generated the inherent questions of the present study, while Aguilera-Hermida's "College students' use and acceptance of emergency online learning due to COVID-19" (2020) and Mishra,

Gupta and Shree "Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic" (2020) were useful to draw a common line in the search for opinions and suggestions on DaD (*didattica a distanza*, or, in English, distance learning). In the specific case of Italian high school students, literature still needs qualitative data made of experiences and feedback, in order to enrich a section that might be useful for international comparisons, along with the other side of the research investigating parents' experiences. As the premises are new for all researchers, so much is to be done to explore the topic fully. That is why the decision for this study was to focus on qualitative data and highlight positive and negative aspects of the COVID-19 distance learning experience.

In the students' interview, the twenty-two questions are divided into five categories, which are:

- General information about students
- Students' use of digital media before and during lockdown
- Students' experiences and observations on DaD
- Students' opinions and suggestions on DaD
- Distance language learning during COVID-19

Since the insight on language learning only concerns students, in the interview for the parents, the twenty-two questions are divided into four categories:

- General information about parents
- Parents' use of digital media before and during lockdown
- Parents' experiences and observations on DaD
- Parents' opinions and suggestions on DaD

Given that general information constitutes an independent category, all in all, it is possible to outline three main areas of interest that are common to all the participants:

1. Use of digital media before and during lockdown
2. Observations and experiences about DaD
3. Opinions and suggestions about DaD

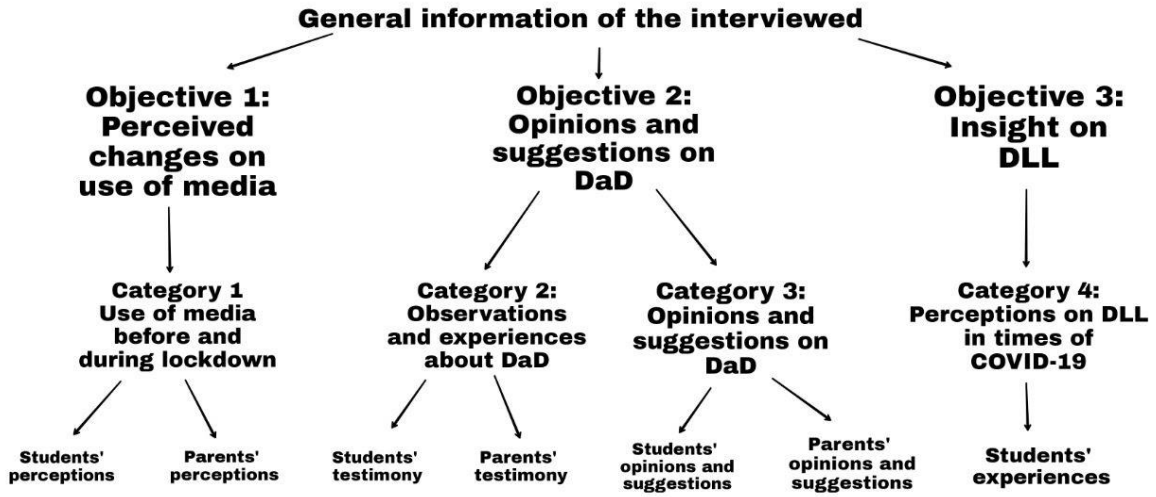
And a fourth one that concerns distance language learning, but it is not explored from the parents' point of view;

4. Students' perceptions on DLL in times of COVID-19

These areas of interest constitute the four categories through which the questions were organized and the results will be displayed. Each objective is associated with a category, in which the questions were divided. The distinction between students and parents will be maintained for

every objective in the displaying of results and the discussion. An overall structure of the presentation of the findings is illustrated in the following scheme.

Image 2 – *The structure of the study: how data have been collected and how they will be displayed.*



In the first category, "Use of digital media before and during lockdown", the aim was to detect possible changes in the habits of the interviewed, where "habits" are described in terms of time spent using digital devices and the internet, most used devices and most frequent online activities.

In fact, the subjects (both students and parents) were asked:

- how often they used their devices and internet before and during the lockdown;
- which was the most used of their possessed devices before and during the lockdown;
- which activities they did on their devices before and during the lockdown.

In case a change in those habits was noticed or mentioned by the interviewed, other questions investigated it in terms of: increasing/decreasing time spent on media, most used devices, most frequent activities.

In the second and third category, the focus moved to digital learning. The questions were just guidelines and the interviewed were asked to expand their observations by adding whatever thoughts they felt like sharing. The main points that students were asked to develop were:

- what they observed had changed in contrast to traditional face-to-face learning;
- if they had to share any devices with members of the family;
- if attention to the lessons was compromised and in what way;
- pros and cons of DaD from their point of view;
- suggestions in the eventuality of a second lockdown or a new, integrated, modality of learning.

Parents, then, were asked:

- if they had to help their kids while using devices and platforms for the digital learning;
- which rules were set to monitor screen time and activities online;
- what changes and difficulties were perceived during their children's DaD and how they intervened;
- pros and cons of DaD from their point of view;
- suggestions in the eventuality of a second lockdown or a new, integrated, modality of learning.

Finally, in the fourth category dedicated to language learning, which was exclusively reserved to students, they expressed their considerations on the topic. All of them having experienced it for the first time, they were asked:

- what activities were proposed and how the language lessons were organized;
- if they were different from the traditional activities and how;
- which one of the two modalities they prefer and why.

Chapter V – Results

This section presents the findings of the interviews, which are classified and ordered according to the three objectives of the study.

5.1 Findings Related to Objective One: Students and Parents' Perceptions on Media Use

The first objective was to collect data about students and parents' use of media, through a series of questions that were inspired by Mascheroni and Ólafsson's (2017) and Ciboci and Labaš's (2019) research. The questions were grouped under the category "Use of media before and during the lockdown" and what emerged is that both students and parents actually perceived a change.

5.1.1 Students' Perceptions on Their Use of Media

Compared to the unforeseen COVID-19 situation, during the lockdown phase students tended to pass more time in front of the screen. In particular, they counted spending hours online, using Internet connection, thus feeling a general increase of time spent online and using their devices. According to their answers, a shift in the most used device was also noticed, in fact, before the pandemic, most students declared using their smartphone instead of other devices.

"Usavo l'iPad solo per cose più serie, tipo fare delle ricerche o montare dei video per dei miei compagni." (Jacopo, 1st year)

"Con il tablet invece scaricavo giochi e al massimo guardavo Netflix, ma alla fine lo facevo più spesso col telefono, quindi, praticamente rimaneva in casa, la maggior parte del tempo spento." (Chiara, 2nd year)

"Io ho il computer fisso e non portatile perché è più potente, per questo lo usavo poco, perché alla fine tra una cosa e l'altra ero sempre fuori casa." (Paolo, 4th year)

With the advent of the emergency, students started noticing that the computer was becoming more and more useful, until some of them even defined it "indispensable".

"È semplicemente più comodo avere uno schermo più grande e la tastiera per prendere appunti su una pagina aperta di fianco. Per me è indispensabile per non rimanere indietro." (Emma, 5th year)

"Sistemare lo smartphone per fare le videolezioni è una perdita di tempo, oltre al fatto che ti fa sembrare orribile e già siamo sempre in pigiama…" (Maria Vittoria, 2nd year)

"Sul computer si può aprire Telegram o Whatsapp e contemporaneamente messaggiare e fare dell'altro. Se invece il telefono è occupato dalla videochiamata non puoi fare nulla e si scarica anche in pochissimo tempo." (Paolo, 4th year)

All the synchronous activities proposed in DaD (*didattica a distanza*, or, in English, distance learning) modality could be followed more easily on a pc then on a smartphone, although someone reported that their smartphone kept being the most used device, as they could follow online lessons and at the same time move through the room or the house.

"Lo smartphone è rimasto il dispositivo più usato perché comunque facevo le videolezioni da lì senza problemi" (Anna, 1st year)

"Per me è anche più comodo perché posso seguire da qualsiasi posto della casa, metti anche se vado in bagno e spengo la videocamera per un secondo" (Aurora, 3rd year)

One of the interviewed pointed out that, because she did not possess a computer, she could manage on the tablet, and so she noticed a shift in the frequency of use of these devices: before the emergency, she used her smartphone the most and during the lockdown, she used her tablet.

The activities students managed through media before the pandemic were essentially focused on socialization with friends (Whatsapp, Telegram), managing of their social profiles (Instagram, TikTok) and occasionally playing games. Few of the interviewed declared using their devices for didactic purposes. During the lockdown period, however, they detected that their most frequent activities were linked to school. In fact, some of the most commonly cited were: "following online lessons", "doing homework", "calling friends for group-work".

"Io faccio solo didattica online! Se senti il mio computer alla sera è bollente per tutte le ore che sta acceso e quando lo spengo, non ho nemmeno voglia di vedermi un film sennò mi cadono gli occhi." (Alberto, 3rd year)

"Sicuramente ora che dobbiamo seguire le lezioni e tutto, io uso i miei dispositivi principalmente per quello. Poi ovvio, messaggiare lo faccio comunque, anche più di prima, però se fai un conto ore, mh, mi sa che ne passo molte di più per la scuola." (Irene, 2nd year)

5.1.2 Parents' Perceptions on Their Use of Media

Also for parents, some of the questions were inspired by Mascheroni and Ólafsson's (2018) and Ciboci Labaš's (2019) studies. For instance, when asked how often they used their devices

before the lockdown many reported using them frequently during the day, especially for work or social purposes. During the lockdown phase, however, they noticed an increase in media use.
"Fa' conto che prima rimaneva spento anche delle ore al pomeriggio, o comunque mettevo la modalità aereo dalle nove in poi. Adesso, lasciamo perdere, anche perché ho l'ansia che qualcuno chiami con certe notizie…" (Mattia's mother)

In particular, they seem to have experienced a shift from the smartphone to the computer, especially those who started smatrworking or had more than one child to help with DaD. Few of the interviewed declared using the tablet and one of them described it being too "innovative" for them to even possess. One parent said that she preferred using the computer to the tablet because she could never have done her job without a "real" keyboard directly attached to the device. The smartphone remained the most used device for social purposes, in fact many declared using it after having dealt with work or family commitments, in order to videocall relatives and friends and check on their status.

It seemed, then, that tablets were the least considered devices, while computers gained importance, even though the most used device was the smartphone both before and during the pandemic.

"Anzi, ti dirò, se non lo avessi avuto mi sarei sparata un colpo! Durante 'sto periodo è tutto ciò che hai per passare il tempo." (Aurora's mother)

Before the lockdown, the main activities done by parents comprehended checking messages, work emails or news. The interviewed confirmed that it did not change in the shift from normal conditions to the lockdown. Still, the preoccupation for the coronavirus determined in many experiences a more frequent search for online news or the reason for sending messages and contacting relatives.

"Volevo sincerarmi che stessero tutti bene per questo alla sera, o al massimo una volta ogni due sere, facevo il mio solito giro telefonate." (Sara's mother)

"No, ti dico la verità, prima non è che leggessi tutte 'ste gran notizie. Cioè sì, magari quelle che ti comparivano su Facebook, sai… scorrendo… Però ora come ora sono sempre lì a controllare le novità. Mio marito si è anche iscritto a un gruppo Telegram specifico per le news sul coronavirus." (Lorenzo's mother)

There were some parents that also came across unexplored potentialities of their smartphones. Some of them started taking photos with effects as a hobby, some discovered the e-book world, some others downloaded apps and videogames that were criticized before. One of them declared

having become “addicted to Candy Crush and Facebook because of this lockdown” and another said she was worried she would miss her “digital relaxing activities” once the lockdown was over.

5.2 Findings Related to Objective Two: Opinions and Suggestions about Distance Learning

The second objective of the study focused on DaD modality, so the aim was to collect students and parents’ experiences in this field through a series of questions that served as guidelines. Unlike the previous category of questions, these left more possibility of enriching the respondents’ speech, with the result that they spontaneously brought up and discussed certain topics, which will be displayed in the following paragraphs. Consequently, both parents and students were asked to give some suggestions that will be listed in the dedicated paragraphs, after the illustration of the participants’ experiences.

5.2.1 Students’ Experiences and Observations on Distance Learning

In this part of the interview, the first question pushed students into naming various aspects of change from in presence to distance learning. The most relevant topics that students spontaneously covered were:

- content and duration of the lessons;
- quantity of homework;
- difficulty of tests;
- parameters of evaluation.

Content and duration of the lessons

In the first area of experience, opinions were varied but overall positive. The lessons had been commensurate to the effort of attention that was expected from students, so they had no more than forty-five to sixty minutes slots for each subject. Just two of the interviewed revealed having teachers that often exceeded the time limit, thus preventing them from going to the bathroom or joining the following lesson. Three of the interviewed pointed out that sometimes they had

to catch up lessons in the afternoon because the teacher could not manage differently, especially in case of oral tests with many students per class.

Quantity of homework

A strongly underlined element was the exceptional quantity of homework that students received, not only at the beginning of the distance learning modality, but through all its development. Some of them claimed to have to stay up late to process all the asynchronous material left from every teacher, some others lamented feeling anxious they could not even finish it on time. A few students admitted faking a malfunction of the device in order to be justified about their missed completion of the assignments.

Difficulty of tests

The tests were considered by some students much easier than the ones they did in presence. Especially in the first months of DaD, when nobody had yet come up with a unique guideline, tests were taken via platforms that allowed copying or searching the net for answers. Also with oral tests, some students had the feeling that they were "softened up".
"Forse perché l'idea di interrogare con uno schermo davanti in effetti mette in soggezione, ma secondo me è perché i prof si sentono in colpa. Nel senso, siamo in una pandemia mondiale e tu stai interrogando, non è che vuoi proprio peggiorare lo stato d'animo dei tuoi alunni e quindi tendi a fare domande facili e dare voti alti a tutti." (Mattia, 5th year)

Parameters of evaluation

By the same thought, students commented on evaluations, which triggered opposite reactions. There was a group of students completely satisfied with the marks they were receiving, because they were better and easier to get, compared to in presence modality. When they started to notice an unexpected increase in their academic level, they claimed they felt "more motivated and relaxed". On the other hand, a group of students observed that marks seemed to have standardized on the same level for everybody, thus rewarding those who were not actually making efforts and penalizing those who, in presence, would have excelled among the group. Other students felt generally disappointed about the decrease, or even lack, of feedback from some

teachers. A problem that emerged is that some professors totally “disappeared” and stopped guiding their students.

At this point of the interview, other areas were explored, and students could move freely within one topic. What students spoke about the most was the sharing of their devices and their relationship with parents during distance learning.

Sharing devices

As for devices, most of the students managed with their computers, while others preferred using the smartphone, but overall, everyone had at least one personal device that allowed them to follow the lessons. There were no signaled cases of impossibility to follow the lessons, except for someone who occasionally had connection problems and a student that for the first two weeks had issues with access to the apps, as she was using her father’s business account. The students who often logged out because of poor connection, always found a way of catching up, by videocalling a classmate on Whatsapp or studying the material that was uploaded by teachers.

In more than a few situations students had to share devices with other members of the family, especially in the case of the computer. In fact, when there was just one per family, the students who had brothers and sisters had to establish turns to use it.

Having to wait for other members to leave the computer was found to be an obstacle not much for following synchronous lessons, but especially when dealing with homework and asynchronous materials. Other reasons of disturbance were: a slow internet connection causing interruptions, malfunctions of the apps used for the online lessons (namely Skype, most of all), malfunctions of the devices, people passing behind the screen, notification popping up from websites, Whatsapp web or Instagram opened in background, distraction from other opened slides, parents calling and younger siblings entering the room.

In case of device problems, the most requested and least possessed one was the computer, which some schools offered as a loan for use. Neither of the interviewed reported asking the school for the loan but many mentioned this alternative with appreciation and one mother reported asking for a tablet for her younger son, who was at elementary school, in order to leave the computer to the older son.

The role of parents

While talking about their experiences, some students lingered on the topic of parents, by describing how they found ways to control their kids. Overall, the impression of students was to be safe and free at the same time. Some of them reported not having rules at all, some others said that they had rules, but that they also found them fair and shareable. Students who did not have rules affirmed that they were aware enough to manage the use of media on their own and that they were happy their parents were so trustful.

One interviewed even ironically expressed that parents were the ones who needed monitoring by their children and enriched her statement with an anecdote.

"Guarda che secondo me sono loro ad aver bisogno di noi, se non controllo io mia mamma, quella si fa spedire gli iPhone da Aliexpress" said Irene, 2nd year. *"Una sera stavo inviando i compiti di storia, arriva lei e tipo mi fa: "Ho vinto un'iPhone X, mi è arrivata la mail!". Vado a controllare e ovviamente è una truffa. E il bello è che nel frattempo si scrive con la sua amica e le manda gli screen e questa le chiede di inviarle il link perché vuole anche lei l'iPhone X."*

The presence of parents while creating profiles, or the imposed screen time were all those that were accepted by the students. The only point upon which two students discussed was the one of privacy. The two interviewed felt, indeed, that their privacy was invaded when their parents knew marks and homework before them because of the electronic register.

"Non potevo nemmeno pensare di saltare o rimandare qualche compito perché tanto mia mamma li sapeva prima di me" Alberto, 3rd year.

Moreover, the fact that their school life was now open to their family created discontent especially for one student, who admitted: *"Mi sento a disagio a parlare con la prof perché penso che i miei possano sentirmi, anche solo passando davanti alla mia stanza. Io mi chiudo sempre la porta e uso le cuffie, però non lo so… mi sento comunque in imbarazzo, specialmente quando mi interrogano"* Sara, 2nd year.

Having parents so close while studying or being interrogated, however, was a positive aspect for someone who gained benefits from the situation. According to the recounts of the experience, many were the episodes where parents helped their kids succeed in school tests, by suggesting answers or even writing them down for them. With these premises, only one participant of the sample admitted taking advantage of their parents' presence to succeed in tests.

"Non succede mica sempre, però qualche volta, mia mamma si mette vicino e mi cerca qualche informazione con Google. Alla fine, sai, non sono di certo l'unico che fa così, solo che sono uno dei pochi a dirlo. Anche dei miei amici di altre scuole lo fanno tranquillamente" Paolo, 4th year.

5.2.2 Parents' Experiences and Observations on Distance Learning

In this section, DaD was explored from parents' point of view. First of all, it was found that the majority of the interviewed did not help their kids in using devices and platforms for digital learning. They declared that their kids did not need help, while it was likely that parents themselves had to ask their children for help, as the younger were generally more used to technology than the adults. There were two parents, however, who specified that for some tasks, like creating a Gmail account and installing Skype, they intervened and helped their kids.
This observation leads to the following point of the study: how parents monitored online activities and what rules they gave their children in order to manage the consistent increase in media use. On this matter, the respondents seemed to divide into two groups. Group one is made of the parents who explained a list of rules and habits they set in order to monitor their children's use of media, while group two is made of parents who did not monitor their children at all.

Monitoring rules

As for group one, the most common applied rule was the one concerning screen time; every family decided a total amount of hours that their children could spend online (and not exceed) during the day. One parent also talked about rewards, like deciding to cook their children's favourite meal in exchange for commitment to DaD without any complaint. Another parent distrusted virtual groups created on videocalling apps and asked for a list of members of the group, in order to make sure they were known people.
It also emerged that some of the above-mentioned rules were constantly changed through the lockdown. At the beginning, the total amount of hours online allowed revealed to be insufficient to cope with all the activities on the agenda and so it had to be adjusted, and for the most part increased. In one case, a mother gave a total of six hours online every day, in which distance learning was included. However, it came out that DaD covered about five and a half of the total

hours, so what was left for her son was just half an hour and it was not enough in a situation where also meeting friends happened digitally.
There was just one case of reduction of consented hours online: a mother, in April, just before the Easter break, had to drastically reduce them because she noticed they were undermining the physical and mental wellbeing of her daughter. Thus, she decided that use of media was admitted only for didactic aims and then devices were to stay shut.
Notwithstanding, there was a small group of parents who answered the question "Which rules did you set to monitor your child's screen time and use of media?" with a straight "None, I completely trust him/her". Frequently, after saying that, the interviewed reprocessed their answer by adding premises and specifications on pre-existing habits.

The electronic register

All the same, almost all the parents mentioned the "electronic register" as a primary source to keep track of their children's school life. Some of the interviewed said that by checking the register daily they had the certainty that students were following lessons, doing homework and keeping up their average marks. Moreover, they also felt that by helping them notice new homework, notes and messages by the teachers, they were doing something to at least ease the weight of the burden that their children had to carry.

Health issues

Many parents have shown concern about the students: they reported that the hours spent in front of the screen made them nervous, unmotivated and sad. Anyhow, most of the interviewed noticed an improvement in their children's performances and achievements. One parent pointed out that DaD during the lockdown was: *"una medaglia a due facce: da una parte, è stata un'esperienza negativa a livello fisico ed emotivo per i ragazzi, ma dall'altra, è stata positiva a livello scolastico perché ha alzato le loro medie"* (Chiara's mother).
At least, said one father, *"è vero almeno sulla carta perché una volta che ritorneranno a scuola, vedremo gli effetti disastrosi della ricaduta di un'educazione semplificata e finta"* (Edoardo's father).
When their kids were undergoing stressful periods, some parents let them settle on their own, others imposed stricter rules, and others spoke with the teachers in order to have a confrontation

and explain what was going wrong. One mother wrote an email directly to the class coordinator and arranged a virtual meeting to discuss some points she did not share about the organization of online lessons and feedback. She reported that her intervention was useful and starting from the following days, she saw more cooperation from the school.

5.2.3 Students' Opinions and Suggestions on Distance Learning

In this part of the interview, there was more space to expand opinions and thoughts. Students were asked to list some pros and some cons about their experience, so according to their opinions, here is what emerged about the advantages of distance learning.

Positive aspects

First of all, some students found it very comfortable and relaxing following lessons from their houses, or even from their beds. They did not miss the morning rush or the obligation of being well-dressed and they generally liked being able to wake up late and start the school day in their pyjamas. In addition, one girl said that she saved time in getting dressed and putting her make-up on.

Another point in favour of DaD was that, for a few students, it was a way not to fall completely behind with the school program. A girl said: *"Sono felice di aver potuto continuare la scuola. Già è una situazione stranissima; lo sarebbe stata ancora di più senza scuola."* (Sara, 3rd year)

One student also pointed out the fact of being able to keep in touch with her classmates: *"All'inizio non mi mancava per niente la scuola, ma poi dopo due settimane che non vedevo i compagni, un po' mi sono preoccupata. Insomma, ero anche in pensiero per loro… non volevo finire la quinta senza nemmeno rivederli."* (Emma, 5th year)

From a more didactic point of view, DaD modality seemed to fascinate those students who liked technology and possessed many devices to experiment it with. Some of them said that online school was funnier and that they felt more curious and motivated to learn. One of them affirmed that he would gladly trade lessons in presence with lessons online sometimes.

Another element that was mentioned is "mood". Some students were preoccupied about the emergency, so having to think about school was, for them, "a sort of escape".

"Per me la scuola si è un po' trasformata. Prima facevo fatica ad andarci, adesso è una delle cose più normali che faccio, anche se farla così comunque non è molto normale." (Alina, 3rd year)

As it was mentioned before, also the fact of seeing their grades improve was defined as a positive element in the final balance of the experience. A student seemed conscious of the fact that this new modality was made of simplifications, but she claimed that *"avevo proprio bisogno di un po' di sollievo per ripartire meglio di prima"* (Alina, 3rd year).

Negative aspects

What emerged about the negative aspects was, first of all, unease and discontent with the delivery modality of DaD. Students reported that every teacher had a preferred platform, so some used Skype, some used Zoom, some used Classi Virtuali form the electronic register and some others used Meet. Students lamented that they had to create too many virtual accounts and enter too many platforms, and reported it being even more difficult when it came to homework. There were teachers who uploaded it on the electronic register, others that used simple emails and, in one case, also Whatsapp was chosen to give assignments. For some students, the most difficult part was not receiving homework, but sending them back. Often teachers could not download files, read them properly and when it came to take photos of exercises, the light was to be ideal as well as the angle and the extension of the file, otherwise it would have generated stressful misunderstandings.

There was a student who talked about "constant misinterpretations" and another one who detected "a sense of disorientation". In fact, other disadvantages underlined by students were: DaD's complicated nature, impossibility of making oneself clear and the frustration given by a handicapped interaction.

In addition, students found that time schedules were not clear and always changeable according to the teacher's ideas: *"Una volta ci fa stare tutti e ventidue un'ora intera, la volta dopo ci divide in due gruppi per fare solo mezz'ora a ciascuno"* said Chiara, 2nd year. *"Ma aspetta: una volta fa i primi undici dell'elenco e la volta dopo "per variare" prende l'elenco a partire dalla Z, tutto per poi alla fine tornare tutti insieme con Skype che si pianta! E questo è solo un prof, quando si mettono a fare tutti così non ci capisci più niente!"*.

Under cover of this problem, many students reported that some of their classmates only faked their presence. Sometimes they entered the platforms just to assess their presence but then

switched off their cameras and microphones with an excuse and stopped participating. This caused differences and disagreements between classmates and triggered a feeling of unfairness that more than one student reported. They said the teachers were helpless in front of this mockery, or just pretended not to see it, but kids could not bypass the fact that some of their classmates were getting away with that behaviour. This feeling, said one student, increased when the minister of instruction declared that everyone would pass the school year, so the phenomenon enlarged and teachers could intervene even less.

Another impression that emerged from some students is that they had to overcome this change on their own. Not all their parents and teachers were of help, so they were forced to find personal resources to face a totally new situation. There was one student who shared having felt so alone and confused that she just gave up and did the minimum wage until June. Besides, there were also some students who declared feeling satisfied about how they managed to get to the end of the school year.

Suggestions

In the light of these observations, students made some suggestions:

- **Choose a unique platform.** They suggested that teachers chose just one platform to deliver lessons and one to give homework. They wished all members of the school staff organized a meeting and thought about common guidelines in order to eliminate this main factor of confusion.
- **Give breaks.** Since the duration of the lessons was in some cases arbitrary, they suggested that teachers did not exceed the imposed time limit and that between each slot there was a short pause. It must be guaranteed not only for physiological necessities but even just to ease the sight, since the hours in front of the screen are conspicuous.
- **Reduce homework.** Highly suggested was the reduction of homework, on the observation that if students did not move from home, it did not mean they had more time (or energy) to dedicate to homework.
- **Control attendance.** Students suggested that stricter rules were applied for those students who did not really attend the lessons. The students demanded equity and fairness.
- **Empower internet connection.** Although having at least one personal device, almost all the interviewed suggested working on the connection. The area covered by this study, in Northern Italy, is made of one main town and many smaller villages distributed up to

20/15 km from the center. The ones living in the center had connection problems just when more than one device was connected. However, for someone living in the villages it was difficult to get connection, even on just one device.

5.2.4 Parents' Opinions and Suggestions on Distance Learning

The same questions about opinions and suggestions were asked to the parents, who shared some points with their children, but also focused on other matters.

Positive aspects

As for the advantages, many parents said that there were just "no positive aspects at all" and started listing all the disadvantages. Some of them tried to find something to say, others (but they were just a minority) seemed quite enthusiastic about distance learning. Among the positive aspects that they cited, one was that, at least, their children kept having school, in spite of the emergency. Another one stated that she was happy she did not have to pay for her son's subscription to public transport anymore.
One point that really satisfied a mother and a father was the possibility to enter directly in their children's school life.
"Mai mi sarei immaginata di entrare in aula, ma alla fine con la didattica a distanza è un po' come se l'avessi fatto e devo dire che è un'esperienza davvero… originale! Cioè, finalmente so di cosa e di chi mi parla mia figlia e devo dire, le credo un po' di più quando dice che certi prof sono matti!" (Anna's mother)
"Non avevo mai avuto il tempo di sedermi vicino a mia figlia e vedere come studiava e quali compiti le davano. Però tra la quarantena e la DaD mi sono affacciato anche al suo mondo e mi sono reso conto che è completamente diverso da quando io, a mio tempo, andavo a scuola." (Emma's father)

Negative aspects

As for negative aspects, some parents declared being displeased with the issue of faking presence and copying during the tests – to the point that, said one mother, if it had happened at school, they would not have been so bothered. The matter, according to some of the interviewed, was that everyone in the exceptional context of a global pandemic was trying and making an

effort, but in such a difficult situation, there were still students (and consequently families) who did not care about the others.

"È una questione di rispetto" said Edoardo's mother. *"Se noi siamo qui a scaricare app, creare duecento mail, collegare duecento cavi è perché abbiamo rispetto in primis per i nostri figli e poi anche per i professori e le scuole. Loro lavorano anche oltre il dovuto orario per esserci e il minimo che gli dobbiamo è esserci a nostra volta. Se tutte le famiglie si dessero alla macchia, a lezione ci sarebbero solamente i professori collegati… infatti fanno così solo perché sono furbi, ma quando torneranno in presenza dovranno rendere conto delle loro azioni, dato che dai banchi non si può scappare come davanti alle telecamere."*

About the general management of the emergency, some parents had the impression that school did not take enough responsibilities, leaving it up to the single teachers. Therefore, from what they experienced, there were teachers who acted promptly by finding a way to reach out for their students and deal with mockeries as they could, and others who "disappeared". Some parents did not doubt they had difficulties, but they also said that *"è il loro lavoro quello di trovare almeno un modo per esserci. Se sono loro i primi ad arrendersi, chi insegna ai nostri figli che non bisogna mollare?"* (Lorenzo's mother).

In particular, a mother said that she felt "abandoned" and "left behind" by the school, since the teachers were not responding to her emails and she had several concerns she wished she could explain to a dedicated figure. Four out of fifteen parents also reported that, at the beginning, the choice of uploading homework on "Classroom", by posting a comment with attached files and photos, was completely wrong. In the first place, it did not respect privacy, as everyone could download other students' work. Secondly, not always did students receive notifications about what instructions were posted by the teachers.

In addition, several parents reported their children having headaches, dizziness and sight issues. At a more emotional level, they also noticed a general dullness in their children, although they did not entirely blame it on the abuse of technology, but also on the impossibility of going out and doing sports.

Suggestions

When it came to making suggestions, some parents did not welcome the premise of "in case another lockdown is needed"; in fact, several of them stopped the train of thought to wish it

would not happen. However, they tried to think about some suggestions and this is what emerged:

- **Find a unique platform**. Parents advocated their children's absolute need of finding a unique way of delivery for lessons, as they observed how this confusion weighed on them;
- **Interaction between families and school.** Parents also insisted on the interaction between families and schools. Even if they did not care so much about it before the health emergency, they stated that it had become necessary in times of forced distance and direct involvement of the family in the learning process.
- **Mediating figure.** On this topic, they also suggested introducing a new kind of presence. They acknowledged the impossibility for teachers of managing everyone and everything, that is why they envisioned a division of jobs: teachers should keep doing lessons and correcting homework, while someone else should deal with all the "extra-curricular" problems experienced by students and their families.
- **Asynchronous modality in the future.** Parents then suggested keeping as a good practice the possibility of asynchronous activities in the virtual classroom folder, because in the future it could become useful to students that cannot attend the lessons and want to catch up without bothering classmates and families.

5.3 Findings Related to Objective Three: Students' Experiences of Distance Language Learning

The topic of DaD is vast and it would be interesting to explore all of its facets. This study provides just a small insight on the aspect of language learning during DaD modality. Some questions were proposed to students in order to collect their perception on a method that they had never tried before in the field of language learning. The majority of the interviewed students took English as the language of reference, as it is the most frequently taught in schools of Veneto.

Some students found no difference between the activities proposed in presence and online, but some others noticed changes such as an increased use of the workbook. For some of them, before COVID-19 emergency, long time was dedicated to the explanation of grammar rules,

but during the lockdown it seemed that the focus moved to exercitations, as language teachers tended to avoid long speeches where they could be interrupted by countless disturbances.

"Per noi che facciamo letteratura non è stato il massimo. La prof ci chiedeva di leggere da soli e poi al massimo ci dava un file con uno schema riassuntivo, ma in classe mi piaceva di più, perché leggevamo e facevamo il commento tutti insieme… capivi molto meglio il testo." (Mattia, 5th year)

One of the interviewed said that the change in the modality seemed to have awakened teachers about the possibility of using the digital version of the book.

"Prima della didattica online la prof non usava mai la versione online del libro con i video, anche se in classe avevamo la tv fissa davanti alla lavagna. Io invece la usavo già spesso perché per esempio se non tornavo a casa dopo scuola, ma ero da mia nonna, non dovevo ogni volta portarmi via il libro. [...] Secondo me la versione online è molto più ricca e mi piace di più poter interagire con lo schermo per fare gli esercizi, guardarmi i video, ascoltare i dialoghi, eccetera." (Jacopo, 1st year)

According to some students, fewer schemes and rules were dictated on the exercise book or printed on photocopies; the book seemed to be sufficient along with explanatory videos, which were never watched in class, or neither as homework. In addition, they were sent many links to interactive websites.

One of the interviewed found it very helpful to memorize new vocabulary on web pages and slideshows where he also liked to find gifs and emoticons that "livened up" something that usually was just "bidimensional and frozen on a page of the book". Moreover, in some students' experience the aspect of interaction was extended to a wider audience than the usual classroom and that seemed to have positively struck them.

"Una cosa che mi è piaciuta un sacco è stata che, a spagnolo, la prof un giorno ha fatto entrare in meet una sua amica colombiana e noi le abbiamo fatto un'intervista. Mi è piaciuto perché non stavo formulando delle domande per l'esercizio del libro o per il solito compagno di banco, ma per una persona vera, con uno scopo vero, che poi mi avrebbe anche risposto!" (Luca, 4th year)

"La prof di inglese ci ha mandato lo screen di una pagina Facebook e noi l'abbiamo dovuta tradurre. Poi ci ha chiesto di fare uno screen di una nostra pagina dei social e tradurla, ovviamente cancellando foto e nomi. Strano, però molto divertente!" (Anna, 1st year)

"Con la lettrice di inglese abbiamo creato un account di classe e abbiamo partecipato a un forum. Lei condivideva lo schermo, noi parlavamo tra di noi e poi inviavamo nella chat di Skype i nostri commenti. Lei li univa, li copiava e poi li incollava nel forum come risposta, dove delle persone hanno anche messo dei mi piace e dei commenti." (Mattia, 5th year)

For some language students, DaD modality brought about also unexpected perks. For example, Alina said that her teacher uploaded videos on a private channel on YouTube to avoid problems linked to the live streaming. So, students had access to the channel and could watch the video to study a new topic. The fact that Alina could pause it or go backwards or even slow down the speed of the speech let her follow language lessons a lot better. At a certain point she also referred to using automatically generated subtitles and even if they were not perfect, she said she was finally able to catch vocabulary that she had never recognized in face-to-face modality.

As for the choice of the preferred modality, the outcomes are really varied: some students maintained missing face-to-face language lessons, adding that they felt their language competency had decreased because of distance. They found it frustrating to interact and practice their oral skills, as well as to not be able to understand what was said during the live lessons because of the difficulty of the language mixed with connection problems.

"Non so, ho trovato tutto troppo complicato. Alla fine, in classe si poteva alzare la mano e semplicemente parlare… cioè, parlavi senza problemi anche nelle discussioni. Su Zoom non hai voglia di ripetere mille volte e sperare che ti sentano, o magari sentono male e sembra che tu abbia sbagliato. [...] Poi c'è anche da rispettare il turno, perché se ti parli sopra in classe pazienza, invece se succede su Zoom si incasina tutto e stanno tutti zitti. Per me è imbarazzante e sinceramente, faccio molta fatica." (Aurora, 3rd year)

Nevertheless, there were some students who said they did not mind the change and would even appreciate a blended modality, as it offered a major variety of inputs which stimulated their interest, curiosity and creativity.

"Io vorrei che fosse sempre così, cioè che lezioni di inglese fossero più movimentate, con attività diverse da fare, invece che ripetere sempre le stesse frasi e sempre le stesse traduzioni alla lavagna." (Lorenzo, 1st year)

"La prof un giorno ci ha fatto fare una cosa bellissima. Praticamente ha creato dei gruppi di tre alunni e ad ogni gruppo ha dato un tema legato al COVID, tipo paura, speranza, solitudine eccetera. Ogni gruppo doveva incontrarsi in un meet e creare un haiku in inglese, poi per la

lezione successiva ogni gruppo condivideva lo schermo e presentava l'haiku attraverso un power point. Non avevamo mai fatto questo tipo di attività: non so se la prof se l'è inventata o l'ha trovata in internet, ma se facessimo più cose così anche in classe sarebbe molto più bello." (Chiara, 2nd year)

One student also linked a positive experience to his former statement about his preference for the mobile phone and, in general, for learning with technology.

"Il telefono ha continuato ad essere il mio dispositivo preferito, cioè il più usato, perché era comodissimo" [...] *"Per allenarci la prof ci faceva fare dei quiz su un'app che si chiama Kahoot e mi trovavo benissimo perché alla fine ci prendevo gusto. A volte anche giravo per casa facendoli, o nei momenti morti, tipo prima che fosse pronto. Per questo dico che col telefono è meglio, ma in generale che si va bene anche facendo le lezioni da casa."* (Luca, 4th year)

There was also a minority of students who declared absolutely preferring the distance language learning modality to the traditional one. The reasons that were added to this statement concerned primarily the feeling of protection given by the context, in fact they claimed that once they were comfortable in their surroundings and behind a screen, they felt much less embarrassed while interacting in a foreign language.

Secondly, the majority of the interviewed (even those who were displeased with DLL) perceived that studying languages at a distance made them more autonomous and aware of what they were doing. *"A scuola a volte non facevo gli esercizi perché la prof non ritirava i quaderni, oppure seguivo l'ordine dei banchi e sapevo quando sarebbe toccato a me correggere la frase e completavo solo quella"* said Maria Vittoria, 2nd year. *"Ma con la didattica online, la prof vede sempre chi ha consegnato i compiti e chi no e quando siamo in Meet chiama chi ha sotto gli occhi, perché non compariamo mai con lo stesso ordine. Quindi mi sono messa a fare tutto più seriamente e mi sono resa conto che mi ero persa delle cose per strada."*

"In Skype se stai facendo altro e hai la telecamera spenta o non compari nello schermo della prof, nessuno ti richiama per stare attento. Devi essere tu responsabile e secondo me più che a scuola, perché a scuola ti stanno sotto, mentre a computer devi stare attento tu e sapere quando collegarti perché la prof è messa peggio di noi." (Paolo, 4rth year)

"Quando la prof interroga, ho sempre Reverso aperto di fianco. So che non si fa, ma devo dire che il fatto di poter cercare le parole che non sapevo mi ha evitato un sacco di scene mute che invece facevo in classe e mi dato un po' di coraggio per buttarmi più spesso. La cosa bella è che poi alla fine me le ricordo pure quelle parole!" (Luca, 4th year)

One of the students said that this big change made him reflect upon his preferences and for the first time, he realized that it was not the language he did not like, but the way it was taught. Another student declared that she felt more responsible for her learning process, as she started to divide material into folders, draw weekly rosters to plan homework and frame every appointment in order to get free time.

"Tutto questo mi ha aiutato anche nelle lingue. Prima studiavo tanto e puntavo sulla memoria, ma poi all'interrogazione buio totale. Invece la didattica online mi ha costretto a e classificare – e in questo il tablet mi è utilissimo – così ho tutto un mio nuovo ordine mentale e visivo che, devo dire la verità, sta funzionando" (Alina, 3rd year)

Chapter VI – Discussion

6.1 Discussion on Objective One: Media Education and Media in Education

The first objective of this study was to find out the perceptions of students and parents about their use of media. First of all, data collected with general information and the first category of questions (*Use of media before and during the lockdown*) seem to be consistent with Mascheroni and Ólafsson's results of the EU Kids Online research of 2018. The screenshot they provided reflects the situation of 2017-18 and finds continuity with the situation of the sample in the present research, in 2020. In fact, the majority of the interviewed declared using their smartphones every day to go online, even if, after COVID-19 emergency, more than a half switched from the mobile to the computer. This shift seems to be linked to the drastic change in their most frequent activity, too, which draws attention to recent data that may spot a transformation. In paragraph 2.4 it is shown that in Mascheroni and Ólafsson's research (2018), the reasons that pushed adolescents towards using media are socialization and entertainment. When talking about a pre-COVID situation, the same reasons are addressed by the sample of the present study, but then, their answers totally change while talking about the lockdown period. What they unanimously declared, in fact, is that their most frequent online activities were related to DaD (*didattica a distanza*, or, in English, distance learning). Since this modality is primarily based on the computer, it is possible to find a correspondence between the change in the most frequent activity and the change in the most used device, due to the new and unexpected migration of school from a physical to a digital place. All in all, by comparing the present results to Mascheroni and Ólafsson's 2018 results it is possible to infer that DaD has had a *strong influence* on adolescents' media use in 2020.

As for parents, by analysing data it is possible to notice that, while their most used device is still the mobile phone, their activity also aligned with their children's new priorities. In order to help them, parents have stopped concentrating on work or leisure related online activities and started checking the electronic register more often, asking other parents for elucidations about homework and finding out news about school.

Media education

Going deeper into the topic of media education, there are results that intertwine with concepts already found in literature and others that remark the necessity for further investigation. For instance, the definitions of "media education" given by Rivoltella and Masterman (cited in Doni, 2015) and explained in paragraph 1.2, highlight the idea of *empowerment* linked to the knowledge and management of media, which also emerged from students and parents' considerations. The less familiar they were with technology, the more they felt uncomfortable and helpless in front of the new and unusual modality of DaD. On the contrary, a well-developed digital competency made students feel at ease with their instruments and aware of their steps forward, leading to successful learning and, in some cases, improvement in self-regulation. Parents reflected upon the idea too; in fact, those who spent the most time with media before the emergency revealed to be the most tolerant of the DaD modality and the most trustful in their children's abilities.

In particular, the results were in line with the situation described in paragraphs 1.3 and 1.4, which briefly depicted media education in Europe and in Italy, by citing Doni's 2015 historical retracement. What emerged from the interviews is the product of the Buona Scuola Law and in particular of the PNSD (Piano Nazionale per la Scuola Digitale): students and parents were not completely strangers to technology and digital learning techniques, because before the emergency they had already been introduced to this dimension. In particular, families had already entered the dynamics of digitalization thanks to the electronic register, which proved to be one of the most useful instruments of formal communication during the emergency.

Connectivity

Back to the topic of media, however, it is clear that the ambitious project envisioned in 2015 still has to reap its benefits. Regardless of the familiarity with technology displayed by the young, teachers had difficulties that showed repercussions on students, families were not adequately prepared and kids felt alone and left behind, also declaring they felt like all responsibilities were falling on them.

Fortunately, being "digital natives" they seemed to possess a generally high level of competency and so, for the most part, they managed to survive. However, not everybody came out the winner and this represented a failure in terms of educational and pedagogical objectives. In

paragraph 2.1, Sherry (1995) insists on the fact that connectivity and interactivity are essential to avoid a stagnation of the learning experience. In fact, what many of the interviewed also felt is that, when interaction was faulty, they were left to independent study, which takes not just a natural set of internal affordances (Reinders and White, 2011), but also motivation and digital skills (Lin et al., 2017). On this topic, Sherry's previsions (1995) become real in the testimonies of students and families, who draw attention to the thin line between autonomy and isolation. In the latter case, what can happen is that students feel alone and not motivated enough. As a consequence, they procrastinate and eventually drop out, which is exactly what occurred in the present study, to one case out of fifteen. Even though data is restricted and may not be representative enough, this small percentage still represents a *red flag*: in literature, this kind of risk had already been contemplated when talking about digital learning (Sherry, 1995) and more than twenty years later, within the coronavirus breakout, theory has become reality.

Accessibility

In this context, the problem of accessibility is to be considered as a possible reason for the sense of frustration and weariness advocated by some of the interviewed. Although the aim of PNSD was to upgrade the Italian school system and although perspectives were optimistic, it did not happen in time, or not sufficiently. The focus here is obviously on a very small reality, located in the region of Veneto. Like Veneto, however, other regions are classified in the third quadrant of Agicom's scatterplot (2019), meaning that their levels of connectivity and innovation are below the national average level. These data are consistent with the research findings, as a matter of fact, many interviewed declared needing resources that institutions in their areas could not provide. Moreover, the students that lived in smaller villages and not in the center of the city reported having many connection problems, confirming the worrying data about the region of Veneto that were collected by Agicom in 2019 (paragraph 1.5). While no correlation was found between the size of the school and the broadband connection, it appears that *density of population* and *urbanization* played an important role, too. In fact, families who lived in less populated and rural villages were the ones who showed more difficulties in terms of availability of devices and, most of all, internet connection. Among the suggestions from families, it was requested that investments were finally made in order to upgrade the digital branch of the educational system in Italy. Some of them even felt the gap between the Italian and other international educational systems, because thanks to media it was possible to learn how every nation

dealt with the emergency and hence make confrontations. During the interviews for this study, Italian families realized they were a step back, in alignment with Doni's screenshot of the situation in 2015 and data provided by the Agicom report in 2019. As years have passed, it seems that the challenges of the Italian school system have remained and in a sudden and uncontrollable situation like the recent coronavirus breakout, all chickens have come home to roost.
Proceeding with the topic of distance learning, another point is worth discussing about accessibility: in fact, as Aguilera-Hermida (2020) observes, accessibility has recently been influenced by the number of members of the household. This observation has found resonance in the results of this research because it emerged that the presence of relatives who were smartworking or studying was sometimes counter-productive for mainly two reasons: devices and connection. In families where there were fewer devices, they had to establish turns and put at risk the proper outcome of asynchronous activities. When more than one person was connected, internet connection stopped working and it represented a big challenge, especially during synchronous activities. All in all, it is possible to say that it was the *most mentioned factor***,** both as a disadvantage and also a distinctive aspect of DaD experience. It was perceived both by students and parents with the same negative consideration and strong will of pointing the issue out.

Effective communication

From the parents' point of view, the problems of connectivity and accessibility also influenced *active learning*, one of the concepts advocated by Sherry (1995) for a successful distance learning. In students' experiences, learning was perceived either as active or passive, according to the situations that were described, but most of the parents judged DaD as a less powerful source of learning than the traditional, in presence, modality. According to parents, it seems to depend not only on the students but also on the teachers, on how they are capable of keeping attention level high.
However, neither of the interviewed had a precise idea of their learning objectives, especially because there never was an indication on when school would be in presence again. It was hard for them to feel motivated and one the consequences was that they would often switch off their camera. They claimed to be lacking a scope in communication and, in general, in learning. For them and for the parents, this was particularly true when the minister of instruction declared that everybody would pass the school year. These results are consistent with the concept of

"ownership of the learning goals" that can be found in Sherry's review of literature (1995), which is seen as essential for distance learning.

Another element in common between theory and the collected data is *multimodal imagery*, a feature of media that researchers like Sherry (1995) and White (1987) treated as a double-faced. Their observations found realization in the experience of students during DaD in 2020. In fact, opinions were divided into two groups: students who felt mesmerized and endeared by the variety of materials and students who felt disoriented and confused. In particular, the second group of students reported experiences that were similar to the risks described by White in 1987. In the book *What Curriculum for the Information Age?* it is argued that the real structure of the message can be distorted by media and for the present sample, it has been true in the case of homework. When it was sent to teachers, media could show it in a not comprehensible way, which triggered groundless suspicions. White (1987) advocated that a sort of awareness is needed to transcend the envelope of media and get to the right content, but it seems that to reach that kind of awareness took a long time, both for teachers and students. Only by the end of their experience and with a retrospective approach, the interviewed saw the bright side of multimodal imagery. Indeed, once they had become familiar with the new modality of learning, they were able to appreciate this factor even more than other techniques implied in face-to-face learning. In those cases, communication was found to be effective, even if synchronous modality was collectively judged to be slightly less effective than the asynchronous one, due to the disturbances that affected the first modality in a more detrimental manner. These data stimulate a reflection upon Lin et al. (2017) and Blake's (2008) observations in paragraph 3.2.1, who find the synchronous modality the best representative of the *here and now* feature of communication, let alone a great source of motivation. A question may arise from these facts: did the faults of synchronous modality have an influence on the generally felt frustration and in some of the reported negative experiences of this study?

Indeed, many of the students indirectly answered yes. They said communication was poisoned to the point that the real meaning of messages was distorted. As for parents, the discarding of apps chosen to give, accomplish and send back homework was a common element in the interviews, which finds sense in King and Xia's argument, as "communication effectiveness depends on properly matching the inherent characteristics of media to task requirements" (King, Xia, 1997, p. 879). Furthermore, in 2020, Baldassare and Tamborra talked about a statistical stagnation for Italy, in terms of successful digital learning, as described in paragraph 2.2. This

conclusion, if compared to the results of this research, might generate another reflection: in a year when digital activity has intensified, does stagnation still remain or has DaD modality led to more successful digital learning?
In this research students only compared their digital learning to traditional learning, but it could be interesting to further develop the topic and see if compared to previous kinds of digital learning, this new form presents some different implications.

Teachers

Many times, during the interviews, students and parents blamed teachers for what was going wrong. Of all the qualities mentioned by Sherry (1995) and Mishra et al. (2020) in paragraph 2.3.1, students seemed to have recognized two as essential, which are *patience and care for students*. In fact, they were tolerant towards lack of digital abilities or problem solving but preferred to see that teachers cared and that they show emotional connection. They seemed happy to help teachers who were troubled with technology, as long as teachers guaranteed presence and did not disappear. In truth, the condemned teachers were those who did not answer or show up in streaming lessons. On the contrary, not all parents showed empathy, because many of them lamented a *lack of professionality*. They seemed to put soft skills on a second layer and demanded ease with the equipment, virtual classroom experience and proper handling of teaching-learning tools.

Parents and digital parenting

When the focus is driven on parents, however, interesting data come up too. The results of the present research demonstrate what Levy had already observed in 2017, which was reported in paragraph 2.3: parents have proven to be worried for their kids' performances and general health, not to mention for the risks they were running into by using media. In Mascheroni and Ólafsson's research (2018) it emerged that the time spent on the internet was a cause of quarrels within the household and the results of the present interview confirm these data. The most debated topic within the household was *privacy* during synchronous activities and the issue of privacy was also addressed by parents when talking about techniques for controlling their kids. There was no mention of blocking apps or reading messages, but the presence of a parent during online synchronous activities seemed to be a common choice. Talking about the terms "privacy" and "control", it is possible to match the results of the research with what is argued by

Riesmeyer, Abel and Großmann in the 2019 article presented in paragraph 2.3.4. Among the parenting styles categorized in literature, some of them seemed to have prevailed in the present study, according to the various reports of the spring lockdown experience.
It is a delicate job to study the present sample and determine with certainty what the most prevalent parenting style is; in fact, it is not an objective of this study. It is possible, however, to make some assumptions starting from the collected data, which may be useful for further analysis and a more defined classification. From what it appears, some parents contrasted the emergency with an *authoritative-democratic parenting style*, made of trust, but also clear rules and *restrictive measures*. The most permissive parents, however, who seemed to be the majority, did not seem to apply identifiable measures, leaving their children with complete autonomy. In paragraph 2.3.4, Riesmeyer at al. (2019) notice that a balanced parenting style is to be found between authoritative and democratic approach and consequently, active measures work better in a digital environment. Although what emerged from the interviews does not reflect this ideal situation, no student expressed discontent with their parents' behaviour, nor blamed on them the fact they were having a bad time dealing with DaD during the lockdown. Either the measures adopted were restrictive or *unidentifiable*, students seemed to understand the rights and wrongs in the realm of media and be sufficiently aware in order to avoid risks. They also spoke well of their families, suggesting that they would turn to them in case of doubts and questions regarding their virtual experiences. The only exceptions were students whose parents applied stricter measures, who still felt supported, but, at the same time, lamented that their privacy was sometimes invaded. This perception confirms what Levy highlights in 2017 and it is in line with what was found in research about privacy during COVID-19 emergency, one of the most delicate topics also for Aguilera-Hermida (2020) and Lo Presti (2020).

6.2 Discussion on Objective Two: Distance Learning

The second objective of the study is to collect students and parents' experiences and suggestions on DaD. Since the results are in line with those found in literature and presented in paragraph 2.5, it could be interesting to focus on points of view. One of the strengths of this study, in fact, is that it offers both sides of the DaD experience, that is why they will be summarized according to how differently they were perceived by the students and their parents. The presentation will start from the observations that were shared by students and parents, as they gain a high significance when the two different points of view converge on the same idea.

6.2.1 Observations from Students and Parents

Positive observations from families

- **Learning always granted.** First of all, all families seemed to agree upon the fact that the one true advantage of DaD was that learning was always granted. To them, the notion that learning was still possible, in spite of the great limitations caused by the spreading of the virus, almost felt like a gift, even though in literature it is not a very common aspect emerging from surveys. It could depend on the fact that the sample is made of people who are still in an age of compulsory education. They are not enrolled in a course or at university, so to see their rights taken away would have been a tragedy. Media have proven to be the key solution to the situation and the only way through which education can continue in every context.
- **Comfort and savings.** Then, for both parents and students, the element of comfort had different declinations but was still one of the most quoted. Parents could avoid carrying their children to and from school, setting alarms to wake them up or paying for their subscription to public transport, a result that happens to be in line with what Lo Presti found in her study in 2020. Adults seem to appreciate the practical and economical side of studying at home, while the younger ones have enjoyed the lack of strict schedules or rules linked to the environment (like dressing codes or sanctions for forgetting material at home). This aspect could be taken into consideration for the hypothesis of a future blended modality of learning, as it seems to give breath to families, in more than one way.

Negative observations from families

- **Promiscuity of platforms.** On the other hand, the first and most mentioned negative aspect of DaD – both by parents and students – was the confusion given by the promiscuity of platforms. Never in history had a situation like COVID-19 health emergency taken place, so it is comprehensible that instructions were not clear at first shot. However, impressions like the ones collected in Lo Presti's study are confirmed by the results of this research. Moreover, in literature, many researchers, like Hurd in 2006, have stressed that for digital learning to work, media must be adequately designed. In addition

to that, some of the utilized platforms were reported to be inadequate for learning. It is the example of Skype, which was used to deliver synchronous online lessons, but did not support the presence of many users at the same time and often crashed.

- **Excessive homework.** The second most denounced disadvantage of the experience was the excessive amount of homework that the students received. This aspect was detected in none of the COVID related studies taken into consideration, but in the present case, it bothered both parents and students. In the previously examined cases the subjects were not associated with high school, because they were course or university students. One challenging implication of this hypothesis could involve university and high school students, in order to explore how they managed in terms of extra activities, or homework, during distance learning.
- **Faulty connection.** As for faulty internet connection, Aguilera-Hermida (2020) classifies this problem in the category of "Online Educational Challenges"**.** It is now clear that it is also valid for Italy and Italian high schools, as many families lamented it as a main cause for stress. Veneto, in particular, is one of the regions that shows less connectivity (Agicom, 2019), which makes it logical to understand why it was one of the greatest concerns of the respondents.
- **Frustration, disorientation and misinterpretations.** These are the consequences of a compromised communication, which Sherry already points out in 1995, when media were even less developed or integrated in learning. The concept of interactivity was already an issue and it has proved to still be crucial in the case of distance learning. Moreover, the concept of *meaningful interaction*, also advocated by Mishra et al. (2020), when talking about face-to-face explanations or laboratorial activities, was recurrent in the observation of the interviewed (mainly students), who lamented the fact that they were "missing" something. For example, those who attended *istituto alberghiero* had to renounce the practical side of their learning process, which in some cases corresponds to the 50% of the school activities. Not being able to communicate the way they used to made them perceive communication as difficult and frustrating. The prolonging of these feelings led, in some cases, to negative effects on general and mental health, which is something that also Mishra et al. encountered in the results of their research (2020).

- **Sense of abandonment.** Among the most cited disadvantages of DaD, students and parents mentioned the sense of abandonment, which was not one of the most signalled features of distance learning in literature. Perhaps, it may depend on the fact that this experience was one of a kind for Italian families and since isolation was on all fronts, the perception of being lonely and alone extended to all fields. Parents noticed their children's misery, while the students used expressions such as *"Ero molto confuso"*, *"Non sapevo a chi chiedere"*, *"I prof non rispondono quindi mi arrangio da sola"*.
- **Lack of socialization.** Parents were unhappy with the lack of socialization of their children as they feared that it could push them into spending even more time in front of the screen. Also students, however, denounced this problem: they really felt they were missing a substantial part of their learning, as one of the best aspects of going to school was the possibility to meet their classmates and chat during breaks. It was also a point made by Raut and Patil (2016) in their synthesis of advantages and disadvantages of distance learning modality, but as it occured for the sense of abandonment it seems to be a condition that was worsened by the pandemic emergency and that should be taken into consideration in case of future projects of blended modality.

6.2.2 Observations from Students

If these aspects were the ones that concerned families the most, there were also some observations that only students made. For example, while parents have demonstrated caution towards the new modality, most students have shown enthusiasm for this opportunity.

Positive observations from students

- **Variety of learning modes.** In particular, they talked about a variety of learning modes, which was perceived as a benefit. In her 2020 study, Aguilera-Hermida collected testimonies of students who discovered new skills and talents: it was also true for the students of the present sample, who found out some abilities they thought they did not have. None of the interviewed revealed taking up courses after DaD experience, but unlike Aguilera-Hermida, they were not at university. Being too young to make that kind of choice, they still reached a new and deeper perception of their abilities. In fact, they were able to manage the digital aspect of their learning, thus practicing managing

skills, patience and resilience, as observed in paragraph 2.6. Along these lines, students who were more familiar with technology for personal reasons found the combination definitely successful. According to Mascheroni and Ólafsson (2018) and Agicom data (2019) adolescents seem to be more and more affiliate to technology, which could be an interesting starting point.

- **Personal interests.** The personal interest they take, united with educational implications can result in a more stimulating learning experience, able to talk to the new generations in a more effective way than traditional instruments do.
- **Creating and sharing.** What was also recurrent in students' experience is that DaD modality opened for them the possibility to share their products. The fact that they could reach a wider audience and an external kind of feedback gave some sense to creating and sharing. For the sake of meaningful activities, some teachers used blogs and some created content that seemed so valuable they decided to share it on Instagram. This is in line with what Raut and Patil depicted in their 2016 article: digital learning can stimulate the production of content and its promotion, which is also directly linked to the importance of feedback.
- **Feedback.** Stella Hurd (2006) already lingered on this topic, by highlighting the support, encouragement and motivation that can come from feedback. As it appears from the results of the interviews, it happens in particular when feedback does not only come from teachers but also from unknown judges. Also, the more practical aspect of sharing seemed to gain value, as Raut and Patil already suggested (2016), because the single fact of uploading, sharing and downloading material was now essential to help classmates who could not connect or follow the online lesson. Creating shared folders or clouds was a faster and easier way to keep everything under control and to feel important to the group, as everyone's contribution could be crucial.

Negative observations from students

- **Simulated presence.** A point advocated by Mishra et al. (2020) was that during distance learning modality it was difficult to determine students' participation, which was also strongly reported by students in the present interview. From what can be inferred by their testimonies, it seems that the younger the students are the more likely they were unreliable on the matter of presence. Older students tended to be more committed and

avoid shortcuts like faking line problems, while in the first and second year several students reported classmates simulating their presence during the lesson.

- **Digital material.** Many students also lamented problems when dealing with digital materials: websites not supported, files which could not be seen properly, etc. This caused difficulties especially in the asynchronous communication, thus compromising the quality of the message. It was one of the risks illustrated by Raut and Patil (2016) when displaying the main disadvantages of distance learning, but it was also confirmed by Reinders and White (2011) and other researchers who reasoned about communication in digital environments. After the DaD experience it is clearer than ever that their observations were true: when the materials are not chosen properly, the message may be misinterpreted and communication compromised.
- **Distractions.** Finally, students found that in DaD modality distractions were behind every corner, more than during face-to-face lessons. It was also an issue that students in Aguilera-Hermida's research (2020) brought up. Both in her study and in the present one, the main reasons seemed to be the possibilities offered by the devices but also from the environment, when family is around. According to Aguilera-Hermida's findings, in fact, home is associated with the feeling of relaxation, and, moreover, one student of the present sample spoke about the tranquilly of not being noticed. These two factors may lead to a sort of propension to distraction and gradual abandonment of commitment.

6.2.3 Observations from Parents

Positive observations from parents

- **Academic performance.** One topic that really saw divergent opinions was academic performance, as many parents have noticed an improvement in their children's career. It has been argued by the very families that it may depend on the fact that teachers, while facing the situation for the first time, have walked on eggshells and given them easier tasks with higher feedback. In literature, the topic of "false perception of improvement" had already been discussed (Reinders and White, 2011) in terms of digital learning, and in the present study it has found a double implication. On the one hand, results showed that the feeling triggered by this event made students feel empowered and parents feel prouder, on the other, some students were able to reflect upon their progress objectively

and showed doubts at a certain point, while parents expressed concern as to, once the emergency is over, marks will decrease as easily as they have increased.

Negative observations from parents

- **Health and wellbeing.** The majority of the observations proposed by parents did not concern internal dynamics of school, as they focused more on the wellbeing of children. For example, Aguilera-Hermida found that students went through emotional challenges (2020), which is also what appeared from the present study. Health, however, worried parents more than students themselves. In fact, while the young focused on different aspects, one of the main preoccupations brought to light by parents was the wellbeing of their children. They noticed the same emotional issues as the ones reported by other researchers, like stress, negative thoughts and anxiety. On top of that they also mentioned apathy, along with physical problems like weariness, headache and loss of appetite. Maybe this will always remain a rightful main concern of every parent, but it gains a lot of importance when it comes to school: a place, or rather an institution, that should protect their members under every aspect.
- **Privacy.** On an equal footing, privacy was an issue that parents seemed to be more sensitive to. It was not such a common remark but more than one interviewed stressed the fact that it was unpleasant to possess too many online accounts. A family even told an anecdote that happened during live lessons, when a teacher demanded that the students switched on their cameras and they maintained they were not forced to. The contestation was brought directly to the headteacher, who confirmed that, for issues of privacy, students who were not willing to show themselves could not be forced to.

All in all, it is possible to state that the more observations were made by families: parents and students agreeing on the same points. Some opinions were given by students only, which are also the ones that concern practical aspects of the "digital school life". After all, they were living the change firsthand inside the new mechanisms of online learning. As a matter of fact, parents had more to say about their children and how they were monitoring them during DaD: they did not notice technical aspects as much as they perceived moral and health issues. It is also possible to observe that *disadvantages are more numerous than advantages*: all the participants seemed to have collected more negative experiences than positive, which surely says something about the overall perception of the matter. Some of the interviewed, when asked to

give their opinion, even tended to point out the cons, without even mentioning the pros. If we compare this kind of results to Aguilera-Hermida's (2020), it is possible to find similarities. Also, her qualitative data about the digital experience show that for many students it was an unpleasant experience that generated a negative attitude towards online learning. It also happened for students of this study: in fact, not only did they consider DaD more difficult than the traditional modality, but with their parents as one, they judged it with skepticism.

6.3 Discussion on Objective Three: Distance Language Learning

On this topic, a lot has still to be said and discovered. However, by following its third objective, this research has collected observations and opinions that concern not only distance learning, but also the area of languages and how it has been covered by schools during the emergency. In this small insight, the aim is to present what positive perceptions the emergency has left to the students and what negative aspects have been detected. This type of investigation could be useful to amplify literature on the topic of distance language learning, but also in a future repetition of the experience. In fact, as also Lo Presti noticed in paragraph 3.3, when the emergency started, issues of continuity, content, motivation and guidance arose, so it could be interesting to understand how different Italian realities dealt with them. In the case of northern Italy high schools, results seem to be in line with most of the considered research, before and after COVID-19. However, thought-provoking observations may come up, by going into detail on some suggestions from the participants. For reasons of significance of data, only the most common considerations will be listed below, from the most to the least cited:

Frustrating interaction

The results of this study find continuity in Lin et al.'s research (2017), as it tries to fulfill their request for further investigation. In fact, dealing with students' level of motivation and its correlation with materials and format of the course, the present research has highlighted the problem of frustration in interaction. The observations of the students also correlate with the concepts of usability, brought up by Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) and lack of adequate tools that Lo Presti signalled in 2020 (paragraph 3.2.1), which was already pointed out by Sherry in 1995. In short, the concern that many researchers share has found a concretization in the results of this study, since the respondents felt and witnessed the negative impact of inadequate, too variable and non-usable tools. Definitely, a problem that has interfered and worsened the very

backbones of language learning: motivation and interaction. Being it the most cited problem by language learners, it should be kept in mind as a sort of premise to interpret the following data.

Perceived decrease in language competency

In literature, many researchers have shown doubts about the combination of technology and languages. From Sherry (1995) talking about technological boundaries that may compromise interaction and extralinguistic competency, to Hurd (2006) that underlines the supposed incompatibility between "language learning" and "distance", to Reinders and White (2011) that denounce the risk of false perception of making progress. In the present study, without the constant, face-to-face feedback to which students were used to, sometimes they had the impression that they were becoming lazier and lazier. However, by comparing the collected data, it is possible to notice that many students felt that way in the most negative moments of their experience. When they looked at it towards the end of the school year, some of them even recanted their statements, which suggests that maybe these sorts of perceptions were influenced by the negative atmosphere linked to the emergency.

Enhanced and upgraded interactivity

Admittedly, if interaction was faulty, interactivity, on the other hand, really convinced students. First of all, it has to be said that the issue of communication had never been so important before. With the imposition of staying at home, being able to communicate was seen as a necessity and as the only way to survive. As reminded in paragraph 3.2.2, language is made between a person and a significant other (Harrison, Thomas, 2008) and in this case the medium has made the difference. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) had already explored the potentiality of audio-conferencing, which, during COVID-19 emergency, happened to be the most used way of delivering lessons by teachers. What emerges from this study is that live lessons cannot just be inspired by real experience, but need to be adapted to the medium, in order not to create just a mere and ineffective reproduction of traditional, in presence, learning. When language learners perceived this chance in their teachers' approach, they noticed their learning process acquired new nuances and they felt like they could take advantage of it. Some of them actually did and, in the end, they had to admit it worked really well.

Wider audience interaction

In this context, interaction is necessarily wider, and it definitely seemed to have captured language learners' attention. The possibility of communicating with other real people, except from classmates or the imaginary interlocutors on the book, gave a whole other purpose to languages – a notion that was well discussed in paragraph 3.2.2 starting from Kukulska-Hulme and Shield's article (2008). In the case of the present study, not only was the audience wider, but it was also made of real people, for the first time. In this sense, students felt that they had a real objective in using language: delivering meaningful messages, whose failure did not just determine a correction by the teacher but also a break in the chain of virtual communication. As it was hypothesized in literature, motivation seemed to have found benefit in this change, as the students who made the observation often mentioned "being more curious and interested".

More digital sources and variety of material

The fact that material was more varied was already mentioned as positive, when talking about DaD in general. As for languages, it is highlighted by some participants when considering the shift from paper to digital books. In Lo Presti's research (2020) this change comes as an opportunity, in Kukulska-Hulme and Shield's (2008) it is accompanied by the concept of portability, also illustrated by Perfetti in 2015 as an inherent feature of media. However, the other side of the medal has proven to be disorientation, according to the words of the respondents. Some students agreed upon the fact that material at a certain point was too varied and that links, pdf files and videos were overlapping in a disordered manner, while the book had at least the capability of gathering everything under the same stylistic presentation. Especially in the case of grammar rules, this fault turned out to be too disorienting and language learners felt the lack of precious synthesis. That is how this research also confirms the doubts exposed by Reinders and White (2011), who presented the exaggerated variety of material as a risk of digital language learning.

Less monological explanation

It goes without saying that, with this more variety of material, digital support and interactive channels for manipulating content, students noticed a change. They observed that their teachers tended to prefer interactive lessons, thus giving movement to learning and enhancing a kind of

involvement that, paradoxically, was not felt in face-to-face interaction. This result may be unexpected, as one of the main worries of researchers was that the barriers of technology would undermine communication. It has been explained that, actually, difficulties have come up and a lot can be improved; however, the fault may reside in the bad organization linked with the pandemic and the data collected may instead show some light. As a matter of fact, if given all the adversities, students still found advantages that traditional learning did not have, then it is possible that beneath some much-needed adjustments lies the very future of language learning.

Stimulated creativity

What Blake advocated in 2011(paragraph 3.1) was also detected in the results of this research. If the medium is supposed to create a chain of motivation (Blake, 2011) maybe the ignition key to the process is creativity. In the present study, students declared being inspired by the potentiality of media: they felt like taking challenges (intervening more during L2 debates, following and interacting with native speaker users), experimenting new strategies (subtitles, recording and listening many times, creating personalized folders on Google Drive) and continuing until they found the fittest solution. What is interesting is that some of them had never experienced such an inclination before, meaning that maybe, the forced introduction of media in their learning process became in fact a sort of turning point. That is also why it could be possible to associate digital language learning with the concept of growth at a personal level, as Kukulska-Hulme and Shield had already pointed out in 2008, while talking about the advantages of distance language learning.

Feeling of protection

Talking about motivation, as Hurd already observed, the digital environment may give a sense of relaxation especially in those subjects where students are constantly called to action. This theory was confirmed by the interviewed that felt protected by the screen, gained courage and started to intervene more often than they did in class during language lessons. Furthermore, those feelings of embarrassment or courage made students realize how the environment affected them: a proof that digital language learning may stimulate metacognitive processes and enrich awareness, towards a deeper and more complete understanding of languages.

Manipulation of videos

Talking about language learning strategies, the introduction of recorded lessons revealed to be a key aspect in language learning. Many students reported enjoying the possibility of studying languages through videos made by youtubers and instagrammers (often native speakers) from all over the world. Also, the fact of following their teachers' explanations on Youtube assumed a new nuance and found a simplification in language acquisition, thanks to the possibility of manipulating the video, or inserting subtitles, like it was not possible during live lessons. In literature, when media are user friendly, a plethora of possibilities blooms (Syodorenko, 2010) and it is not excluded that, from now on, it will become necessary to implement digital functions into traditional learning in order to make it complete.

Privacy in DLL

On a sour note, however, the problem of privacy had an influence on digital language learning, too. In fact, from what was reported by students, it seems that during language lessons, it was difficult to conclude conversation exercises because some of the classmates refused to turn on the camera, thus slowing down the interaction. As it was explained in the above paragraphs, they were excused by privacy policies and although teachers were contacted, the school still referred to the episodes as a sensitive subject. This topic was already eviscerated by Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008), but it seems to have acquired a new declination during COVID-19 related lockdown, showing technicalities that interfere especially with interactive disciplines. Unlike in more discursive subjects, in languages it is not sufficient to listen and take notes, because it is through audio and visual communication that language is produced.

Students' observations come to a conclusion when analyzing their non-explicit words. If the previous points were openly mentioned and discussed by the participants, these last two points are what can be read between the lines, by noticing the unsaid concepts that were recurrent in every interview and what can be inferred by the implicit references that were made.

Autonomy and awareness

In paragraph 3.3.1**,** it is possible to read that autonomy is essential in distance language learning, but is it just a question of internal affordances (Reinders and White., 2011) or can it be triggered

by the situation? What emerged from this study may suggest that autonomy can be solicited in an emergency situation, where students had to manage on their own to survive. If in Hurd's words (2006) autonomy was made of self-monitoring, planning, self discipline and taking responsibility skills, then many of the interviewed students revealed finding out that they possessed such skills only in the described emergency. In order to survive, they started putting them into practice and by doing so day by day, they ended up as more autonomous students than they were before. Some of them, at the end of this process, even seem to reflect the description of self-regulated students which was proposed by Lin et al. in 2017. As for languages, what emerged is that DLL modality made students experiment, apply strategies and draw conclusions about their own learning strategies: some discovered they responded better to the fragmentation of content, some other to audio or video stimuli, some to interactive digital activities and so on. In general, it was found that, by comparing presence and distance language learning, students started thinking about what they liked and what they did not like in a language lesson, what kind of exercises worked for them and what did not and how many times they really needed to repeat a grammar rule to learn it. Learning languages online was not a successful approach for everybody, but at least, it made them reflect upon their learning, in a way that put them at the center of the process, like Hurd (2006) pointed out when talking about "metacognitive awareness" (paragraph 3.1.1).

Motivation

All the above findings seem to necessarily lead to motivation, which was a sort of *fil rouge* in all aspects of distance language learning, both in the case of negative and positive experiences. Some interviewed, in fact, talked about it as a negative element, since they often felt demotivated, especially at the beginning of their learning experience. Some others, however, reported seeing benefits in their motivation as they were discovering new ways of learning. Of all the kinds of motivation described by Deci and Ryan (1985; 1995) and cited in Lin et al. (2017) (paragraph 3.1.3), few seemed to show signs of intrinsic motivation. The majority stated trying to adapt to DaD modality in order to study languages, thus confirming that their motivation had extrinsic influences and in particular, the *introjected type* seemed to be the most common, as students talked about an obligation that they started to care about step by step. Their introjected

motivation has then shifted from extrinsic to intrinsic, in a corroboration of Hurd's (2006) concept of balance: in a language student the most common situation is a balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

All in all, it is possible to say that in the specific case of this sample, motivation had ups and downs. In the worst times, what struck students the most was the feeling of impotence and uncertainty coming from all fronts. It was not just a matter of content of the subject, but, as Hurd (2006), Lo Presti (2020) and Aguilera-Hermida (2020) noticed by investigating DLL, it was an ensemble of factors. Was language learning an aggravating element to the lack of motivation? Yes, in terms of technological barriers of communication, but it was also a positive aspect in the up phase of motivation. When knowing a language let students chat with other people, produce meaningful posts on websites, or create material to share with the mother tongue community, they felt satisfied and willing to commit even more. A real balance, then, is yet to be found, but at least, from the result of the present research, it seems that with the due improvements, motivation in language learning could benefit from the digital environment, until students are autonomously willing to "to spend more time engaged with the second language (L2) materials, which ultimately promotes greater learning" (Blake, 2011, p. 3).

6.4 Suggestions from the Participants

An interesting point of view was given by parents and students who, as protagonists of this educational revolution, balanced pros and cons and gave suggestions about how to improve the DaD modality, by keeping what worked and discarding what did not.

- **Find a unique platform:** what seemed to be suggested most strongly both by parents and students is to find a unique platform dedicated to school and online courses. By underlining that, all they do is confirm what many researchers (Sherry, 1995, Hurd, 2006, Lo Presti, 2020, Aguilera-Hermida, 2020) have stated: media are a land of possibilities and opportunities, but, as far as education is concerned, it is necessary to narrow it down to simplicity in order to exploit them properly and avoid the risk of disorientation.
- **Fixed school schedule:** as for students, they suggested planning the school schedule more accurately. One may think that such a request is common in young students who hope for a lighter commitment, but this seems to find continuity in other lockdown re-

lated research, referring to all kinds of students, university ones and adults. Like Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) sustained about DLL modules, the shorter they are the more effective is learning. On that note, in Lo Presti's study (2020) the sample, which was made of adult students, suggested shortening long explanations in order to limit weariness and distraction. The present sample shared this lamentation and talked about the possibility of introducing longer breaks to restore their eyes and get ready for spending further time in front of the screen. For the same reason, homework (which corresponds to asynchronous modality of learning) was found to be too much, with the aggravating influence of device availability, already denounced by Aguilera-Hermida (2020). Students hope for a better collaboration among teachers in order to partition homework more wisely.

- **Guarantee internet connection:** surely, the question of internet connection was a burden for the present sample as well as for many other similar studies. In Lo Presti's research (2020), in fact, many students lamented a poor internet connection, and in general, problems with technology. The malfunctions linked to the Skype platform was detected by both Lo Presti's and the present sample, confirming that it was a weak tool and that it had a contribution in the initial stressful approach to the situation. In the specific case of Veneto the collected data did not seem to describe a region prepared enough to face the emergency at best, thus supporting Agicom's 2019 findings. What would be interesting is a possible confrontation between Veneto and other Italian regions, to see if families' perceptions were less negative in regions with a better position in Agicom's scatterplot (2019).
- **Control attendance:** as opposed to other research, in the present study the wish for fewer students during live lessons did not emerge, neither did preparation before the lesson. However, the suggestion of control attendance was quite unique, as it did not appear in the other examined studies. This could depend on the fact that other researchers based their study on a sample of adult or university students, who could be more self-regulated than high school students, both for reasons of maturity and motivation. On the contrary, since their institution is different from high schools, it is more likely that adult students deal with problems of high course attendance, while high school students are already divided into small groups (averagely twenty students per class).

- **Improved interaction:** shifting the attention to parents, a better interaction between families and the school was one of their strongest requests. Parents were straightforward by sustaining that they would have liked a more consistent dialogue than the interaction through the electronic register. Students, on the contrary, were more generic, but they talked about "disappeared teachers", "sense of abandonment and carelessness towards students", "delays in feedback and answers", "impossibility of communication", "sense of confusion", which can be interpreted as a wish for a better synergy between them and their schools.
- **Mediating figure:** among the other suggestions of parents, there was the presence of a mediating figure, which is a topic that other researchers, like Sherry (1995) and Borup, Chambers and Stimson (2019) had also explored. In particular, Borup et al. sustained that this figure is necessary in a school environment: mediators come as facilitators of the online experience, experts of technology and *liaisons* in communication, by monitoring presence and suggesting strategies. In a few words, the meditating figure, which appears in Sherry's review of literature as "site facilitator" (1995) could be what parents have been asking for and what children seem to need. Hopefully, research will find more about this topic, not only to comply with families' requests but also to lighten teachers' preoccupation in a perspective of a more and more digitalized school.
- **Future implementations of DaD:** Following this purpose, another proposition from parents regarded future implementations of DaD. In unforeseen times out of COVID-19, it often happened that, for health matters, children had to skip school days, so parents saw in the asynchronous modality an opportunity. They think DaD could become a good alternative when such situations take place and a guarantee that, even when students cannot go to school, they still have the possibility to catch up. Students, from their part, appreciated some facets of digital learning and they did not display reluctancy at the hypothesis of a blended modality.

As it was suggested in paragraph 3.2.1, after taking into consideration Blake (2011), Lin et al. (2017) and Kukulska-Hulme and Shield's (2008) opinions about synchronous and asynchronous modalities, the best solution seems to be found in the middle. Hypothesizing that digital learning becomes an integrating part of learning, with the right balance of synchronous and asynchronous modalities, the result could be interesting. To integrate these two dimensions, one proposition already comes from Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008), who associate the

portability of *mobile phones* with new frontiers of digital learning. More in general, works like Baldassarre and Tamborra's article (2020) have found that the promotion of media in the educational field happens by combining digital and traditional sources and that it leads to improvement, as the one positively influences the other. However, as Sherry notices in 1995 and as the results of this research have shown, it is important that whatever innovations are made they happen with the right preparation. Transition is not easy for students; hence they need to be supported and accompanied with monitoring and feedback in order to reach self-regulation (Sherry, 1995). It is a concern that also Lin et al. (2017) share in paragraph 3.2.1: how can students achieve this objective, if self-regulation cannot be taught? The researchers propose to incorporate learning strategies in the online courses and, as it was presented in this discussion, the participants of this study add other suggestions, too. It is possible, then, to improve what schools have already worked with and make it infallible. After all, this study has demonstrated that digital learning does have beneficial effects on motivation, awareness and the learning process in general, but results have also shown that it can become a painful and frustrating experience for students and parents if it presents too many negative aspects. Teachers, schools and the very families are then invited to join forces in order to make a change, a change that COVID-19 health emergency has demanded, by forcing Italy and the whole world to adapt in the most immediate way possible. All in all, it can be said that what Mark Warschauer had envisioned in 2007, "the future of learning is digital" (p.41), has now come true. In 2020, there is no more future, but the present and the present of learning *is* digital.

Conclusions

COVID-19 emergency undoubtedly brought about a crisis, but it is exactly from crisis that often comes revolution. People have been forced to re-invent their lives and they could only count on one instrument: media. As to the educational field, what happened after the emergency was the necessity to find balance in a *hybrid solution*: digital and traditional blended into a new modality of learning (Mishra et al. 2020). It seems the most logical choice because the emergency has not ended yet, but also because it has given birth to positive aspects worth keeping. Obviously, it is still a work in progress, in fact, also other researchers like Aguilera-Hermida (2020) reminded that the hybrid modality is just at the beginning of its development and what is fundamental for future adjustments is to keep two factors in mind: creativity and flexibility. The 2020 health emergency can be defined as a unique situation, with solutions that had never been implied before, therefore much is still to be done and researched, starting from the very nature of the emergency and moving to its implications in the educational field.

In this scenario, families are more involved than ever, as this revolution touches them in the first place, like it never did before. Within this new educational frame, school literally enters homes, and this is why it is important to pay attention to the relationship between formal and informal education. As Mishra et al. (2020) remind, this new frontier could strengthen the link between private and public education, but also underline the digital gap that divides geographical areas and families at their core: parents and children, older and younger generations, digital immigrants and digital natives.

What emerges from this and other research is that it is important to pay attention to all the variables, when making decisions about education and in particular about this new, wide spreading type of education. According to the results of the present study, some of the most relevant elements that can play an essential role in the successful outcome of the "experiment" are the devices families possess, their broadband connection, the difference between urban and rural areas, their motivation and auto-regulation and many other aspects that have been examined. In a few words, the present needs and urges of the educational system include digital learning as an always developing and perfectible project. It has had a great inevitable boost, thanks, or because of, the pandemic, and now it has become a responsibility for everyone: teachers, students, researchers and parents. Looking back to what happened might help all the

forces at play to work on this project and give it a more and more effective dimension that will really bring a revolution to education.

Strengths of the study

As a matter of fact, the strengths of this study lay in its purpose: to underline positive and negative aspects of the experience, as to give indications for future evolutions of digital learning. Hybrid learning modality is a still unexplored field, so the study may contribute as it focuses on a situation without precedents, being among the first to depict a screenshot of northern Italy high schools experience. Moreover, the study puts two school-related parts of the population at the center of the attention at the same time: students and parents. Thus, it gives more dimension to the study and finds what is common ground between parents and students and what they do not get along on. By focusing on a semi-structured interview, the study leaves to its subjects the possibility to enrich their opinions and unravel arguments that could be unexpected or underestimated by research, the school system or the subjects themselves. The fact that also parents take part in this research is an added value, as up to now most of the research on the emergency has had a tendency to focus more on students and teachers, putting on background parents' point of view. In this sense, the study also gives space to high school education, as thus far, many of the available studies have focused on higher education with a particular attention to universities, colleges or adult courses.

Weaknesses of the study

One of the weaknesses of this study concerns literature. There is still a lot to explore on the territory of digital learning linked to the lockdown emergency, so it was not easy to retrieve material, especially in the first months of the emergency and with regards to high schools in Italy. Consequently, also some of the questions of the interview have been created from scratch, without the help of pre-tested instruments.

Many are also the weaknesses that characterize the sample, for instance, this study did not reach those students who lack access to the internet because the survey was online. It only focuses on a small sample belonging to a small reality, so it does not reflect opinions of families from all parts of Italy or all kinds of high schools. In fact, the method chosen for this study is a non-probabilistic sampling, meaning that it may not be as representative as a larger one, selected

with a probabilistic sampling. Moreover, if on the one hand it includes two parts of the population at the same time (parents and students), on the other hand it excludes another essential part of the school system: teachers.

A problem that emerged during the planning of the interview and its administration is that, when expressing their thoughts, some interviewed showed insecurity, by saying something instinctively and then recanting it a few seconds later with a different version. This phenomenon could mean that some of the answers were affected by social desirability bias, thus posing the problem of generalizability. Can the results be extended to other people outside the sample? Aguilera-Hermida's research (2020) detected the same kind of limitation, supposing that the reasons may lie in the influence of the pandemic and all the related negative feelings. In the specific case of this study, another element that could have affected students' answers could be the presence of their parents, and vice versa. Even though the interviewer requested respondents to be alone while answering the questions, the communication via media, which was not a choice but an imposition due to the lockdown, may have altered this dynamic. As the present study demonstrates, in fact, it is very difficult to control what happens at the opposite side of the screen.

Contributions of the study: educational implications

What Mascheroni and Ólafsson (2018) wished for in their research is that some of their results could be compared in a longitudinal perspective and updated in order to identify the most relevant changes into the habits and online practices of children and adolescents. In this sense, this study guarantees this comparatibility at a national and European level, because it offers a chance to find similarities and differences with other national or international realities and it also includes the main innovations at a digital level. It collects perceptions about new platforms and techniques that have been used and appreciated during the emergency and it registers relevant social developments in times of total lockdown. Alongside, the idea of the study is also based upon media education in Italy. Thanks to the screenshot it gives, it finds continuity in this branch by taking account of the virus breakout and explaining how it influenced the *educational field.* Students and parents' experiences can give a practical direction to media education, which is needed now more than ever and involves families on the whole. In such a landscape, qualitative data become a useful source "for further future academic decision-making during any adversity" and for the constant search for "a better implementable model" (Mishra et al.,

2020, pp. 1-2). As also Aguilera-Hermida has found, the elements that are to be analyzed are "the lack of physical contact, the reduction of social interaction, and the negative emotions that the pandemic created (fear, sadness, uncertainty, etc.)" (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020, p. 8) in order to understand to which point they have interfered with families' habits and consequently the learning process. To some extent, this research provides partial answers for these questions, so further research could focus on how the very concept of digital learning has changed according to how everyone lived in the emergency. In fact, what Aguilera-Hermida suggests is that perceptions play a fundamental role in the acceptance of digitalization of learning. With this in mind, this study could then be of inspiration while exploring what positive ideas have been created about digital learning, what prejudice have been confirmed and what negative perceptions may determine a future bad consideration or untrustworthy of the practice.

Since it focuses on unprecedented matters, the present study could also be a starting point for future debates in other fields.

In the *pedagogical field*, the research offers an insight on the topic of parenting and digital parenting, by siding studies like Ciboci and Labaš (2019) and Reismeyer et al.'s (2019). The focus is on COVID-19 influence within family habits and rules, and it acknowledges that it is still hard to accept that "teacher-taught direct interaction" could be replaced or modified (Mishra et al., 2020) and therefore the torch could be passed to other pedagogical approaches. These discoveries, then, call for further investigation into formal and non-formal education, as it is now clear that the advent of DaD has disrupted the household balance and given to parents a whole new role in their children's education.

At a *regional level*, the results of this research could be useful to monitor the digital divide gap after the 2020 pandemic, and to possibly improve the position of Veneto starting from the collection of the suggestions and heading towards necessary change.

In the field of *digital language learning*, the specific demands of the sample could be studied in order to verify if they can be applied to other language students. For example, a conclusion that can be drawn from data collection is that asynchronous modality of digital learning seems to benefit not only learners, but specifically language learners. It would be interesting to go deep into these findings and see what eventual implications could integrate a blended or traditional modality of learning, in particular in the field of distance language learning. All in all, it is clear that the pandemic has influenced all humans' lives and that it is not possible to go back the way it was. Even in a desirable outcome where the population is out of danger,

these weeks, months and possibly years have left their mark. Change has just begun, and research can only start from that assumption to find the good aspects in order to make it a *good* change. By keeping on collecting data from all over the world, it could be possible to give meaning to what has happened and drive future educational decisions into the right path.

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