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Foreign Language Motivation in Distance Learning

An exploratory survey with University students
during the pandemic emergency

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List of abbreviations

ANSA	Agenzia Nazionale di Stampa Associata
CAI	Computer Assisted Instruction
CALL	Computer Assisted Language Learning
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
CRUI	Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
FL	Foreign language
IAU	International Association of Universities
L2	Second Language
MALL	Mobile Assisted Language Learning
SMT	Synchronous Meeting Tool
SNS	Simple Notification Service
SRL	Self-Regulated Learning
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
VoIP	Voice over Internet Protocol

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to discuss the impact of distance learning on University students' foreign language (FL) motivation, also exploring the type of e-learning platforms used and the activities required in FL online courses. This research takes part in the ongoing debate in online FL motivation, which was brought into the limelight by the Covid-19 outbreak. More broadly, this dissertation topic stands vis-à-vis the theoretical framework of FL learning motivation in distance learning contexts.

The study was conducted on 76 University students attending an online foreign language course as part of their academic curriculum, and examines controlled and autonomous motivational factors, attributive styles and the level of self-efficacy experienced by the participants. Participants in the study completed the *Motivation in online distance environment for FL learning questionnaire*, whose data were subsequently collected and analysed through quantitative methodology. The questionnaire was published through four Facebook Group pages and respondents participated on a voluntary basis. Then, the data were interpreted in terms of descriptive statistical methods. Despite only quantitative data were collected, this study is qualitative in orientation.

Findings indicate that University students attending an online FL course show a combination of autonomous and controlled motivations to participate in the online activities. Consistently with previous studies, online language learning appears to foster students' autonomy and sense of self-efficacy in the learning process. Furthermore, success in online learning activities is mostly attributed to students' capabilities and interest in the FL, reaffirming that the e-learning experience improved students' engagement in FL learning. Unsurprisingly, participants in the study express no reason to be demotivated in this context. The role of online feedback on students' FL motivation is also discussed as a pivotal component of learners' participation in the online learning context.

Introduction

Research in foreign language (FL) motivation has a long tradition. This field has gradually broadened as FL learning occurs also online or with the use of web-based applications. This evolution has posed new challenges to scholars and researchers to understand the impact of new technologies, on the one hand, and of distance learning, on the other, on learners' motivation. Thus, this research investigates a relatively new area in the field of FL motivation which has come into the limelight during the COVID-19 outbreak, FL motivation in academic online learning.

Since universities have adapted to the new governmental dispositions regarding this sanitary emergency, academic activities have been occurring mostly online. Against this background, this research aims at investigating how FL motivation could be affected by distance learning, especially as regards the impact that this shift towards e-learning has had on university students' attitudes towards foreign language education. This is typically a complex problem which comprises the effects of FL distance learning on students' self-determination, self-regulation, their sense of self-efficacy, and their attributive styles of success and failure in an FL online course. This problem turns out to be even more intricate because certain online activities could be perceived as more engaging, thus motivating the students to persevere learning, while others might have the opposite effect.

This multifaceted problem has received substantial interest in research on FL motivation. As far as we know, however, no study to date has examined FL motivation in distance learning during the COVID-19 outbreak in its entirety. To illuminate this uncharted area, we surveyed university students enrolled in FL online courses across Italy during the COVID-19 outbreak. Then, we analysed the data and investigated whether the results could be comparable to previous studies in FL online learning.

The aims of this study are three-fold. First, we focus on investigating the FL learning experience during the pandemic from an organizational point of view (what type of e-learning platforms and web-based applications are being used, and what type of activities are required). Second, we explore how students perceive individual and collaborative activities in terms of motivation, which activities they find most motivating and why. Third, we investigate students' controlled and autonomous motives, their sense of self-efficacy in e-learning, their attributive styles for success and failure, and their sense of demotivation.

This thesis documents several key contributions made to the field of FL motivation. Firstly, students' perceptions of online activities as to whether they are motivating or not, are discussed and insights into the reasons why a certain online activity is more engaging than another for the students, are suggested. Based on these findings, educators can consciously plan FL activities in the online context to sustain students' motivation. Then, in comparison with other studies, this research has the advantage of considering various aspects of motivation (autonomous and controlled motives, self-efficacy, attributive styles, the role of feedback) in one survey, thus providing a comprehensive groundwork for future studies.

This thesis paper comprises two parts. Part 1 will focus on examining some models of distance language learning that have developed through the years (chapter 1), as well as some of the theories and studies behind FL motivation in distance language education (chapter 2). The aim is that of reviewing some of the literature concerning distance language education and creating a strong theoretical framework, which will account for both the designing of the instrument of data collection (chapter 3) and the discussion of the data (chapters 4, 5, and 6) in Part 2. In Part 2, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 aim at analysing and discussing the data according to the research questions outlined in Chapter 3. Finally, Chapter 7 presents some final remarks on the research findings, and its limits. In Chapter 7 some pedagogical implications of the present study are also suggested.

As regards Part 1, Chapter 1 presents the context of distance learning, first in the current emergency (paragraph 1.1), then in its historical development (paragraph 1.2). Chapter 1 then goes on to describe the specific of distance language learning (paragraph 1.3). As regards distance language learning, three main web-based media are examined: virtual learning platforms (paragraph 1.3.1), computer networking and social media (paragraph 1.3.2), and videoconferencing (paragraph 1.3.3). In these last three paragraphs, particular attention is devoted to describing the affordances of e-learning tools to foreign language learning and to report some research on their effects on students' motivation.

Chapter 2 explores the theoretical background regarding motivation (paragraph 2.1) and reviews some of the most prominent studies regarding FL motivation in distance learning (paragraph 2.2). As concerns the theoretical framework, this study draws on some of the most influential sociopsychological and cognitive theories on motivation. The sociopsychological theories mentioned in this study refer to the works of Gardner (1985), Deci and Ryan (1985; 2008) and Dornyei (2005). Alongside the sociopsychological framework,

cognitive theories are explored, particularly as regards the works of Weiner (1986), Eccles and colleagues (1983; 2001; 2002), Bandura (1997) and Zimmerman (2002). In the past several decades, the Self-determination continuum (Ryan & Deci 2000) has become the comprehensive conceptual framework of reference in the field of motivation. Not only this framework conceptualises motivation as a continuum, from self-determined to non-self-determined behaviours, but it also considers the sources of motivation, the focus of causality and the level of autonomy. This study closely follows this paradigm to analyse and discuss the data collected.

As regards Part 2, Chapter 3 describes the study, outlining the research questions, the procedure of data collection, and the subjects involved in the research. First, the three Research Questions (RQs) and hypotheses are set out (paragraph 3.1). Drawing on the information collected through the questionnaire, paragraph 3.2 also describes the characteristics of the subjects involved in the study (their age range; the geographical location of the university they are attending; the foreign language studied during the pandemic; their level of proficiency in the FL; and the reasons for studying it). Finally, the method of research (paragraph 3.3) and the instrument of data collection (paragraph 3.4), alongside the procedure of data analysis (paragraph 3.5) are illustrated.

Chapter 4, 5, and 6 aim at examining and discussing the research findings with regards to the three research questions outlined in Chapter 3. Each of these three chapters is organised as follows: first quantitative and/or qualitative data are examined, then findings are discussed in the light of the theoretical framework and the previous literature presented in Chapter 2. More specifically, Chapter 4 examines and discusses findings concerning the type of e-learning tools and platforms used for FL learning in distance education (RQ1); Chapter 5 focuses on the type of e-learning activities used in FL distance education, with particular attention to the effect of individual and collaborative activities on students' motivation (RQ2); Chapter 6 concentrates on the role of autonomous and controlled motivation, the sense of self-efficacy and the students' perceived causes for their success or failure in FL learning through distance mode (RQ3).

Chapter 7 presents some final remarks, highlighting the crucial role of autonomy, relatedness, and perceived competence on FL motivation in e-learning; in the light of these observations, some pedagogical implications are put forward. Then, the limitations of this study are set out, especially as regards the sampling method and the type of data collected. And, to conclude, some insights for future research in the field of FL motivation in distance learning are suggested.

Part 1

This section comprises two chapters aiming at setting out the background on which this study is founded. Chapter 1 describes some of the characteristics of the online learning context, especially as regards foreign language learning. In the past several decades, web-based applications and e-learning platforms have played an important role in sustaining students' motivation to learn an FL and to develop new forms of interaction. In this respect, the COVID-19 outbreak has posed new challenges to academic teaching and learning, and internet-based technologies have been used to respond to both teachers' and students' needs.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework on which this thesis is based, and relevant studies are reviewed. Most of the theories on motivation are focused on explaining students' engagement in learning from a socio-cognitive perspective. In this regard, the self-determination theory is considered to be the most comprehensive theoretical framework to describe FL motivation.

Chapter 1 Learning a foreign language online

This chapter will focus on briefly presenting the context of distance learning, clarifying some of the terms used in this regard, and supplying some definitions. First, it explores the academic consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak on academic teaching and learning, focusing on the adjustment of the academic activities to the new governmental regulations to contrast the spread of the virus. Then, the historical evolution of distance education will be outlined. Within this transformation, technology and the interaction it affords will be identified as the main components. This chapter will then proceed to explore the development of distance language learning, from its inception in the 19th century as a form of correspondence exchange between a teacher and the students to the current model of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs).

The aspect of meaningful communication in distance language learning will be presented as the focus of technological development. Computer networking and videoconferencing tools constitute a significant component of distance language learning because they can afford real-life experiences for their users, overcoming physical and temporal distances between them. Finally, some studies regarding the effects of e-learning tools on students' motivation and their engagement in the learning process will be reviewed. These studies will provide the context within which the present research can be placed.

1.1 Context: COVID-19 consequences on academic teaching and learning

According to the International Association of Universities (IAU), more than 1.5 billion students and young adult students across the planet have been affected by school and university closures due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The lockdown and social distancing measures have an enormous impact on education which has shifted to distance learning to guarantee the completion of the academic year. Universities around the globe responded differently to the new stringent measures in the effort to organize an efficient digitalization of the teaching process.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic and the strict actions taken against it, the IAU launched “The IAU global survey on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education around the world”, which was available online from 25 March to 17 April 2020. 424 Universities and other high education institutions, based in 109 countries and two special administrative regions of China (Hong Kong and Macao), replied. The IAU survey reported that two-thirds of all the universities and institutions had replaced face-to-face teaching with distance learning.

This shift was affected by difficulties in accessing the technical infrastructure, lack of competence in distance education, and the specific requirements of certain academic fields that are incompatible with online learning. Despite offering new meaningful opportunities, distance learning presented three interconnected dimensions impacting the quality of education: technical infrastructure and its accessibility; distance learning competencies and pedagogies; the field of study. The IAU survey concluded that the quality of distance education as a response to the current sanitary emergency varies a lot across the globe according to the characteristics of these three variables.

In Italy school and University closures due to the COVID-19 began on 21 February 2020, firstly in the northern part of the country. In the following weeks, the government announced that it would temporarily close all the nation's schools and campuses due to the Coronavirus outbreak. These measures forced Italian Universities to come up with alternatives to guarantee a continuation of their activities online. On 7 February, the Italian Ministry of Education presented a national plan that would provide 24000 university-level courses from more than 20 online platforms free of charge, covering 12 different subject areas at the graduate level and 18 at the postgraduate level (Reda & Kerr, 2020).

A survey conducted by Fondazione della Conferenza dei Rettori Italiani (CRUI) reported that by the end of March, 88% of all the academic activities in Italy were being conducted online. At the same time, more than half of the Italian Universities were delivering more than 96% of the courses through online platforms. According to the Agenzia Nazionale di Stampa Associata (ANSA), only a small number of Italian Universities, like the University of Basilicata, installed thermal scanners to continue their learning and teaching activities on campus (ANSA, 2020).

1.2 Distance learning

The pandemic outbreak has brought into the limelight the debate of distance learning and its impact on students' wellbeing and motivation. However, research in the field of distance learning does not constitute a new area, but it is a mature field which is now being spun out into online learning. In this regard, distance learning, also called distance education, dates to the 19th century as paper correspondence. Since its inception, distance learning has utilized a wide variety of technologies ranging from postal mail in the 19th century to

virtual reality today. With the advances in technologies, materials and interaction among teachers and learners have been reshaped according to the new type of communication used (Simonson & Seepersaud, 2019).

Considering the technological evolution which distance learning has undergone since the 19th century and the transformation in the mode of communication between the teachers and the students, Schlosser and Simonson (2009) elaborated a definition of distance education which comprises four components. Distance education can be defined as “institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunication systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors”. The first component of this definition is the concept that distance learning is institutionally based and differs from self-study. The institution referred to in this definition could be a traditional educational school or other non-traditional institutions offering education at a distance. The second component of the definition is the separation between the teachers and the students which could be geographical as well as temporal. Interactive telecommunication is the third component; interaction can be synchronous, occurring at the same time, or asynchronous, occurring at different times. Telecommunication systems non only imply electronic media, but it could also refer to the postal system as in correspondence education. Finally, distance learning should connect learners, teachers, and resources through the sharing of data, voice, and video to create the learning experience.

As seen, distance learning history spans almost two centuries, and numerous changes have occurred in this period in learning and communication. Alongside the advances in technology, new terms have started to appear, namely e-learning and online learning. The term e-learning seems to have originated in the 1980s (Moore et al., 2011) and Ellis (2004) suggests that it does not only cover content and instructional methods delivered through the Internet but also includes audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, and interactive TV. Some authors (Tavangarian et al., 2004) felt that the technology being used was insufficient as a descriptor and included the constructivist theoretical model as a framework for their definition, stating that e-learning also involves the transformation of the individual’s experience into the individual’s knowledge through the knowledge construction process. Besides, the concept of interactivity was indicated by some authors (Ellis, 2004; Triacca et al., 2004), claiming that e-learning constitutes a collaborative and communicative environment.

As regards *online learning*, some authors use it to refer exclusively to wholly online education (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005); while others describe it as access to education via the use of some technology (Benson, 2002). Furthermore, Benson (2002) makes a clear statement that online learning is a newer and improved version of distance learning. The two terms, e-learning and online learning, have often been used interchangeably, creating uncertainty as to which exactly are the learning environments they refer to.

In conclusion, terms such as online, web-based, and e-learning are often used synonymously when describing a learning environment in which some technology is used to support the teaching and learning process. In this study, we shall use the terms online learning, e-learning, and distance learning interchangeably when we refer to a distance mode of education in which teachers and students are geographically separated. In this respect, our research focuses exclusively on a learning context in which internet technologies compensate for the temporal and spatial gap occurring between the learners and the tutors.

1.3 Distance language learning

Similar to distance learning, distance language learning has evolved through several successive generations, as Wang and Sun (2001) point out, from print-based courses to current models using the internet and real-time tools for interaction and collaboration.

As White (2012) states, the earliest documented form of distance language learning appeared in Sweden in the 19th century, based around letter writing. These courses focused on the interaction between the students and the teacher, who replied to the students' letters drawing out further topics of interest and returning them with corrections. Larger scale courses were subsequently developed, as White (2012) suggests, using printed materials for the educational content and the exchange of correspondence for the interaction between the teacher and the students. The print-based mode of correspondence was the predominant form of distance language education up to the 1960s. This mode of teaching supported the development of written and reading skills, in contrast to speaking and listening which were not contemplated.

The next generation of course models emerged with broadcast language programmes, initially via radio and television, and later with audio- and video-based language courses. Later, computer technologies extended learning opportunities with online asynchronous environments, using web presentations of materials, e-mails, and discussion boards. Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) platforms started to offer new opportunities for

communication and interaction between teachers and learners. This technological evolution determined a change in the use of technology from mere distribution purposes to its use for communication (White, 2006) and constitutes the root for the development of online language courses.

Distance language learning has also developed around interactive synchronous teaching (White, 2012) with the students and the teachers using Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), and oral-visual interaction through videoconferencing. Starting in the mid-1990s, synchronous online audio was pioneered by researchers at the Open University in the UK (White, 2012). According to Lamy (2004), spoken online language learning has emerged as a significant aspect in distance language learning, focussing on the different online mediums for developing spoken interaction, on the nature of oral competence, and intercultural competence.

By the start of the new millennium, the reach of distance language learning had extended significantly with technology-mediated access to authentic encounters with the target language and culture (White, 2012). In this respect, White (2012) mentions telecollaborative projects as a purposeful intercultural experience. Telecollaboration can be defined as a form of international partnership using web-based technologies and providing learners with a chance to interact across geographic, linguistic, and cultural lines (Ware & Kramsch, 2005).

In conclusion, innovation in distance language learning can be described as a move from the concern with the appropriate learning materials to a concern with interaction, as White (2012) suggests. In other words, foreign language learning in distance education is being reshaped as a social process supported by communication technologies. On this basis, the present study attempts to explore the environment of online language learning focusing on the role of individual and collaborative activities on students' motivation. As it will be further discussed in chapter 3, it is hypothesised that the type of interaction required in an FL online course is decisive for supporting students' motivation. In this respect, paragraphs 1.3.1, 1.3.2, and 1.3.3 will present three pivotal aspects regarding interaction in the e-learning context: virtual learning environments, computer networking and social media, and videoconferencing.

1.3.1 Virtual Learning Environments

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) can be defined as computer-based platforms, allowing interactive encounters with other participants, and providing access to resources (Wilson, 1996, p. 8). VLEs share many

similarities with Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI). For example, learners can access learning materials independently and follow different learning paths through them. But the VLE concept also encompasses the communication dimension, whereas CAI represents mostly an individual experience.

Indeed, VLEs can foster communities of learners, encouraging discussion and interaction (Wilson, 1996). In a VLE, students can communicate, collaborate, access learning materials, upload homework and assignments, answer online quizzes, seek assistance from their teacher, etc., beyond the confines of their classroom and the official class hours. Moodle, Google Classroom, Blackboard Collaborate, and Google Teams, just to name a few, are some of the most popular platforms used for e-learning.

One of the essential components of VLEs is the use of technology. As Piccoli et al. (2001) state, technology in VLEs is referred to as the collection of tools used to develop the teaching and learning process. Technology aims at delivering the learning materials, as in the case of texts, graphics, video- and audio-resources. It is also used to foster communication among participants, as in the case of discussion boards, synchronous chats, and videoconferencing. Technology is primarily intended to promote interaction among learners and instructors, supporting learners' connectivity through the learning experience and allowing for knowledge transfer. Furthermore, technology also promotes learners' control, which refers to the extent to which students can control the pace of learning, the sequence of materials, and the time and place of study.

Regarding foreign language learning, some research has highlighted the fact that there is some difference in the students' perception of VLEs in FL learning and other non-linguistic subjects. Oliver et al. (2012) conducted a study on high school students participating in online courses offered by North Carolina Virtual Public School. When the results of foreign language students were compared to those of students in other subject areas, the findings suggested that foreign language students had significantly lower perceptions of their online courses. Results indicated that overall success in the online environment, teacher preparation, teaching, course/assignment instructions, and level of group collaboration were perceived to be the areas in need of improvement.

Nevertheless, a more recent study on the effect of using Google Classroom, conducted by Alabashtawi and Bataineh (2020), investigated the attitudes of EFL University students towards using Google Classroom as an innovative platform. The students participating in the research showed positive attitudes towards this e-learning platform in terms of its usefulness, ease of use, and accessibility.

E-learning platforms have enhanced telecollaborative projects, allowing individuals and groups to contribute opinions, knowledge, and experiences, and form social networks. One example is reported in the study of Brocke et al. (2010), where two groups of language students collaborated to complete tasks, activities, and projects, using a variety of communication tools, such as asynchronous forums, chats, and wikis. The two cohorts were distance students of German as a foreign language (FL) in New Zealand and students of English as an FL at Munster University in Germany. Following the general trend of creating language learning communities through the web, this study shows that collaboration in e-learning can foster “active learner involvement in the construction and distribution of content and knowledge” (Brocke et al., 2010, p. 14).

Alabashtawi and Bataineh’s (2020), and Brocke et al.’s (2010) studies draw our attention to the role of communication and interaction which internet technologies might afford. As seen, VLEs have been adopted by Universities to compensate for the disruption of the academic activities brought about by the COVID-19 outbreak. To provide an ever more communicative experience for the students, VLEs have been recently integrated with computer networking and videoconferencing tools. Both computer networking and videoconferencing increase the collaborative nature of language learning through VLEs, allowing for meaningful and authentic communication between the participants. Based on these considerations, the present study focuses precisely on exploring the characteristics of the online context as regards FL learning and the advantages of VLEs in promoting students’ engagement in FL activities.

1.3.2 Computer networking and social media for language learning

By the 2010s Computer Assisted Language Learning technologies were no longer restricted to the language classroom. Mobile and broadband technologies were allowing anytime, anywhere access to social media, resulting in access to more authentic FL usage and the development of autonomous learning skills (Reinhardt, 2019).

This current trend that combines digital technology and language learning is called Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). According to Kukulska-Hulme (2009), MALL broadly refers to anywhere, anytime language learning activities undertaken through mobile devices. There are several affordances attributed to MALL in the literature: spontaneity, individuality, flexibility, personalised and self-paced learning (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009; 2020). Motivation has been also identified as a crucial issue when it comes to the integration of

technology in language learning environments (Ushioda, 2011). For instance, Stockwell (2013) argues that there could be a biunivocal correspondence between use and motivation in language learning. In other words, a learner highly motivated to learn a language might use technology to reach his or her goals. Similarly, a learner with high motivation to use technology might develop the motivation to learn an FL (Gonulal, 2019). One of the most important characteristics of MALL is its affordances to take language learning out of the classroom and provide sustained language practice through unconventional and informal methods of learning. In this respect, numerous social media apps have appeared as alternative language learning tools. Reinhardt (2019) defines social media as “any application or technology through which users participate in, create, and share media resources and practices with other users by means of digital networking” (Reinhardt, 2019, p.3). Indeed, computer networking can be used as an instrument of interactive communication. The following networking tools can be combined with any VLE to increase the effectiveness of interaction and communication among the students.

Blogs

According to Reinhardt (2019), blogs could be arguably defined as the first social media because they were designed to develop an interactive readership and multimedia embedding since their inception in the late 1990s. Blogs provide affordances for writing as a social practice due to the wide variety of topics and registers they offer to promote the development of linguistic skills, like skimming, scanning, and critical reading. As Reinhard (2019) points out, a blog as a learning space has evolved integrating with image-sharing social media like Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr.

Numerous studies have been carried out on blog-enhanced FL or L2 distance learning: just to name a few, blogs have been employed in culture learning and intercultural exchange (Ducate & Lomnicka, 2008); for the development of academic literacy and identity (Bloch, 2007); for the support of learner’s autonomy (Alm, 2009); and to stimulate audience awareness (Raith, 2009). Although the present study does not seek to investigate the specific of using blogs in FL online language learning, it is worth mentioning that VLEs can offer opportunities to integrate blog content as an additional component of e-learning.

Wikis

While blogs highlight self-presentation and individual authorship promoting dialogic interaction and collaboration, Wikis afford to focus on collaborative, distributed authorship (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). According to Reinhard (2009), Wikis are collaborative websites which rely on contributors for both authoring and editing. Like Wikis, collaborative documents like Google Docs have emerged as tools of CALL.

Some research on the affordances of Wikis to distance language learning have focussed on their use as VLEs. DeHaan et al.'s (2012) study involved 13 University-level English learners in Japan using a Wiki to practice spoken roleplays. Overall improvements in the spoken ability were reported, despite Wikis presenting highly structured tasks and lacking an external audience. Furthermore, Kennedi and Miceli (2013) sought to use a Wiki for their University students of Italian at three Australian campuses. The Wikis were used as a shared space for noticeboards, discussions, and social networking. Despite the reported technical problems, the students showed appreciation for interaction and collaboration which were stimulated by this e-learning tool.

SNSs

Simple Notification Services (SNSs) are social media services that foreground personal profile curation and network articulation, in contrast to blogs and wikis which emphasise content creation. According to Reinhardt (2019), SNSs range from forms of microblogging, like Twitter, to business networking services like LinkedIn. Facebook could be defined as the SNS par excellence with 1.45 billion using the service daily in 2018 (Reinhardt, 2019). Research on SNS-enhanced language learning is extensive (Reinhardt, 2019), especially regarding L2 development, ranging from socio-pragmatic discourse and L2 pedagogy to identity development and learners' autonomy. For the scope of this study, it is worth mentioning that a strand of the research focuses on self-directed foreign language learning that SNSs mediate.

In this respect, Pasfield-Neofitou (2011) analysed the online SNS, blog, and email mediated communication among 12 Australian learners of Japanese and their counterparts over four years. Findings revealed that exchanges between learners focussed mostly on issues of identity and nationality, and the perceived ownership of the online space. It was also reported that participants in the study had a sense of virtual immersion and of being in someone else's space, which might develop FL learners' motivation to use the target language. Furthermore, Back (2013) analysed the daily Facebook posts of three learners of Portuguese as an FL studying

abroad in Brazil and found that posts increased in number and length overtime. This also implicated the development of audience and register awareness afforded by SNSs use. Findings indicated an overall increase in Portuguese use during study abroad, as well as the acquisition of terms in Portuguese relevant to computer-mediated communication.

However, as SNSs are associated with informal and personal use, the formal use of SNS activities may not always be well perceived, as Reinhardt and Zander (2011) found. They encouraged English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to evaluate Facebook-based social games and SNSs for educational purposes. Results from the SNSs implementation reported here showed that they promoted learner-learner interaction and the development of transcultural, plurilingual identities. However, it was also found that learners may resist the educational use of an SNS. In this study, because of the pressure of an impending standardized test, some participants refused to collaborate with classmates in SNS-enhanced activities, preferring more traditional test preparation activities.

Although the present study does not seek to investigate the specificity of social media and computer networking for language learning, it is worth mentioning that mobile technologies are at the heart of e-learning since they afford for bridging the spatial and temporal gaps mentioned before. Also, the studies mentioned above demonstrate ever-increasing attention from the academic community to the pivotal role of mobile learning in language education. Computer networking as well as videoconferencing are some of the e-learning tools which determine a more interactive and communicative experience in VLEs. This is precisely the background on which the present research is grounded.

1.3.3 Videoconferencing

As previously suggested, videoconferencing is one of the crucial components of a VLE for language learning. Videoconferencing can be described as a system where two or more participants, geographically distant from one another, can interact while both seeing and hearing each other in real-time, with the help of specialised equipment and an internet connection, as Smith (2003) explains. This type of tool can be also called Voice over Internet Protocols (VoIPs), emphasizing the crucial role of oral communication that videoconferencing entails.

The audio-visual channel of communication and the immediate response generated by verbal exchanges among the participants put the videoconferencing context close to a real-life situation. A study by Craig and Kim (2012), supported this claim by comparing results of tests with test-taker using face-to-face and videoconference oral interviews. The participants were studying for a BA in English at a Polish and a Spanish university. The findings indicated no significant differences in performance between the two test modes and proved comparability in terms of non-verbal linguistic cues and speaking opportunity.

Videoconferencing has unsurprisingly made an important contribution to the language learning field especially as a means of communication orally with expert/native speakers (Craig & Kim, 2012). Considering the possibility of barrier-free communication with people from all over the world, numerous authors consider VoIPs to be the perfect tools for promoting intercultural exchanges (Taillefer & Munoz-Luna, 2014). However, a study conducted by Kotula (2016) on the use of Skype in FL teaching, found that many teachers involved in the research consider presence at a distance to be radically different (in a negative sense) from physical presence. Although the results of Kotula's study show that Skype is overall judged by teachers as a valuable tool in the context of online language learning, its use, nevertheless, has some limitations. For example, infrastructure weaknesses (e.g., interrupted connections), lack of some functions (e.g., supervising the content of the learner's screen), or the specific nature of contact with the interlocutor (the lack of a possibility to interact in a common space).

One of the popular and easy-to-use videoconferencing tools is Zoom (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020). It includes several features, such as video- and screen-sharing, annotation tools, and breakout rooms. Through using the breakout room function, teachers can create opportunities for students to use the language productively, engaging them in student-to-student interaction. This function allows integrating and monitoring synchronous group work which is often not feasible on most platforms. Besides, when combined with other tools such as Google Forms and Google Docs, students can co-construct texts and complete exercises in groups (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020). A study (Ayoub, 2019) conducted with Lebanese University students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) found that a Zoom session enhanced students' motivation towards learning English. Findings suggested that students felt more responsible for their learning, thus becoming more motivated towards the learning process itself.

It can be concluded that online language learning encompasses several learning environments, from synchronous and asynchronous lessons to a variety of technologies, such as videoconferencing, computer-mediated communication tools, and social media. These tools are meant to offer learners not only a repository of information and materials, but also a place where they can interact, communicate, and collaborate (White, 2006). The evolution of technologies for distance language learning has determined a shift in focus in the teaching and learning process towards an ever more authentic experience. From correspondence education to the current use of e-learning platforms, distance language education has become more collaborative and communicative for the learners, offering them multiple tools to bridge physical and temporal distances. This change has not occurred without difficulties, as it has been highlighted in the studies of Rainhardt and Zander (2011), Oliver et al. (2012), Kennedy and Miceli (2013), and Kotula (2016).

However, despite significant limitations, distance language learning has proved to be beneficial for the development of the students' FL motivation and learning autonomy (Ayoub, 2019; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011), especially because of its constructivist characteristics (Brocke et al., 2010). Based on these considerations, the present study seeks to explore the relation between the use of internet technologies and motivation in FL learning, exploring also the impact that interaction or the lack of it has on students' engagement in the learning activities.

Chapter 2 Motivation in distance language learning

Motivation has been defined as the engine of learning (Paris & Turner, 1994). Motivated learners are those who are willing to take higher risks, are actively engaged in activities, have a more creative and persistent approach to learning, and are more successful in their studies (Hartnett, 2016). This chapter will briefly describe the theoretical background regarding motivation on which the present study is grounded, from a socio-psychological and cognitive perspective. In this regard, Ryan and Deci's Self-determination theory (2000) will be considered the cornerstone of this study. In the second part of this chapter, some studies regarding motivation in FL distance learning will be reviewed, focussing especially on the influence of self-determination, self-efficacy, and self-regulation.

2.1 Theoretical background

In this section, some of the theories on motivation will be briefly presented to establish the theoretical backdrop on which this study is based, particularly as regards the instrument of data collection (Chapter 3) and the discussion of the data (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). It is acknowledged that affective factors, in particular motivation, are critical to effective learning and often predictors of success or failure (Dornyei, 2001; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Ushioda, 1996). For several decades, researchers in social and cognitive psychology, neurobiology and education have recognized the importance of motivation for successful second language learning, together with other affective variables such as attitude, orientations, anxiety, and aptitude and have proposed a variety of models and theories aiming at describing and analysing motivation. In this paragraph, some socio-psychological and cognitive models relevant to this study will be summarily presented.

2.1.1 Socio-psychological models

Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of language learning distinguishes between integrative (wishing to integrate into the target culture) and instrumental motivation (pursuing academic and work-related advancement). This model is largely reflected in Deci and Ryan's (1985) original theory of intrinsic (stemming within the individual) and extrinsic motivation (determined by external factors such as praise or rewards). Only thereafter Deci and Ryan's (2008) Self-Determination Theory represented a shift from a static description of motivation to a continuum with varying degrees of individual autonomy, ranging from non-self-determined to

self-determined motivation, and placing the sources of motivation on a scale which stretches from impersonal to external and internal (Table 1). As this model encompasses socio-psychological as well as cognitive aspects regarding motivation, its features and its relevance for this study shall be described in more detail in paragraph 2.1.2.

Another influential model of motivation, which specifically accounts for the learning dimension, is Dornyei's Motivation Self theory (Dornyei, 2005). Here motivation is represented as a dynamic process which interrelates with other variables such as personality, beliefs, attitudes, and the learning setting. Dornyei's approach to L2 motivation contemplates three distinct levels, the language, the learner, and the learning situation: the Ideal L2 self (the ideal image that one person would like to have of oneself as an ideal L2 speaker); the Ought-to L2 self (characterized by obligations and duties perceived by an individual as an L2 speaker); and the L2 learning experience. While the first two levels were largely based on the work of Gardner, the third level is more complex, encompassing class dynamics and the learner group.

It is precisely the L2 learning experience component of this theory to have inspired this study and, consequently, the desire to understand how a particular context might affect motivation in FL learning. The L2 learning experience is viewed as an aspect of motivation "which concerns situated, executive motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g., the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, the experience of success)" (Dornyei, 2009, p. 29). Moreover, Dornyei considers the L2 learning experience as "the perceived quality of learner's engagement with various aspects of the learning process" (Dornyei, 2019, p. 7); hence, it is a strong predictor of motivated behaviour.

In this definition of the L2 learning experience, Dornyei distinguishes between the notion of motivation and engagement: while motivation indicates only the students' potential for persevering learning rather than its actual realization, the engagement construct also encompasses the behavioural aspect of motivation (Dornyei, 2019). Among the various facets composing the construct of language learning engagement, the "learning tasks" (Dornyei, 2019, p. 7) have been identified to be the pivotal component of the present study. In this regard, the present study investigates the impact of online language activities on students' motivation and on their perseverance in participating in the online course.

2.1.2 Cognitive models

Alongside socio-psychological studies in motivation, the so-called cognitive revolution aroused interest in motivation research in the 1970s, as scholars started to study the main cognitive aspects of human behaviour and consequently identified the multifaceted nature of human actions (Dornyei, 2020).

Attribution theory

A cognitive facet of motivation was explored by Weiner (1986) with Attribution theory, suggesting that motivation in learning is influenced also by attributions to one's success in learning. This theory is centred on explaining the causes for success or failure according to two types of attributions, namely internal and external. Some learners believe that their language learning outcomes are attributable to their abilities, their efforts, or their actions; on the contrary, others believe that their success or failure in learning depends on other people, on fate or external causes. Attribution theory has been used in this study to investigate the causes to which students ascribe their success or failure in FL online learning. Understanding whether stable or unstable factors, either personal or situational, are perceived to be most influential could provide significant insights for adapting the FL online curriculum to suit students' needs.

Expectancy-value theory

In alignment with Weiner's theory, Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2001) formulated Expectancy-Value theory which claims that achievement-related choices are motivated by a combination of people's expectations for success and subjective task value in particular domains. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) suggested that motivation is based on how well learners expect to perform in a task and how much they value their success; these two factors are integrated and determine the extent of motivation in doing the task. Motivation is high when both expectancy and value are high; it disappears when one of these factors equals zero. Since this study is set in a special context, we considered it appropriate to investigate whether students' perceptions of their success and their appraisal of the online activities could somehow affect their motivation.

Self-efficacy

Again, attention was given to the learners' beliefs in their abilities in Bandura's (1997) theory which considers the pleasure derived from the learners' perception of their self-efficacy. Thus, he defined self-efficacy as 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). These beliefs influence how learners approach learning, how long they continue to pursue the tasks and how much effort they put forth. The sense of self-efficacy does not have any relation with real abilities or competences, but rather it stems from complex cognitive processes based on people's opinions, feedback, past experiences, encouragement, or lack of it. It could be argued that the e-learning context might undermine students' sense of self-efficacy, affecting both their engagement and their motivation in doing online activities. Bandura's theory appears to be particularly appropriate to describe students' attitudes in FL online learning as the lack of face-to-face interaction, especially during a world's sanitary crisis, could magnify the role of certain cognitive processes on motivation to the detriment of others.

Self-regulated learning

A comprehensive theoretical background to describing motivation from a socio-cognitive perspective is represented by the Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) model (Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulation is the control that students have over their cognition, behaviour, emotions, and motivation using personal strategies to achieve the goals they have established. This definition contains the concept of motivation control which refers to being aware of one's motivation and being capable of sustaining self-motivation, interest, and attention during a task. Motivation and self-regulation are two aspects of the same process: learners generate motivations to initiate and maintain learning, then apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies to regulate their learning processes (Zimmerman, 2008).

In other words, motivational factors are treated as pre-requisites for SRL (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and motivated students, learn how to regulate their learning more actively. According to Zimmerman's (2002) model, motivation to perform a task is the result of the combination of several variables, namely students' beliefs of their capability to perform the task (sense of self-efficacy) and to succeed in the task (outcome expectations); perceived relevance of the task for students' goals (task value) and students' beliefs about their learning purposes (goal orientation); liking of the task (interest). The relevance of Zimmerman's theory for his work

stems from having considered motivation a multifaceted concept encompassing many facets, thus allowing for a more comprehensive framework of reference. As we shall see in the next chapter, Ryan and Deci (2000) devised a theoretical framework which takes into account also the pivotal role of self-determination in motivation, associating it with other variables, such as autonomy and the locus of causality.

2.1.3 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

As seen, an exhaustive description of motivation can be found in Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-determination Theory (SDT). We shall briefly present Ryan and Deci's theory as it represents not only a comprehensive framework for explaining motivation itself but also a point of reference for justifying the role of attributive styles and the sense of self-efficacy on motivation. As it is precisely the significance of internalization of personal experiences and behavioural outcomes to have guided this study, the SDT continuum was found to be the most pertinent framework of reference for the present research (both for the formulation of the questionnaire and the analysis of the responses). SDT focusses on the contextual conditions that promote or hinder self-motivation. Identifying these conditions is pivotal to the e-learning context due to its unique characteristics, determined by less interaction among teachers and learners than face-to-face learning, thus relying mostly on autonomous motivation (as shall be further explained in chapter 2.2).

As Ryan and Deci suggest, motivation cannot be merely explained through the contrast between two bipolar opposites, such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci's SDT ranges along a continuum from amotivation to intrinsic motivation (see Table 1). At one of the extremes of the continuum stands intrinsic motivation, the most autonomous and self-determined instances of behaviour. On the other extreme stands amotivation, the state of lacking any motivation to act. In the middle between these two extremes are extrinsically motivated behaviours with varying degrees of autonomy and self-regulation.

To explain the variability in motivation, Deci and Ryan (1985b) formulated two sub-theories, Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) and Organismic Integration Theory (OIT). According to CET, intrinsic motivation is based on the fundamental needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness; in other words, intrinsic motivation refers to the inherent satisfaction of doing an activity. Extrinsic motivation, in contrast, concerns the performance of an action to obtain a specific outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). More specifically, OIT

accounts for “the different forms of extrinsic motivation and the contextual factors that either promote or hinder [...] the regulation of these behaviours” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72).

As can be seen from Table 1, *externally regulated* behaviours are the least autonomous and they are performed to obtain external rewards or to avoid punishment. They could also be determined by compliance with certain norms or rules. Therefore, these types of behaviours are perceived to be controlled or alienated, being their perceived locus of causality external. Another type of extrinsic motivation is called *introjected regulation*, which refers to internally driven behaviours with an external perceived locus of causality. In other words, introjected regulation is a relatively controlled form of motivation, which is regulated by contingent self-esteem and self-control. Moving towards more autonomous behaviours, *identified regulation* represents the conscious valuing of an action, accepted as personally important. Finally, the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is *integrated regulation*. It occurs when certain actions are performed because they have been evaluated, appraised, and brought into one’s own set of values or needs.

These gradations of extrinsic motivation shed light on Ryan and Deci’s (2000) main idea behind their SDT continuum, that is to say, the importance of promoting autonomous regulation also in extrinsically motivated behaviours (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). The two scholars reiterate that relatedness, i.e., the sense of being connected with others, perceived competence, i.e., the sense of being efficacious, and autonomy, i.e., the sense of freedom from external pressure, facilitate the integration of intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation.

Table 1 below shows the intricate relationship between self-regulation, self-determination, and the level of autonomy in a learning setting, in an attempt to demonstrate how each of these factors is closely interrelated to one another.

	Low Autonomy <-----> High Autonomy					
	Non self-determined <-----> Self-determined					
	Demotivation	Extrinsic motivation				Intrinsic motivation
Regulatory styles	Non-regulation	External regulation	Introjected regulation	Identified regulation	Integrated regulation	Intrinsic regulation
Perceived locus of causality	Impersonal	External	Somewhat external	Somewhat internal	Internal	Internal
Defining features	Lack of control and intentionality. Non-valuing.	For external reinforcement, and rewards. For avoiding punishment.	For avoiding external sources of disapproval or gaining approval (self-control and ego involvement)	For personally held values, such as gaining new skills (congruence with one's values and needs)	For congruence and awareness. For satisfying psychological needs.	For enjoyment, interest, and inherent satisfaction.

Table 1 The Self-determination continuum (adapted from Ryan & Deci, 2000)

2.2 Literature review

In this section, some studies on motivation in FL distance learning will be reviewed. The criterion for selecting some areas of research over others emerged from the need to establish a sound background to the current study and to focus this review exclusively on those studies concerning the FL e-learning context.

As observed in paragraph 2.1, Self-determination and Self-regulation theories were found to be the most relevant to investigate FL motivation in e-learning, due to the specific characteristics of this context which requires a higher level of autonomy than classroom-based instruction. Furthermore, self-regulation appears also strictly connected with the sense of self-efficacy in increasing the motivation to persevere learning, as well as attributive styles of success or failure. Finally, following Dornyei's focus on the role of the group dynamics and the learning experience on students' motivation (L2 learning experience), the effects of collaborative activities and teacher feedback on students' motivation were explored.

Studies on self-determination

Since online learning is mainly influenced by self-determined behaviours and self-regulated actions (Mobarhan et al., 2014; Reinders, 2014), the Self-determination continuum (Deci & Ryan, 1985) could arguably be considered the best approach to investigate motivation in online language learning. Thus, it has been pointed out that Self-Determination Theory refers to the individuals' ability to choose how to satisfy their needs and

perform actions that need some degree of self-regulation. As regards the e-learning context, if learners accomplish their innate needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, they will feel more engaged in the activities and satisfied with their performance (Grolnick et al., 1991).

Fathali and Okada (2017) investigated the learners' perceived competence and sense of relatedness of Japanese EFL undergraduate students attending general English courses. The participants in this study practised their FL skills both in an e-learning environment inside the classroom and through a web-based e-portfolio system outside the classroom (Fathali & Okada, 2016). The results of this study confirm the relationship between the Self-determination theory indicators (perceived autonomy, perceived competence, and perceived relatedness) and the learners' attitudes towards technology-enhanced language learning.

Besides the formal academic setting, other studies investigated the application of the Self-determination theory in informal online contexts. In this respect, Beaven et al. (2017) investigated the intrinsic motivation and self-determination of learners participating in a language exchange online programme. The relationship between motivation, perceived competence, stress, and enjoyment in this context were also explored. It was found that this e-learning context enabled learners to expand and take control of their learning outside the formal learning environment and personalise it. Participants in the study seemed to find enjoyment and interest, and consequently motivation, in tasks that they also found stressful, which could be read as evidence of their resilience. Beaven et al. (2017) concluded that intrinsic motivation and self-determination, "i.e., the ability to continue doing something that is interesting, personally important, and vitalising despite the tensions this might produce, is likely to impact on the overall learning experience" (Beaven et al., 2017, p. 138).

Fathali and Okada's and Beaven's studies applied SDT to the FL online context which is precisely the main setting of the present study. Both studies highlight the importance of Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) components on FL motivation in e-learning, which will be further explored in the present study. Despite the similarities, it is worth mentioning that the present research somehow differs from Fathali and Okada's and Beaven's studies. Firstly, Fathali and Okada (2017) investigated a technology-enhanced environment, whereas the present study explores motivation in a fully online setting. Then, Beaven's research (2017) is set in an informal online context which cannot be compared to an academic setting in terms of organization and expectations.

Studies on self-regulation

As observed, self-determination and self-regulation are closely interrelated in online learning (Mobarhan et al., 2014; Reinders, 2014). Several studies have shown that self-regulated learning is a crucial factor in students' success in online courses, both in higher education (Barnard et al., 2009) and in compulsory education (Kim et al., 2014). It appears that compared with face-to-face learning, online education requires students to exercise more autonomous control over their learning behaviour (Barnard et al., 2009).

When studying online, learners' engagement with the new dynamic environment and their online self-regulation become pivotal factors contributing to their academic success. In a study conducted by Zheng et al. (2018) students with a positive future image of their FL learning and an intrinsic interest in the FL culture, showed better self-regulatory capacity in online learning environments. In contrast, students who learn the FL to avoid negative academic results might be less motivated to carry out online self-regulated learning.

In addition to being linked to self-determination, self-regulation has a close relationship with the sense of self-efficacy, both in classroom-based and in online settings (e.g., Bai et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2015). For example, Su et al.'s (2018) study highlighted the intricacies between online self-regulation and self-efficacy among EFL learners taking a blended English language course at university. The findings of this study provide support for the potential bi-directional nature of the relationships between self-regulation and self-efficacy. Learners with higher self-efficacy may be more self-regulated in learning. Likewise, learners who demonstrate better self-regulatory capacity tend to be more self-efficacious.

Overall, these studies demonstrate that FL motivation in e-learning encompasses many socio-cognitive variables, thus a comprehensive framework of reference for analysing it is needed. This is precisely what this study seeks to investigate, that is the application of the SDT continuum to understand the various facets of motivation in FL students attending online courses. As seen, in Su et al.'s (2018) study, the authors identified a sort of parallelism between self-regulation and self-efficacy, hence providing fertile ground for studies such as the present one.

Studies on self-efficacy

As seen in paragraph 2.1, Bandura's socio-cognitive theory (1997) recognises the powerful influence of self-efficacy on cognition, motivation, and behaviour. Studies on the relationship between the sense of self-efficacy

and online learning environments concentrate mostly on the technology factor: for example, computer self-efficacy (Jan, 2015; Pellas, 2014); internet self-efficacy (Belland et al., 2014; Womble, 2007); and information-seeking self-efficacy (Hill & Hannofin, 1997; Tang & Tseng, 2013). However, the technology factor is beyond the scope of this work.

Studies exploring the relationship between self-efficacy, motivation and learning success in FL online learning appear to be few and far between and present contrasting results. For instance, a study conducted by Zheng et al. (2009) explored the affective factors in learning English as an FL in a 3D game-like virtual world. Using communication tools (e.g., chats, bulletin boards, and e-mails) and 3D avatars, students co-solved online content related problem quests with native English speakers. The students using the virtual world rated themselves higher in self-efficacy towards advanced use of English, attitude towards English and e-communication, than those students who did not participate in the virtual learning world. Consequently, the distance learning mode proved beneficial for the participants' sense of self-efficacy in FL learning.

Conversely, some studies (Alhamami, 2019; Phuttharaksa et al., 2018) have reported less positive beliefs towards learning an FL in online settings than in face-to-face contexts. For example, Phuttharaksa et al. (2018) conducted a study with some highly self-efficacious learners who failed in an online foreign language course. The findings suggested that goal setting, the shift of attribution and insufficient feedback are factors that might negatively influence the sense of self-efficacy in online learners.

These studies seem to suggest that even though self-efficacy is closely related to success in learning in the online environment, this relation does not hold for everyone. Aspects such as goal orientation, attribution and feedback appear to play a significant role in motivating the students to persevere learning. Considering the investigation on motivation conducted in the present study, it seems pivotal for a comprehensive analysis of FL motivation in e-learning to examine the intricacies between self-efficacy and the other variables, such as self-determination and self-regulation. Also, as some studies have reported contrasting results, the present study could be of wide interest to further investigate this area of research.

Studies on attributive styles

In Weiner's view (2000), attribution theory explains how FL learners evaluate their success or failure and consequently, how their perceptions affect their performance. The significance of attribution theory has been

understood and revealed by numerous studies exploring FL motivation (e.g., Oxford & Shearin, 1994; McQuillan, 2000; Graham, 2004; Williams et al., 2004). Yet, the role of attribution theory in the FL e-learning context appears to be still unexplored.

As seen, FL distance learning refers to a particular educational context in which the teacher and the students experience geographical distance and the whole teaching and learning process might occur using technology. Some studies (Serpil, 2019) investigating Attribution theory's effects on FL learning and motivation have shown some attention to the technological dimension of FL learning, but they cannot account for the whole complexities of e-learning. In particular, no study, to our knowledge, has considered the specific of the present research, that is looking at attributive styles of success or failure about motivation in the FL e-learning setting.

Studies on online activities and motivation

The present study focusses, among the other things, on identifying the activities that students find most motivating in an online language course, on grounds that integrating into the curriculum activities that foster motivation could improve the learning process and the accomplishment of learning goals (Galishnikova, 2014; Liu, 2013). Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors play a significant role in how students perceive the activities they do online. On one hand, intrinsic motivation is enhanced by the need to interact, to be competent and to achieve autonomy, as well as by the students' self-identification with the ongoing action or with its value (Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the other, extrinsic factors concern aspects of the curriculum, resources, and the teacher, which can likewise influence the sense and quality of motivation (Barack et al., 2016).

The impact of online language learning activities, especially in the EFL context, to enhance learner's motivation in University instruction has been examined in numerous studies (Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016; Jeong, 2019; Lin & Lan, 2015; Yanguas, 2020; Zou et al., 2015). Here we shall focus on the distinction between individual and collaborative activities, as it is hypothesised that the latter are perceived as more motivating than the former (see Chapter 3). For example, in Lin and Lan's study (2015) two classes of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students were recruited and randomly assigned to one of the two groups-*individuals* and *collaborators*. The participants in the study were instructed to use the Google Docs application to carry out some language learning activities. The results of the study indicated that not only *collaborators* performed

better in vocabulary gain, but they also were more motivated to engage in the activities than *individuals* and perceived the learning experience more positively.

Similarly, the study of Zou et al. (2015) explores the effect of collaborative tasks on EFL University students in China. The participants in the study were collaborating on a writing project using a Wiki with learners of Chinese as a foreign language in the UK. The Chinese participants were found motivated to collaborate with the students in the UK, mentioning the enjoyment in participating in the activities. Also, some students had high motivation to access the Wiki frequently, especially when they had tasks to complete. Moreover, students reported that they were highly motivated to work on the Wiki because they were using the FL for real communication purposes (Zou et al., 2015).

The results of these studies seem to suggest that through technology-mediated tasks, productive language output can be promoted. In other words, what Swain (2000) termed *collaborative dialogue* can be developed with learners engaged in problem-solving and knowledge-building activities. Besides, e-learning collaborative tasks can facilitate group interaction and build a sense of community, increasing students' motivation to learn and collaborate. Since the present study is based also on the role of the L2 experience (Dornyei, 2005) on students' motivation in online learning, the beforementioned studies seem to suggest that the impact of individual and collaborative activities on motivation needs further investigation. As we shall see in Chapter 3, research question 2 will seek to investigate whether individual and collaborative activities promote or hinder the development of self-motivation in FL students, and in particular, which activities are perceived to be most motivating.

Studies on feedback and motivation

As Barack et al. (2016) have found, teacher's attitudes and teaching styles have a significant impact on students' motivation. Research has shown that teacher's feedback is not only effective in the process of language acquisition (Ellis, 2009; Ellis et al., 2006), but it also contributes to improving learners' motivation (Burgers et al., 2015).

Whether the feedback recipients will feel motivated to improve or discouraged and disengaged from the learning process will depend not only on what feedback is delivered but also on how it is delivered. In the FL e-learning context, many studies have shown that the frequency of learner's engagement in online learning is

positively correlated with teacher's feedback (Caruso et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2019). If learners can get timely answers and help in the process of online learning, they will gradually increase their learning confidence and participation in online activities, as well as their motivation.

Following the sanitary emergency due to the Coronavirus outbreak, academic activities are occurring mostly online (see Chapter 1) and scholars are showing more and more interest in the ongoing research in motivation in online learning (Qunfei et al., 2020; Xiaoquan & Huijuan, 2020). A recent survey (Qunfei et al., 2020) made by some scholars in China found that the total online teaching due to the pandemic has weakened students' learning motivation. Qunfei et al.'s (2020) study examined the factors promoting or hindering EFL learning motivation of college students in Guangdong Province in China. This study put forward some strategies to motivate online English learning for college students, which include, among other aspects, teachers' timely and effective evaluation and feedback. Similarly, Xiaoquan and Huijuan (2020) found that teacher online feedback was positively related to both learning motivation and learning engagement in University EFL students.

Conversely, delayed feedback by the tutors has been reported to be insufficient to motivate EFL students in online settings because it is not direct and immediate (Yang et al., 2012). In Yang et al.'s (2012) study participants were students from different departments enrolled in freshman English courses at a large university in Taiwan. Students were randomly assigned to three groups which had the same instructor, course content, class format and textbook, but participated in different types of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) discussions. In one of the three groups, the English teaching assistants were able to provide appropriate feedback and assistance during the online discussions and students could take advantage of the presence of a native speaker to request different terminologies and clarifications. In terms of affect, students appeared more motivated to learn because they had immediate feedback from the tutors. Whereas the other participants received written delayed feedback from the tutors which proved insufficient to motivate the students because it was not direct and immediate.

A strand of the research in the affective factors related to online feedback in FL learning highlights the role of peer-feedback in facilitating FL motivation (Hsu & Wang, 2010; Lee, 2010; Sun, 2009; Freeman & Brett, 2012; Godwin & Jones, 2003). Online peer-feedback has also been identified to be positively correlated to

motivation, collaboration, and course satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2014; Huang & Cyndi, 2016; Saeed et al., 2018).

It could be concluded that receiving timely feedback is pivotal in FL online learning as the physical distance between the teacher and the students might determine a sense of demotivation in participating in the activities. Feedback appears to be more effective when it is received promptly rather than when it is delayed. The same applies to peer-feedback, contributing also to establish a sense of group cohesion and relatedness which could be missing in online learning. The present study will briefly investigate how students perceive teachers' feedback in connection with the motivation to persevere in participating in the learning activities. As seen, teachers' feedback is the direct consequence of students engaging in the activities; hence, the type of feedback provided might positively or negatively affect motivation as well as participation.

As shown by the studies reviewed here, there exists a considerable body of literature on FL motivation in online learning. In short, the literature about this field strongly suggests that students' motivation in e-learning is affected by many variables, concerning both their identity as learners and the characteristics of the environment. The Self-determination continuum was found to be the most comprehensive framework to analyse FL motivation in e-learning, as it considers the intricate relationship between autonomy and, self-regulation, and the sources of motivation. To this must be added the role of the e-learning environment, or to put it in Dornyei's words, the L2 learning experience, in particular as regards the type of activities required and the characteristics of the feedback offered.

Part 2

This section is composed of five different chapters. First, in chapter 3 the research questions the present study focuses on are laid out; the chapter goes then on to report the study's participants, exposing its methodology and reiterating its purpose, procedures, and context. In this section, we shall also illustrate the characteristics of the subject sample as regards their age, the geographical location of the University attended, the FL studied, their proficiency level in the FL, and their motivations for attending an FL course, according to the data collected through the questionnaire.

The following chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine findings with regards to the research questions outlined in chapter 3 and provide the interpretation of the research results in the light of the theoretical background and the studies presented in Chapter 1 and 2. Each chapter analyses and discusses one research question (Chapter 4 focuses on research Question 1; Chapter 5 concentrates on describing findings regarding Research Question 2; Chapter 6 analyses results concerning Research Question 3). Firstly, chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the data collected through the questionnaire in the form of graphs and percentages. Each research question has been investigated through multiple items in the questionnaire and each chapter is organised accordingly. After the description of the results, we shall discuss the implications of the research findings against the backdrop of the characteristics of the e-learning environment presented in Chapter 1, the theories on motivation introduced in Chapter 2, and the studies reviewed in Chapter 1 and 2.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents a synthesis of the findings of the present study, some remarks about its pedagogical implications and some insights for future research. In Chapter 7 the limitations of this study are also discussed in light of the conclusions drawn from the results and the method of research adopted.

Chapter 3 The study

The main reason for conducting this research is to explore the impact that the shift from face-to-face to distance learning has had on FL motivation among University students in Italy. This study is particularly relevant in this historical moment when academic education faces new challenges due to the COVID-19 outbreak across the globe. Foreign language learning has been affected by the significant disruption of the teaching activities, despite the efforts in place by the government to ensure the continuation of the academic year.

3.1 Research hypotheses and questions

The assumption that FL motivation is negatively affected by distance learning and lack of face-to-face communication among the teachers and the students, is the background against which this present research is set. Thus, language activities in virtual learning environments take on a particularly important role in sustaining students' desire to participate in the interaction with others and to persevere learning. Indeed, it is believed that FL motivation could benefit primarily through collaborative learning. To investigate this hypothesis in-depth, the following Research Questions (RQs) were formulated:

RQ1. What type of virtual learning platforms and other instruments of distance communication has been used in Universities across Italy during the COVID-19 outbreak? It is hypothesised that multiple distance learning tools have been used for FL teaching as Universities have adapted to the government dispositions.

RQ2. What kind of FL activities do students find most motivating vis-à-vis individual and collaborative tasks? What kind of activities do they enjoy the least? It is hypothesised that in Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) collaborative activities are perceived to be more motivating as they develop students' cooperation and a general sense of belonging to the group, which could be inhibited by the distance mode of education.

RQ3. Are students more influenced by autonomous or controlled motivation in FL distance learning? Do they believe in their capacity to produce specific performance attainments or does their sense of self-efficacy decrease in a VLE? Do students attribute their success in FL learning to internal or external causes in this

setting? Do they feel demotivated? It is hypothesised that FL motivation could be negatively affected by the characteristics of VLEs despite affording for the development of more autonomous learning.

3.2 Participants

The reported data were obtained by submitting a questionnaire (see Appendix A) to seventy-six University students enrolled in bachelor's or master's degrees at Universities in Italy, attending an FL course in distance mode of learning. Respondents to the questionnaire participated voluntarily. They had been informed of the research questions investigated and were asked to give informed consent to the use of the data collected through the questionnaire. They were also reassured that their privacy would be protected.

The questionnaire was published on three Facebook group pages and students decided to take part in the survey on a completely voluntarily basis. Consequently, subjects were selected via random sampling. The randomization of subjects has the main advantage of preventing any type of selection bias (i.e., living in a selected geographical area, attending a certain university, learning a specific FL). As Dornyei and Csizer (2012) explain, random sampling involves the selection of some members of the population on a completely random basis. This type of selection is based entirely on chance rather than any subjective factors. However, as the two authors suggest, no matter how random a sample strives to be, the generalizability of the data collected is often negligible. Despite sharing some of the characteristics with the defined target population, the sample also presents limitations inherent to the sampling method itself (see Chapter 7).

By the end of September 2020, a total of seventy-six students answered the questionnaire. The data gathered in the demographic section of the questionnaire are presented in this chapter because it refers to the characteristics of the subjects involved in the study. According to the data, subjects' age ranged between eighteen and fifty (Table 2) and they were attending Universities in different areas of Italy (Table 3).

Age range	Number of respondents	Percentage
18-25	53	69,7%
25-30	21	27,6%
Other	2	2,7%
Total	76	100%

Table 2 Participants' age groups.

Most students responding to the survey belonged to the 18-25 age group. A quite high number of respondents belonged to the 25-30 age group. Two students replied that they were in the 40-50 age group without specifying their actual age.

Location	Number of respondents	Percentage
North-West	34	44,7%
North-East	16	21,1%
Centre	14	18,4%
South and the Islands	9	11,8%
Other	3	4%
Total	76	100%

Table 3 Geographical location of the Universities attended.

Most students attended Universities located in the North-West of Italy; the North-East and the Centre of the country show a similar percentage of participants with just two points of difference. Students attending Universities in the South or the Islands came last as regards the participation in the survey. Finally, three students answered that they attended Universities in *the UK*, *Italy* and *Milan*. It could be argued that the student answering in *the UK* did not read the informed consent thoroughly as it specifically states that to participate in the survey students should be attending Italian Universities. Similarly, the student answering in *Italy* might not have understood that the survey addressed only students located in Italy and it required to give a precise indication of the University geographical location. The student answering in *Milan* is supposed to have misinterpreted the question as Milan is in the North-West of Italy.

Respondents were also asked to say what FL they were studying at University and their proficiency level in the FL. Table 4 and 5 show the findings as regards these two questions.

Language	Number of respondents	Percentage
English	62	81,6%
Spanish	5	6,6%
French	6	7,9%
German	1	1,3%
Russian	-	-
Other	2	2,6%
Total	76	100%

Table 4 Foreign languages studied as part of the academic curriculum.

Level	Number of respondents	Percentage
Beginner	7	9,2%
Lower intermediate	8	10,5%
Intermediate	32	42,2%
Upper Intermediate	22	28,9%
Advanced	7	9,2%
Total	76	100%

Table 5 Level of proficiency in the foreign language.

Table 4 shows that the most frequent foreign language studied at University is English. Spanish and French are quite popular languages in the academic curriculum, whereas German and Russian appear to be the least favoured by the students. One of the respondents answered that he/she studied two languages, Russian and German. Another respondent answered that he/she had no foreign language in his/her curriculum of studies. It could be assumed that this respondent did not read the informed consent which identifies attending an FL course at University as one of the requirements to participate in the survey.

Most of the respondents declared that their level of proficiency in the FL is intermediate, followed by the upper intermediate level. Beginner, Lower Intermediate and Advanced levels show a lower percentage of frequency. Finally, respondents were asked to identify the reason why they chose to study an FL at University (Table 6).

Reasons for studying a foreign language	Number of respondents	Percentage
I want to use the FL in my future job	23	30,3%
I want to get a job abroad where the FL is spoken	13	17,1%
I want to get further education abroad	4	5,3%
I agree that the FL may be needed in my future life	18	23,7%
Because it is required by the course plan	10	13,2%
Because I am interested in the FL culture	-	-
Because I enjoy learning it	7	9,2%
I agree that the FL gives advantages when applying for a job	1	1,2%
Total	76	100%

Table 6 Reasons for studying a foreign language.

Unsurprisingly, respondents claimed that the main reason to study an FL is its usefulness in the future: the FL might be needed in a future job (30,3%) or more broadly in a future life (23,7%). Some also declare that they plan to get a job in the country where the FL is spoken (17,1%). According to these data, the choice of the FL might be dictated by its instrumentality for career prospects or living arrangements. Conversely, only 1,2% of the respondents claimed that they study an FL out of pleasure to learn, and none mentioned the interest in the FL culture as a good motive to learn it.

3.3 Method of research

This research is a descriptive study, qualitative in orientation even though mostly quantitative data have been collected. As Cohen et al. (2011, p. 17) explain, the quantitative-interpretative methodology, in opposition to its normative-positivistic counterpart, shows concern for individuals and aims at understanding the subjective world of individuals' everyday experience. The interactions between the subjects of the study and the cultural and historical context in which they live are also explored through a quantitative-interpretative methodology (Creswell, 2009).

Initially, the present study contemplated adopting a mixed methodology of research to increase the accuracy of the data collected. Alongside the questionnaire, a focus group was planned to obtain some soft data through

the interviews of some participants. The methodology of connecting and/or integrating the findings, mixing both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2009), is referred to as mixed. The mixed methodology of research aims at developing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, facilitating the validation of data, and avoiding self-referentiality. However, only one of the respondents in the survey agreed to participate in the focus group. Hence, the present study relies exclusively on the data collected through a self-completion questionnaire.

Being the questionnaire the only instrument of data collection, this study can be labelled small-scale survey research. As Cohen and Manion (1985) point out, the prerequisites to the design of any survey are “the exact purpose of the enquiry; the population on which it is to focus; and the resources that are available” (Cohen & Manion, 1985, p. 85). The purpose of this study and the sample of the subjects participating in this research have been already described in paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2, respectively. As far as the resources available, it is important to underline that this small-scale study was carried out by a lone researcher, as part of her dissertation for the master’s degree in Language Sciences at Ca’ Foscari University (Venice).

As Dornyei and Csizer (2012) explain, survey research is a quantitative research method which aims at collecting self-report data from individuals. The main assumption about survey research is that certain characteristics of a large population (e.g., University students enrolled in an online language course, as in the case of the present study) can be described and analysed by questioning only a fraction of the population (Dornyei & Csizer, 2012). Dornyei and Cseizer (2012) highlight the fact that as survey research allows to make inferences about the larger FL learning population, it also facilitates decision making in policy formation in curriculum design that is precisely the ultimate purpose of the present study. Hence, Chapter 7 will suggest some important pedagogical implications in the FL online learning context resulted from the findings of this research.

3.4 Instrument of data collection

In this study, research participants were invited to answer the “Motivation in online distance environment for foreign language learning” questionnaire (see Appendix A). The survey was published on three Facebook group pages, specifically designed for University students to distribute questionnaires and surveys among the academic community. The three Facebook pages on which the questionnaire was published are SOS

Questionari, Aiuto Test Tesi (sperimentali)-Studenti Universitari, and We want you!-Questionari per tesi e ricerche degli studenti.

The questionnaire was displayed on Facebook for five months (May-September 2020), using the Google Docs application. This application allows users to create questionnaires, publish them on the internet and finally collect the responses in the form of graphs or verbatim answers. The questionnaire created for this study is primarily made up of closed-ended items, which do not require the respondents to produce any free writing. Open-ended questions were used to investigate which individual and collaborative online activities were perceived to be the most and the least motivating.

The guidelines of Dornyei and Cseizer (2012) on how to design questionnaires in L2 learning were particularly relevant in the construction of multi-item scales. The Likert scale was used in most of the questions in section 5 of the questionnaire (Motivation in language learning online). This scale consists of a statement accompanied by some response options. Respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with them, marking one of the responses ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* (Dornyei & Cseizer, 2012). Besides, the semantic differential scale was used mostly in section 4 (Virtual learning environment). Like the Likert scale, it consists of eliciting a graduate response by marking a continuum between two bipolar adjectives/adverbs at the extremes (Dornyei & Cseizer, 2012).

The questionnaire created for this research is subdivided into six sections.

-Section 1 consists of the title and the subtitle of the questionnaire.

-Section 2 asks the respondents to give informed consent to the use of the data collected.

-Section 3 refers to the demographic data regarding the research participants (their age, the geographical area in which their university is located, the FL studied, their level of proficiency in the FL, the reasons why they decided to study an FL).

-Section 4 explores the respondents' experience with the VLEs and the type of activities they were asked to carry out. This section of the questionnaire provides an answer to the first research question, regarding the Italian University response to COVID-19 restrictions in terms of online platforms and e-learning tools used. It also aims at identifying the most and the least motivating factors in FL activities in distance education, which is the scope of the second research question.

-Section 5 investigates in depth the aspects affecting motivation in FL learning online. It explores the continuum between autonomous and controlled motivation, the sense of self-efficacy perceived in online activities, the attributional factors in FL learning success and failure, and finally demotivation. This section aims at finding data to answer the third research question.

-Section 6 asks for participants' availability to participate in a focus group.

The questionnaire is reported in its entirety in Appendix A.

3.5 Analysis

The quantitative data collected via the closed questions in the questionnaire were elaborated through descriptive statistical analysis, using percentages. Statistics were provided by the data analysis functionality of Google sheets. Bar graphs were used to quantify and visualize the data in a graphic form. As regards answers to open-ended questions, they were coded using content analysis. Being content analysis a data analysis procedure applied to verbatim responses, it is crucial in the description and presentation of responses to open-ended questions. Content analysis aims at identifying recurring themes to code answers into a meaningful set of categories that lend themselves to further quantitative statistical analysis.

The data collected through the questionnaire will be reported and discussed in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

This chapter has presented the three Research Questions (RQs) which stem from the teaching and learning context in the COVID-19 emergency. As seen, the data in this work consist of University students' answers to a questionnaire published online. The quality of the statistical data collected through the closed questions was enhanced by providing additional qualitative data in the form of four open questions, which were further analysed through a content analysis procedure. As regards the sample, it was heterogeneous for the Universities attended and the foreign languages studied. However, some selection bias will be discussed in Chapter 7. The following chapters will present the research findings and discuss them against the backdrop of the theoretical background and previous literature on FL motivation in e-learning.

Chapter 4 RQ1: results and discussion

RQ1. What type of virtual learning platforms and other instruments of distance communication has been used in Universities across Italy during the COVID-19 outbreak?

The first research question concerns the type of e-learning platforms and other e-learning tools used in FL distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. It was assumed that Universities had employed a variety of tools to guarantee the continuation of the academic year as it appears in the CRUI survey (CRUI 2020). Items 1 and 2 in section 4 of the Questionnaire address this research question.

4.1 Results

Item 1 is *What type of VLE platform are you using for online learning?* It is a multiple-choice question and only one answer can be selected. Considering the whole sample (76 respondents), findings are shown in Figure 1.

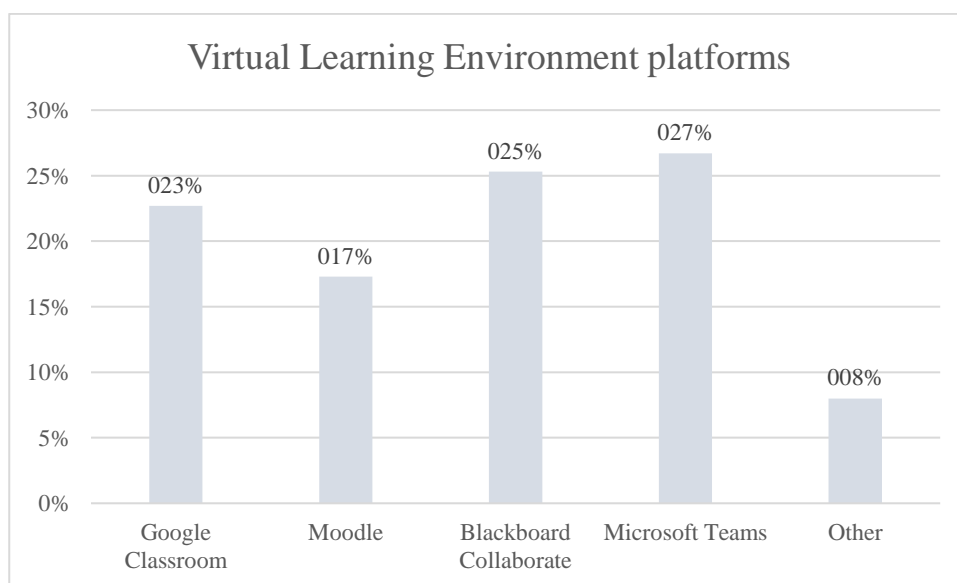


Figure 1 Virtual Learning Environment platforms

Examining the bar chart in Figure 1, it appears the most popular e-learning platforms are *Microsoft Teams* (20 out of 76 respondents chose this answer) and *Blackboard Collaborate* with a slightly lower number of respondents choosing it. Nearly a quarter of the respondents indicated *Goole Classroom* as the e-learning platform used in FL distance education. *Moodle* accounts for only 17,30% of the participants' answers.

Only a small minority of the respondents (8%) chose *Other* among the available options. These respondents mentioned six e-learning tools (*Dolly blended*, *ONELab*, *Zoom*, *Skype*, *Cisco WebEx*, and *Italki*), of which only two could be considered e-learning platforms. *Dolly blended* is a comprehensive e-learning platform which affords synchronous and asynchronous lessons and administrative procedures. *ONELab* is a University platform which offers, among other things, the possibility of recording face-to-face lessons and uploading them on the platform for the students to watch in asynchronous mode, and of organizing meetings between teachers and students through Synchronous Meeting Tools (SMTs).

The other respondents mentioned some video conferencing tools which cannot be regarded as e-learning platforms. *Zoom*, *Skype*, and *Cisco Webex* are three SMTs that allow synchronous conversation among the participants; they cannot be considered e-learning platforms because, despite their multiple affordances, they are not specifically designed for academic teaching. A similar tool is *Italki*. Despite functioning as an SMT, it is conceived to be used as an FL marketplace whereby language teachers from all over the world offer language lessons to interested clients; thus, it is not used as a University e-learning tool but rather as a commercial website.

Item 2 is *Which other instruments are you using for online learning?* It is a multiple-choice question, and more than one answer can be chosen. Only 72 answers were submitted (the whole sample consists of 76 respondents) and the results are shown in Figure 2 below.

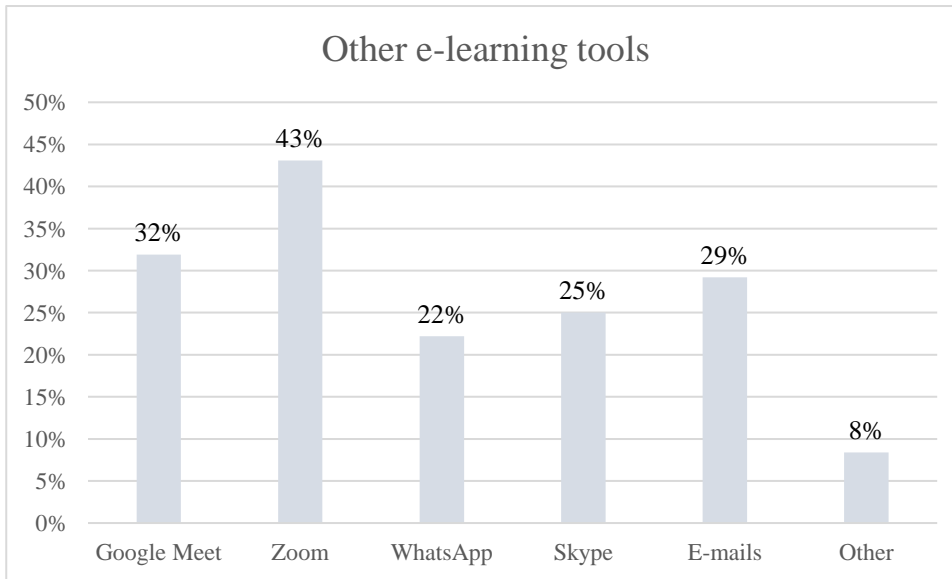


Figure 2 Other E-learning tools

Figure 2 shows that the most used Synchronous Meeting Tool (SMT) is *Zoom*, followed by *Google Meet*. These two SMTs appear to be the most popular applications as they allow student-teacher and student-student interaction in synchronous mode, as has been suggested in chapter 1. *Skype* was mentioned by a quarter of the respondents as another e-learning tool alongside e-learning platforms. Despite not being an SMT, *e-mail* exchange appears to be a quite popular tool for FL learning in distance mode, as was indicated by more than a quarter of the respondents. Finally, just under a quarter of the respondents mentioned *WhatsApp* as another e-learning tool.

Five respondents chose *Other* as the answer, mentioning mostly e-learning platforms rather than other e-learning tools (*Microsoft Teams* and *Blackboard Collaborate*). *Cisco WebEx* was rightly mentioned by only one respondent as an SMT to support FL e-learning. Comparing these answers with those of item 1 (section 4) of the questionnaire, it could be argued that there are some overlapping responses due to misunderstandings in the difference between e-learning platforms and other e-learning tools. Finally, one of the respondents mentioned the *Wordreference Site* as another tool. This answer cannot be considered significant for the scope of this study because instead of referring to an interactive e-learning tool, it refers to a free online dictionary.

4.2 Discussion

As seen in Chapter 1, Agenzia Nazionale di Stampa Associata (ANSA) reported that more than 90% of the Italian Universities were delivering online courses at the end of March 2020 (ANSA, 2020b) to avoid the disruption of the academic activities due to the Coronavirus outbreak. ANSA also reported that 94% of the lessons were being conducted on e-learning platforms, involving 1 million and 200 thousand students by the end of March 2020 (ANSA, 2020b).

Consistently with ANSA's reports, data retrieved from the questionnaire confirmed that Universities across Italy have implemented a variety of e-learning platforms to continue the academic activities. Among the most popular, *Blackboard Collaborate*, *Microsoft Teams* and *Google Classroom* were found in the analysis of the data. However, students seem uncertain about the difference between Virtual Learning Environments and other tools, which refer to supplementary web-based applications, intended for synchronous or asynchronous communication. Despite this difficulty, it can be argued that online language learning during the COVID-19 outbreak was delivered using both e-learning platforms and videoconferencing tools, such as *Zoom* and *Google Meet*.

In contrast, social media seem to be less popular in academic activities, as students did not mention their usage during distance learning. When asked to mention other tools used in distance learning, it appears that students only use e-learning platforms and videoconferencing tools, but social media were not contemplated in the language courses they were attending.

In conclusion, survey results indicate that Universities have adapted to the distance mode of education using a variety of platforms and tools instead of deciding on a common option. As Figures 1 and 2 show, language courses in University campuses in Italy have assumed different characteristics according to the type of e-learning tools used. Consequently, students' experience of FL learning online should prove as varied. In Chapter 5, we shall focus on the type of FL individual and collaborative activities required in online courses. As we shall see, despite the plethora of e-learning tools used, activities appear to be quite homogeneous.

Chapter 5 RQ2: results and discussion

RQ2. What kind of FL activities do students find most motivating vis-à-vis individual and collaborative tasks?

What kind of activities do they enjoy the least?

The second research question aims at investigating the type of individual and collaborative language activities that are perceived to be the most and the least motivating by the students. First, students are asked to indicate the frequency of some language activities carried out online; then, they are invited to specify which activities they enjoy the most and the least, motivating their answer. As a direct follow-up of doing activities and submitting exercises, feedback is also investigated, especially in terms of its promptness, clarity, and its potential to create group cohesiveness and increase motivation to participate. Items from 3 to 10 in section 4 of the questionnaire address this research question.

5.1 Results

Item 3 is *How frequent are the activities listed below in the course you are attending?* This item is a five-point Likert scale with *never* and *always* as the two bipolar opposites. The results are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 below. The table in figure 3 shows the data collected through the survey in a number format, while the bar chart in Figure 4 reports the data in a percentage format. The data progression table allows an overview of the data among the various activities conducted online; also, a more analytic view of the data for each category will be afforded by the bar chart.

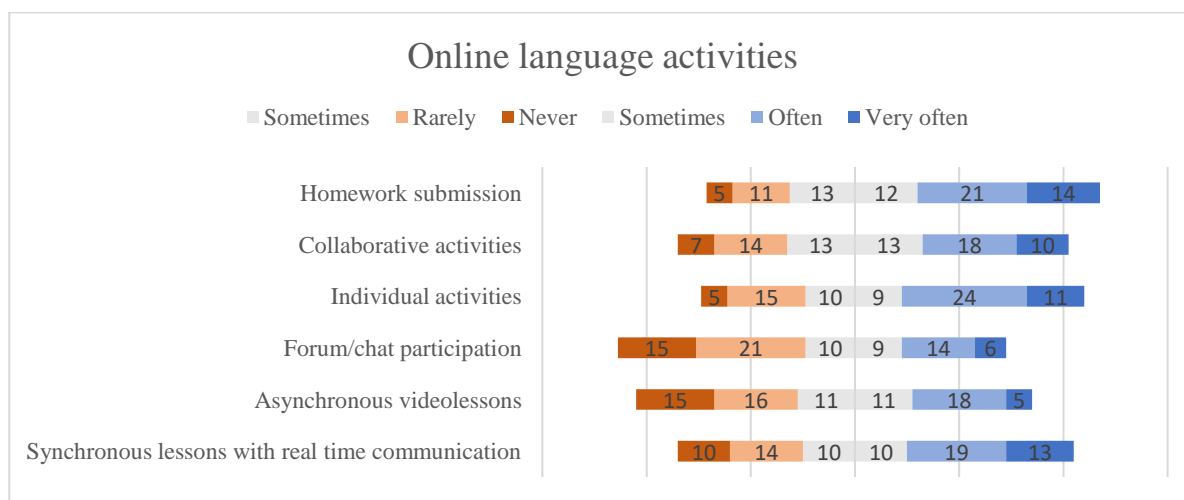


Figure 3 Online language activities (data progression table)

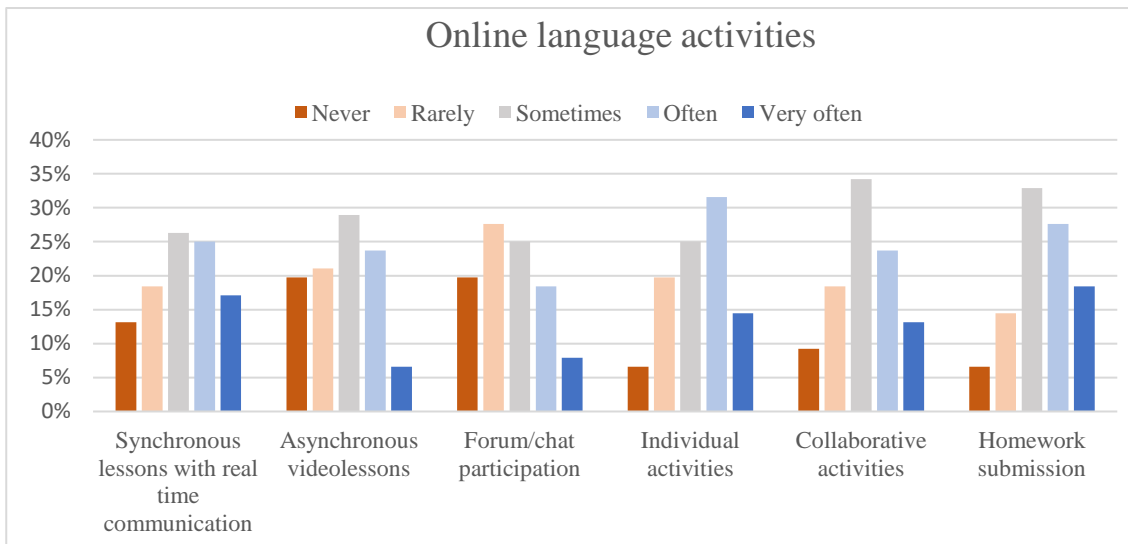


Figure 4 Online language activities (bar chart with percentages)

Analysing the data reported in Figures 3 and 4, it appears that most of the respondents replied that *homework submission* is the most frequent activity conducted online (*very often*), followed by *individual activities*. Unsurprisingly, *synchronous lessons* seem to be quite popular in a foreign language course too. In this regard, numerous Synchronous Meeting Tools (SMTs) are being used in online learning, as it has been reported in the results of Question 1. Also, *collaborative activities* could be considered a significant part of an online language course as 28 respondents replied that they do this type of activity *often* or *very often*.

As opposed to the above frequent activities, many respondents reported that *forum/chat participation* is *rarely* or *never* required in an online language course (20% of the respondents). These results may be due to the type of e-learning platform used and the type of activities planned in the language course, although many of the e-learning platforms used for academic purposes include a forum/chat function. It could be also argued that the forum/chat section is used as a place for homework submission rather than discussion among the participants. Finally, *asynchronous lessons* appear to be not so popular in online learning. However, it could be assumed that some of the participants in the survey might have not completely understood the meaning of this term which refers to video-recorded lessons uploaded on the e-learning platform.

Item 4 is *What type of individual activities are mostly required in the language course you are attending on a VLE?* This is a multiple-choice question, and more than one answer can be chosen. A total of 75 out of 76 answers were received and the results are shown in Figure 5.

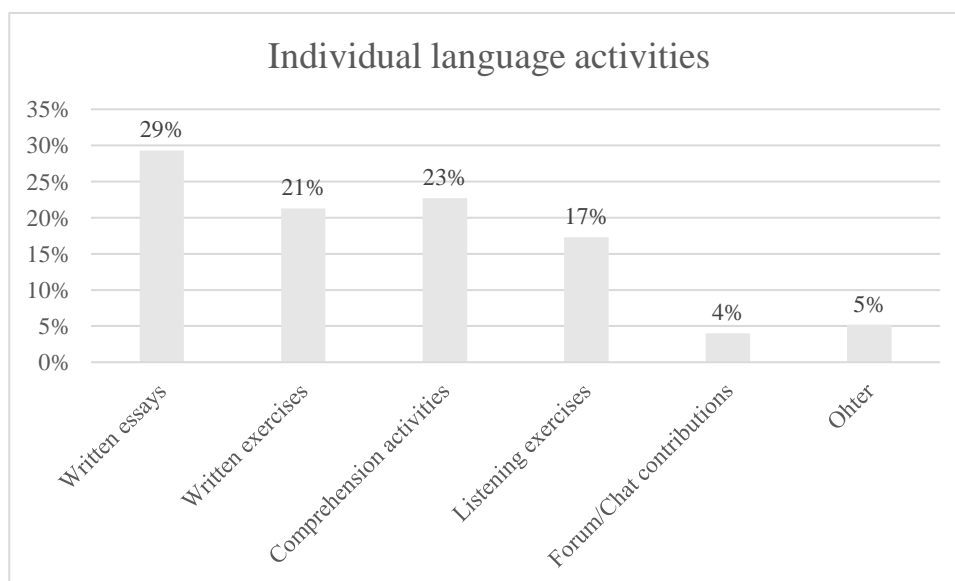


Figure 5 Individual language activities

Analysing Figure 5, it is evident that *written essays* are selected as the most frequent individual activity (nearly 30% of the respondents chose this answer). Consistently with the data collected through Item 3 showing limited *Forum/Chat participation*, *Forum/Chat contributions* are reported to be the least frequent activities. Also, the results related to *written exercises* and *comprehension activities* are consistent with the data in Figures 3 and 4, reporting that 20% of the respondents are required to submit homework *very often*. It could be argued, thus, that homework in online language courses is in the form of reading comprehension and writing activities, as well as written essays. *Listening exercises* account for only 17,3% of the answers.

Four respondents chose the option *Other* to this question and provided the following answers: *Conversation*, *Projects and Presentations*, *Exams*, *Production of sentences using phrasal verbs and idioms*. The only answer which could be counted among *Individual activities* is *Production of sentences using phrasal verbs and idioms*. However, it could be considered a written exercise, and therefore, counted in this category. The other answers cannot be considered to be individual activities because *Conversation* and *Projects and Presentations* are not carried out individually, but require some interaction between the participants, whether they be conducted between the students, or between one student and the teacher. Finally, *Exams* cannot count for individual activities, but rather as a separate category altogether.

Item 5 is *Which of the above individual activities do you find most motivating and why?* This question requires the respondents to write a short answer comprising two aspects: first, the type of activity they find most motivating; then, the reason why they perceive this activity the most motivating. The results regarding the first part of the question are shown in Figure 6. A total of 45 answers were submitted (out of a total of 76 respondents).

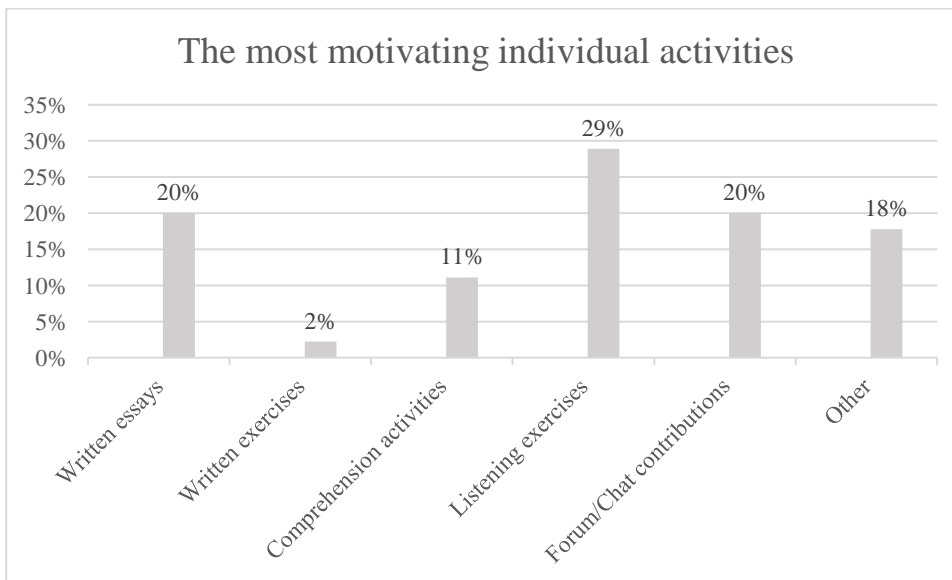


Figure 6 The most motivating individual activities

It appears that *Listening exercises* are perceived to be the most motivating among the individual activities mentioned in the questionnaire, despite being not so frequent in online language courses, as seen in Figure 4. *Written essays* and *Forum/Chat contributions* are reported to be the most motivating by a quite high number of respondents. However, comparing these results with those in Figure 4, it can be noted that while *Written essays* are the most frequent activities in online language courses, *Forum/Chat contributions* seem to be the least frequent of all. Only 4% of the respondents reported that forum/chat activities are the most frequent in their language course; this result is in stark contrast with the results in Figure 5, presenting *Forum/Chat contributions* as the most motivating activities for 20% of the respondents.

Eight respondents added their answer to the *Other* category, mentioning *Conversation*, *Projects*, *Lessons*, *Using business idioms*, *Homework activities*, and *Free speaking activities* as the most motivating individual activities they are engaged in. Two respondents replied *I do not know* to Item 5 of this section of the questionnaire. The only reply that could be considered an individual activity is *Using business idioms* which

could be described as a written exercise. *Conversation, Projects, and Free speaking activities* cannot be considered individual activities as they involve interaction among the teacher and the students. Moreover, it could be argued that the term *Lessons* refers here to the teacher's explanations and/or lectures, which cannot be counted as individual activities. Finally, *Homework activities* refer to a broader category which might comprise *Written essays* and *Written exercises*, and any other type of individual or collaborative work that is assigned as homework.

The second part of the answer to Item 5 requires the respondents to provide an open-ended response, indicating the reason why they find the beforementioned individual activities the most motivating. Out of 45 replies, only 30 have provided the second part of the answer (the whole sample consists of 76 respondents). The qualitative data collected has been analysed through the procedure of content analysis. There have been identified four semantic macro-categories, describing the reasons why a certain individual activity is perceived to be the most motivating: *because they develop various language skills and subskills, because they are useful in every-day life or for future career prospects, because they could promote interaction among the learners, and because they meet the personal taste of the respondents*. The whole answers or parts of them are quoted in Table 7 in italic and keywords have been highlighted.

Individual activities	Because they develop various language skills and subskills	Because they are useful in every-day life or for future career prospects	Because they could promote interaction among the learners	Because they meet the personal taste of the respondents
Written essays 9 out of 30 responses (30%)	4 out of 9 responses (44,44 %) <i>-try new syntactic structures</i> <i>-write freely</i> <i>-focus on what I want to say</i> <i>-develop “a specific topic language”</i>	4 out of 9 responses (44,44%) <i>-use the language in everyday life</i> <i>-are most useful</i> <i>-perchè aiutano nello studio della materia</i> <i>-help me practice</i>	1 out of 9 responses (11,11%) <i>-especially in teams</i>	
Written exercises 1 out of 30 responses (3,33%)	1 out of 1 response (100%) <i>-have to use “different types of your language skills”</i>			
Comprehension activities 4 out of 30 responses (13,33%)	1 out of 4 responses (25%) <i>-perchè racchiudono più capacità</i>	3 out of 4 responses (75%) <i>-most useful in real life experiences</i> <i>-useful in everyday life</i> <i>-we can read all the topic we want, especially from the journals</i>		
Listening exercises 9 out of 30 responses (30%)	5 out of 9 responses (55,55%) <i>-can improve different skills</i> <i>-I can improve the skill of understanding the language</i> <i>-for the pronunciation</i> <i>-most important skill to learn</i> <i>-improve my listening skills</i>	2 out of 9 responses (22,22%) <i>-in my future work I'll talk to a lot of people</i> <i>-this is what I will have to do when I live abroad</i>		2 out of 9 responses (22,22%) <i>-I feel directly involved in it</i> <i>-because this is my best ability</i>
Forum/Chat contributions 7 out of 30 responses (20,68%)	2 out of 7 responses (28,57%) <i>-improve speaking</i> <i>-be free to speak English</i>	1 out of 7 responses (14,28%) <i>-it is like a real-life conversation</i>	3 out of seven responses (42,85%) <i>-share opinions</i> <i>-more interactive</i> <i>-interact in real time</i>	1 out of 7 responses (14,28%) <i>-they are engaging</i>

Table 7 The most motivating individual activities: students' motives

Item 6 is *Which of the above individual activities do you find least motivating and why?* Like item 5, this question comprises two parts: first, the respondents must indicate the individual activity that they find least motivating; then, they must provide the reason for their choice. The results regarding the first part of the question are shown in Figure 7. A total of 44 answers were submitted (out of a total of 76 respondents).

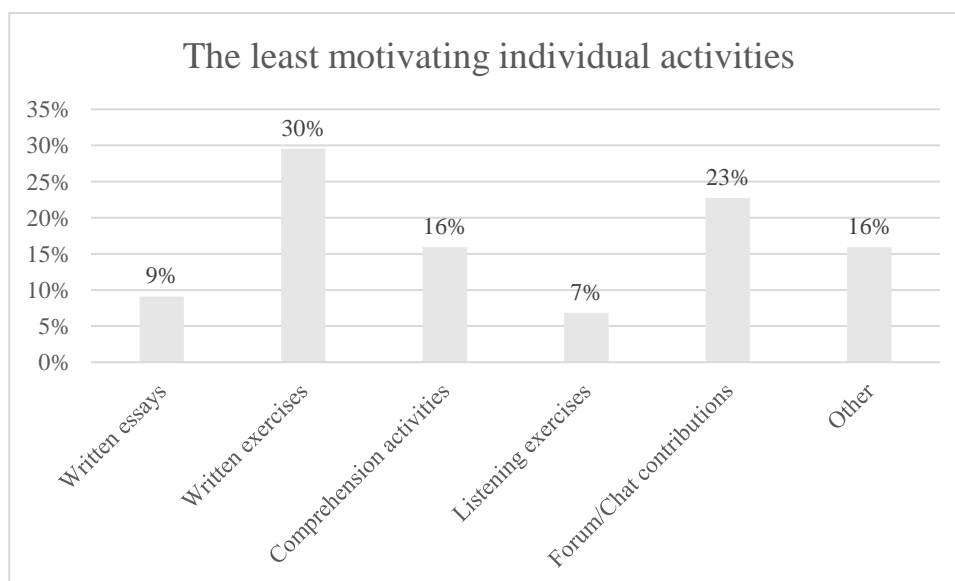


Figure 7 The least motivating individual activities

It appears that *written exercises* are perceived to be the least motivating among the individual activities carried out online, followed by *forum/chat contributions* which, like written exercises, require a written response to an input. Written essays and listening exercises are perceived to be not particularly motivating, considering that less than 10% of the respondents mentioned both these activities. Nearly 16% of the respondents chose *Other* for this answer, mentioning *homework* and *learning grammar and vocabulary* as the least motivating activities. The rest of the respondents, for a total of 5 responses, replied *I do not know* to this question.

The second part of the answer to Item 6 of this section of the Questionnaire requires the respondents to provide an open-ended response, mentioning the reason why they find the beforementioned individual activities the least motivating. Out of 45 replies, only 29 have provided the second part of the answer (the whole sample consists of 76 respondents). Again, the qualitative data collected has been analysed through the procedure of content analysis. There have been identified four semantic macro-categories, describing the reasons why a certain individual activity is perceived to be the least motivating: *because they are perceived as useless*, *because they are perceived as monotonous or tedious*, *because they do not afford for any interaction*, and *because they are perceived to be either as too easy or too difficult*. The whole answers or parts of them are quoted in Table 2 in italic and keywords have been highlighted. Identical answers referring to the same category have not been reported in Table 8.

Individual activities	Because they are perceived as useless	Because they are perceived as monotonous or tedious	Because they do not afford for any interaction	Because they are perceived to be as either too easy or too difficult
Written essays 3 out of 29 (10,34%)	1 out of 3 (33,33%) <i>-it's not useful</i>	1 out of 3 (33,33%) <i>-require too much time</i>		1 out of 3 (33,33%) <i>-are very difficult</i>
Written exercises 11 out of 29 (37,93%)	3 out of 11 (27,27%) <i>-far from the real use of the terms/verbs</i> <i>-different from real communication</i>	5 out of 11 (45,45%) <i>-they are boring</i>	1 out of 11 (9,09%) <i>-there isn't interaction</i>	2 out of 11 (18,18%) <i>-like high school</i> <i>-less practice</i>
Comprehension activities 4 out of 29 (13,79%)	1 out of 4 (25%) <i>-not useful</i>	2 out of 4 (50%) <i>-they are boring</i>		1 out of 4 (25%) <i>-I find them confusing</i> <i>-are the easiest</i>
Listening exercises 3 out of 29 (10,34%)			2 out of 3 (66,66%) <i>-there is no interaction at all</i>	1 out of 3 (33,33%) <i>-not good pronunciation</i>
Forum/chat contributions 8 out of 29 (27,58%)	2 out of 8 (25%) <i>-I have never used it</i> <i>-I don't know the properties about learning FL</i>	3 out of 8 (37,5%) <i>-often boring</i>	1 out of 8 (12,50%) <i>-it has no live answer</i>	2 out of 8 (25%) <i>-I find them confusing</i> <i>-le trovo caotiche e dispersive</i>

Table 8 The least motivating individual activities: students' motives

Item 7 is *What type of collaborative activities is mostly required in the language course you are attending on the VLE?* This is a multiple-choice question, and more than one answer can be chosen. A total of 74 replies out of a total of 76 respondents were collected and findings are shown in Figure 8.

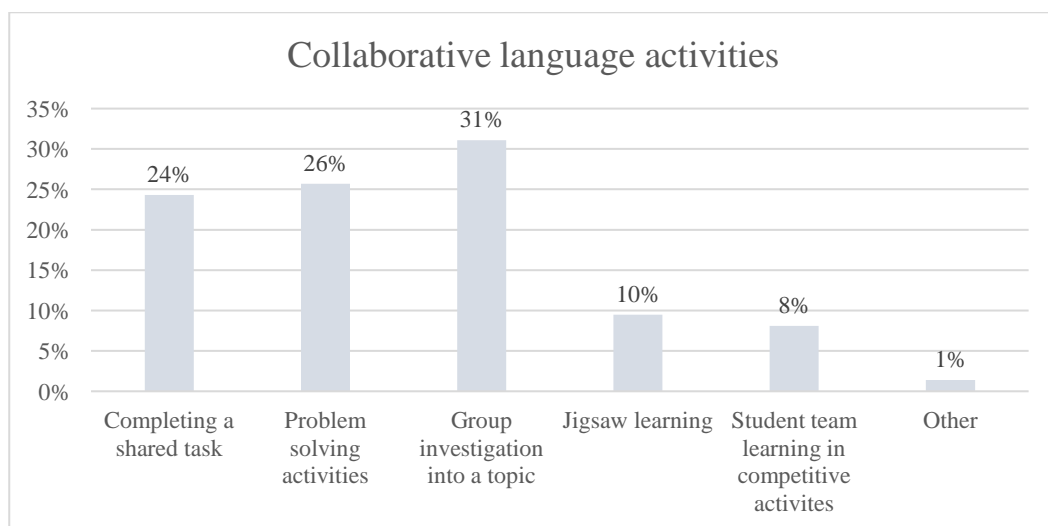


Figure 8 Collaborative language activities

As can be seen from Figure 8, the most required collaborative activities in online language courses appear to be *group investigations into a topic*, as more than 30% of the respondents chose this answer, followed by

problem-solving activities with about 25% of the replies. A similar frequency to *problem-solving activities* was reported for *completing a shared task*, which registered a total of 24,30% of the replies. *Jigsaw learning* and *student team learning in competing activities* appear to be the least frequent of all with 9,50% and 8,10% of replies, respectively. As regards the *other* option, only one respondent replied that none of the activities listed before were required in the language course he/she was attending.

Item 8 is *Which of the above collaborative activities do you find most motivating and why?* This question requires the respondents to write a short answer comprising two aspects: first, the type of activity they find most motivating; then, the reason why they perceive this activity to be as such. A total of 41 answers were submitted (out of a total of 76 respondents). However, 4 answers were not counted in the statistical analysis because they provided a motive without the indication of the activity or because they could not be counted in any of the above group of activities. The 4 answers are *perchè aiuta a sviluppare anche alcune soft skills* (referring in general to collaborative work), *attività dove si parla, I find it interesting because you can work with your classmates*, and *I don't know*. The results regarding the first part of the question are shown in Figure 9.

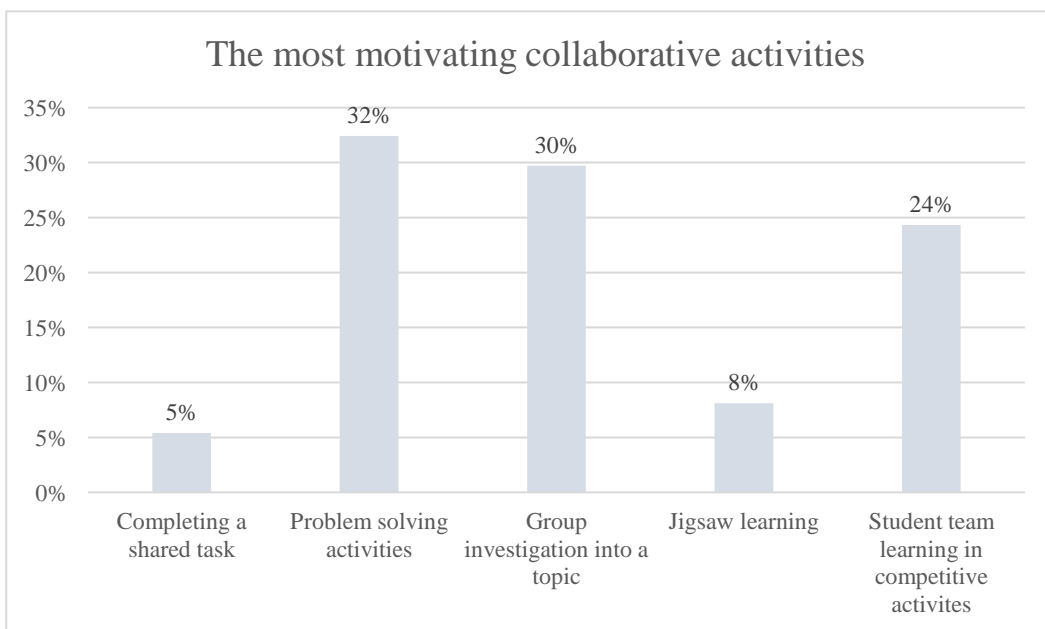


Figure 9 The most motivating collaborative activities

As regards the second part of Item 8, 25 complete responses were received out of a total of 37 replies to this question. The open responses were analysed through the procedure of content analysis. In this respect, four semantic macro-categories were identified: *because they are perceived as a pleasant or interesting activity*, *because they are appreciated for their authenticity and closeness to real-life situations*, *because they motivate the students to persevere in learning*, *because they are perceived to be meaningful for the learning process*. The whole or part of the answers has been reported in italic in Table 9 and keywords have been highlighted.

Collaborative activities	Because they are perceived as a pleasant or interesting activity	Because they are appreciated for their authenticity and closeness to real-life situations	Because they motivate the students to persevere in learning	Because they are perceived to be meaningful for the learning process
Completing a shared task 2 out of 25 (8%)				2 out of 2 (100%) <i>-it improves team-work skills</i> <i>-cooperation is the fastest way to learn</i>
Problem-solving activities 9 out of 25 (36%)	2 out of 9 (22,22%) <i>-it's interesting and motivating</i> <i>-it's a nice skill</i>	4 out of 9 (44,44%) <i>-simulate real discussions</i> <i>-it can help you with the real-life</i> <i>-they are related to real situations</i> <i>-it will be asked during your job</i>		3 out of 9 (33,33%) <i>-you have to think a lot</i> <i>-increase one's skills</i> <i>-put in practice theoretical knowledge</i>
Group investigation into a topic 5 out of 25 (20%)	3 out of 5 (60%) <i>-nice way to work together [...] with friends</i> <i>-interesting</i> <i>-more fun</i>			2 out of 5 (40%) <i>-they develop team working [skills]</i> <i>-they allow the group to come up with innovative ideas.</i>
Jigsaw learning 2 out of 25 (8%)	1 out of 2 (50%) <i>-new stimulating method</i>			1 out of 2 (50%) <i>-learn how to work in teams</i>
Student team learning in competitive activities 7 out of 25 (28%)	3 out of 7 (42,85%) <i>-interesting because you discuss and collaborate with other people</i> <i>-fun and engagement</i> <i>-stimulating and funny</i>		3 out of 7 (42,85%) <i>-give me the right motivation to keep working</i> <i>-spinge ogni studente a partecipare in maniera attiva e a produrre di più</i> <i>-give students more motivation to complete a task</i>	1 out of 7 (14,28%) <i>-because of the communication</i>

Table 9 The most motivating collaborative activities: students' motives

Item 9 is *Which of the above collaborative activities do you find the least motivating and why?* This question comprises two parts: first, the respondents must indicate the least motivating activities, then they must provide the motives behind their choice. A total of 40 replies (out of 76 respondents) were collected, but only 31 were considered for the statistical analysis. The other 9 replies could not be counted for the analysis because the

respondents did not provide a suitable answer; either they indicated that none of the activities is the least motivating, or they did not know which activity to select. Findings regarding the first part of the question are shown in Figure 10 below.



Figure 10 The least motivating collaborative activities

Consistently with the results of Item 8, *completing a shared task* is reported to be the least motivating activity among those listed, with nearly 50% of the respondents indicating this activity. *Team learning in competitive activities* appears to be the next less motivating choice with nearly 30% of the respondents selecting this answer. *Problem-solving*, *jigsaw learning*, and *group investigation* into a topic are perceived to be more motivating with less than 10% of the respondents choosing these options. Comparing these results with those in Figure 9, *team learning in competitive activities* is perceived to be controversial by the respondents: more than 24% of the respondents stated that they are the most motivating activities; conversely, a slightly higher percentage was reported for those stating that competitive activities are the least motivating. These contradictory results will be further analysed in Table 10.

As regards the second part of the question, only 19 responses out of 31 (the whole sample consists of 76 respondents) were considered for the analysis as the other 12 did not provide a full answer. Through content analysis, 3 semantic categories were identified: *because they are perceived to be monotonous or tedious*; *because working collaboratively does not appear useful*; *because the type of interaction promoted by the activities does not appeal to the participants*. Results are shown in Table 10 below.

	Because they are perceived to be monotonous or tedious	Because working collaboratively does not appear useful	Because the type of interaction promoted by the activities does not appeal to the participants
Completing a shared task 11 out of 19 (57,89%)	5 out of 11 (45,45%) <i>-boring</i> <i>-boring, less interactive</i> <i>-nothing new</i> <i>-not enough interesting</i> <i>-too simple</i>	3 out of 11 (27,27%) <i>-can be performed on one's own</i> <i>-you have to do it on your own</i> <i>-non mette lo studente a confronto con gli altri</i>	3 out of 11 (27,27%) <i>-I don't like competition</i> <i>-it can happen that one can work more than the others</i> <i>-it's frustrating for me</i>
Problem-solving activities 1 out of 19 (5,26%)		1 out of 1 (100%) <i>-when you work alone you do them considering your point of view</i>	
Group investigation into a topic 1 out of 19 (5,26%)	1 out of 1 (100%) <i>-topics are not interesting</i>		
Jigsaw learning 1 out of 19 (5,26%)			1 out of 1 (100%) <i>-I want to complete a task from start to finish</i>
Student team learning in competitive activities 5 out of 19 (26,31%)	2 out of 5 <i>-boring</i> <i>-less pleasing</i>	1 out of 5 <i>-not necessary to learn FL</i>	2 out of 5 <i>-I don't like competition, I prefer collaboration</i> <i>-make me anxious and decrease my performance</i>

Table 10 The least motivating collaborative activities: students' motives

Item 10 is *Feedback: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided*. This question shows a five-point semantic-differential scale investigating the frequency of different types of feedback. A total of 74 out of 76 respondents replied to this question. The results regarding this question are shown in Figure 11.

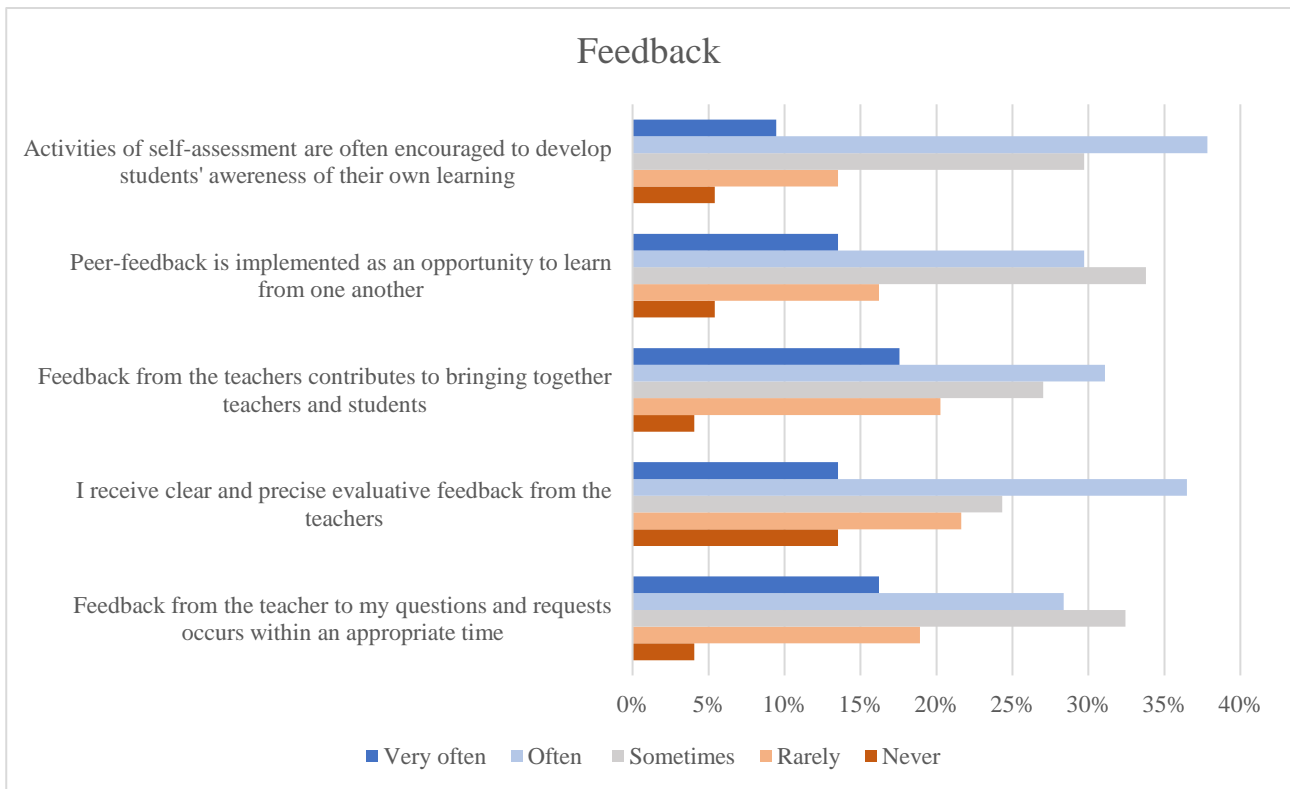


Figure 11 Feedback

Analysing Figure 11, it appears that some students receive timely feedback since nearly 30% of the respondents said that teachers reply *often* to their questions and requests, and nearly 17% of the respondents said that they receive feedback *very often*. More than 30% of the respondents, however, stated that timely feedback occurs only *sometimes*. Also, most students seem pleased with the type of feedback they receive, as nearly 40% of them stated that they *often* receive clear and precise feedback. Worryingly, however, nearly 18% of the students said that the feedback they receive is *never* clear and/or precise. This figure seems to indicate that despite receiving some form of feedback, some students do not find it useful for their learning.

Receiving feedback is perceived to be an attempt to create group cohesiveness, as nearly 18% of the respondents said that feedback creates group spirit *very often*, followed by *often* with more than 30% and *sometimes* with 27%. Nevertheless, many students do not feel that feedback is beneficial to develop a sense of belonging to the group (20% of the respondents replied *rarely*). This perception might be a consequence of the fact that for some students, feedback is neither timely nor clear: in fact, the figures referring to feedback clarity and promptness are remarkably similar (around 20% of the students replied *rarely* to these three statements). Also, peer-feedback is indicated as a way of mutual learning which occurs *often* according to nearly 30% of

the respondents, and *sometimes* by nearly 35% of the respondents. These results highlight the pivotal role of feedback in FL distance learning to establish a sense of community among the learners and the teachers, as well as a sense of belonging and relatedness. Unsurprisingly, considering the characteristics of learning in distance mode, self-assessment activities are reported to be implemented *often* (around 38%) and *sometimes* (nearly 30%).

5.2 Discussion

Individual activities

As regards individual activities, written essays and exercises seem to be the most frequent, but the least motivating. Students seem to enjoy more listening exercises or forum/chat contributions, despite being reported as not frequent at all in the language courses they are attending. Unsurprisingly, respondents show a high level of identified motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000) to attend the individual activities: the majority indicated the development of some language skills as the main reason for which individual activities are perceived as motivating. It could be argued that being University students, the respondents value the activities required in a course based on their usefulness towards getting credits, passing an exam, and acquiring skills that can be exploited in a future career.

The prospect of using the FL in a future job or for future living arrangements, as well as in present situations, is also perceived to be motivating to participate in the individual activities (Table 7). According to the Self-determination continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2000), this type of motivation could be somewhat internal as the students attribute personal importance to the online activities. Also, some of the respondents reflected on the role of communication and interaction among the learners, and value the activities accordingly. This type of motivation is again somewhat internal, as the students consciously appraise the tasks they are required to do. At the end of the Self-determination continuum, stands the pleasure of doing the activities because they are perceived to be pleasant or interesting. This type of motivation is internally regulated and concerns inherent satisfaction for doing the activities. It is worth mentioning that the activities which intrinsically motivate the students are *listening exercises* and *forum/chat contributions*, reported as infrequent in online foreign language courses.

When it comes to the least motivating individual activities, most of the respondents indicate *written exercises* as the least engaging activity. This figure is immediately followed by *forum/chat contributions* with just below a quarter of the respondents choosing it. Surprisingly, students' perception of *forum/chat contributions* seems in contradiction with what was previously found as regards the most motivating individual activities. These conflicting results might be due to the limits of the research, which will be addressed later in Chapter 7.

Again, it appears that students define individual activities as not motivating based on somewhat internal motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000): they value the activities according to their perceived usefulness and affordability of interaction. Also, in the case of the least motivating activities, respondents mention the fundamental role of pleasantness or lack of it to identify the activities as motivating or not. Interestingly, these findings apply to an academic context in which it could be assumed that extrinsic motivations would have been predominant. On the contrary, respondents show a high level of self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2008), trying to apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies to regulate their learning, especially as regards task value and goal orientation.

Collaborative activities

As seen in Figure 4, nearly 35% of the respondents indicated that collaborative activities are required *sometimes* in the language course they are attending, and a quarter of the respondents replied that they are required *often*. The most frequent collaborative activities (Figure 8) have been identified to be *group investigations into a topic*, *problem-solving activities*, and *completing a shared task*. Whereas *jigsaw learning* and *student team learning in competitive activities* are reported to be the least frequent. Among the collaborative activities, students find the most motivating *problem-solving activities* and *group investigation into a topic*, followed by *jigsaw learning* (Figure 9).

Even in the case of collaborative activities, students indicate identified regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as the main reason for considering these activities the most engaging; in particular, students mention the fact that motivating activities are meaningful for the learning process and develop specific language skills. Besides, consistently with Zimmerman's Self-regulation theory (2008), respondents mention the fact that certain collaborative activities motivate learners to persevere learning and participating in online tasks. This assumption (Table 8) demonstrates the close link between self-regulation and motivation, whereby motivated

students learn how to regulate their learning more effectively. Again, intrinsic motivation, in the form of interest, fun, and engagement in the activities, is perceived to be the incentive to participate in the FL online course.

As regards the least motivating collaborative activities, *completing a shared task* and *team learning in competitive activities* have been indicated as the least engaging of all. Again, among the reasons given for this choice, appears the fact that students make a personal judgment on these activities, as they believe that no new skills will be acquired through them (Table 10). Intrinsic motivation appears equally significant in the context of the least motivating activities, particularly as regards competitive activities. Students say that competitive activities generate frustration and anxiety, thus regarding them as the least motivating. Tediousness is equally perceived as demotivating.

To sum up, motivation to participate in the FL online activities seem to be related to identified, integrated, and intrinsic regulation according to Ryan and Deci's Self-determination continuum. These results are consistent with Barnard et al.'s study (2009) which pointed out how students exercise more autonomous control over learning in online courses, as opposed to face-to-face ones. Despite having analysed both individual and collaborative activities, it is not possible to identify which ones are perceived to be the most motivating. Even more so given the fact that students indicated similar motives to participate in individual or collaborative activities. Students seem to find equally stimulating or monotonous both individual and collaborative activities, without showing a preference for one or the other.

Feedback

Consistently with previous studies (Barack et al., 2016; Burgers et al., 2015; Ellis, 2009; Ellis et al., 2006), these research findings demonstrate that clear and timely feedback contributes to create group cohesiveness and to motivate students to persevere learning. As in Qunfei et al.'s (2020) and Yang et al.'s (2012) studies, results indicate that failing to give significant feedback could determine a sense of demotivation to participate in online activities. Questionnaire results demonstrate that not all the students participating in an FL online course receive appropriate feedback from their tutors, and consequently, they do not perceive its usefulness in creating a sense of belonging to the online group.

Self-assessment is reported as very frequent; in contrast, peer-feedback seems to be less frequent. In line with the effects of improving teacher online feedback, implementing peer-feedback more often could contribute to create a better e-learning environment and to motivate students in the participation of the online activities, as numerous studies demonstrate (Freeman & Brett, 2012; Godwin & Jones, 2003; Hsu & Wang, 2010; Huang & Cyndi, 2016; Lee, 2010; Sun, 2009; Saeed et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2014).

In conclusion, despite having initially hypothesised that collaborative activities would be preferred by the students since they were assumed to be creating a sense of group belonging, often lacking in distance learning, results highlight a different scenario. Individual and collaborative activities are considered equally motivating provided they are perceived to be useful for future life prospects or for developing specific language skills. Our results cast a new light on students' motivation in FL online learning, showing that integrated and identifies motives determine students' participation in both individual and collaborative activities. It is also worth discussing the role of *forum/chat contributions* and *listening exercises* according to their pedagogical implications (see Chapter 7). Other interesting findings concerning attributive styles, the sense of self-efficacy, and autonomous and controlled motives for participating in the e-learning activities will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 RQ3: results and discussion

RQ3. Are students more influenced by autonomous or controlled motivation in FL distance learning? Do they believe in their capacity to produce specific performance attainments or does their sense of self-efficacy decrease in a VLE? Do students attribute their success in FL learning to internal or external causes in this setting? Do they feel demotivated?

The third research question aims at investigating more closely how controlled and autonomous motivations, as well as demotivation, influence students' engagement in online activities; how students' sense of self-efficacy affects their motivation in learning an FL online; how motivation to learn, is shaped by students' attributive styles of success or failure. Initially, it was hypothesised that FL motivation could be negatively affected by online learning despite affording for more autonomous learning. Items from one to five in section five of the questionnaire address this research question.

6.1 Results

Item 1 is *Autonomous motivation: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided*. This question is a five-point Likert scale which tries to measure the level of students' agreement to the statements provided. 75 out of 76 respondents replied to this question. The results are shown in Figure 12.

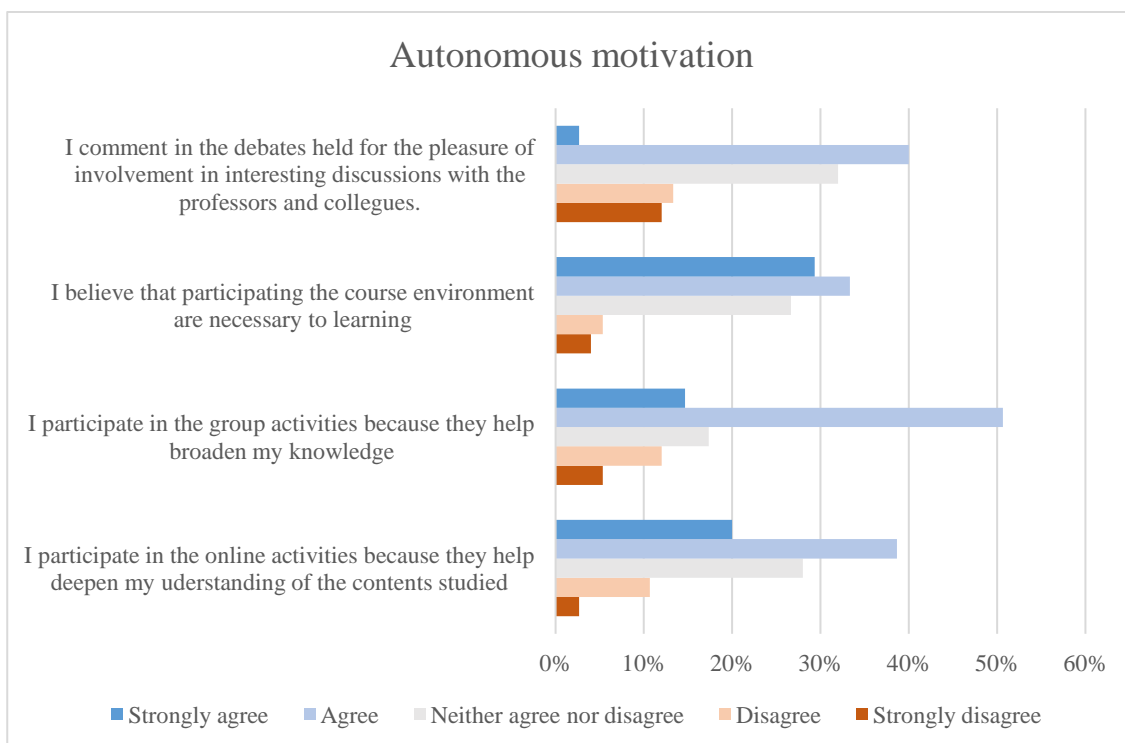


Figure 12 Autonomous motivation

The results shown in Figure 12 indicate that generally students are motivated to participate in online FL activities driven by interest and pleasure in doing the tasks, as well as by the awareness of tasks' usefulness to FL learning. As regards the pleasure derived from participation in the debates, 40% of the respondents replied that they *agree* with this intrinsic motivation for engaging in online discussions. However, only a fraction of the respondents (nearly 2%) replied that they *strongly agree* with this statement. It appears that many respondents did not perceive pleasure as significant enough to motivate them to participate in the debates (more than 10% of the respondents *strongly disagree* with this statement and nearly 12% *disagree* with it).

According to the Self-determination continuum (see Chapter 2), the other statements of this questionnaire item present different regulatory styles than intrinsic regulation (as seen in the first statement). The other statements veer more on identified and integrated regulation, showing significantly different results. First, a staggering 30% of all the respondents stated that they *strongly agree* with the fact that participating in the activities is motivated by their usefulness to improve FL learning, followed by more than 30% who said that they *agree* with this statement. Only a fraction of the respondents replied that they *disagree* (around 3%) or *strongly disagree* (around 2%) with this.

The next statement takes into consideration the collaborative activities and their usefulness to broaden students' knowledge in FL. More than 50% of the respondents replied that they *agree* with this statement demonstrating that group activities are perceived to be highly motivating for the students, consistently with previous results. Finally, students are asked to express their agreement with the usefulness of online activities to learn more about the contents studied. Nearly 40% of the students *agree* with this statement and 20% *strongly agree* with it. It can be concluded that students are motivated to participate in online activities mostly because they have personally valued the tasks and they have developed an awareness of what the learning process requires, thus consciously motivating themselves to engage in the online activities. Participation is also motivated by interest and pleasure derived from the engagement in the activities themselves.

Item 2 is *Controlled motivation: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided*. Like Item 1, this is a five-point Likert scale question requiring the respondents to express their level of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding controlled motivation. 75 out of 76 respondents answered this question. The results are shown in Figure 13 below.

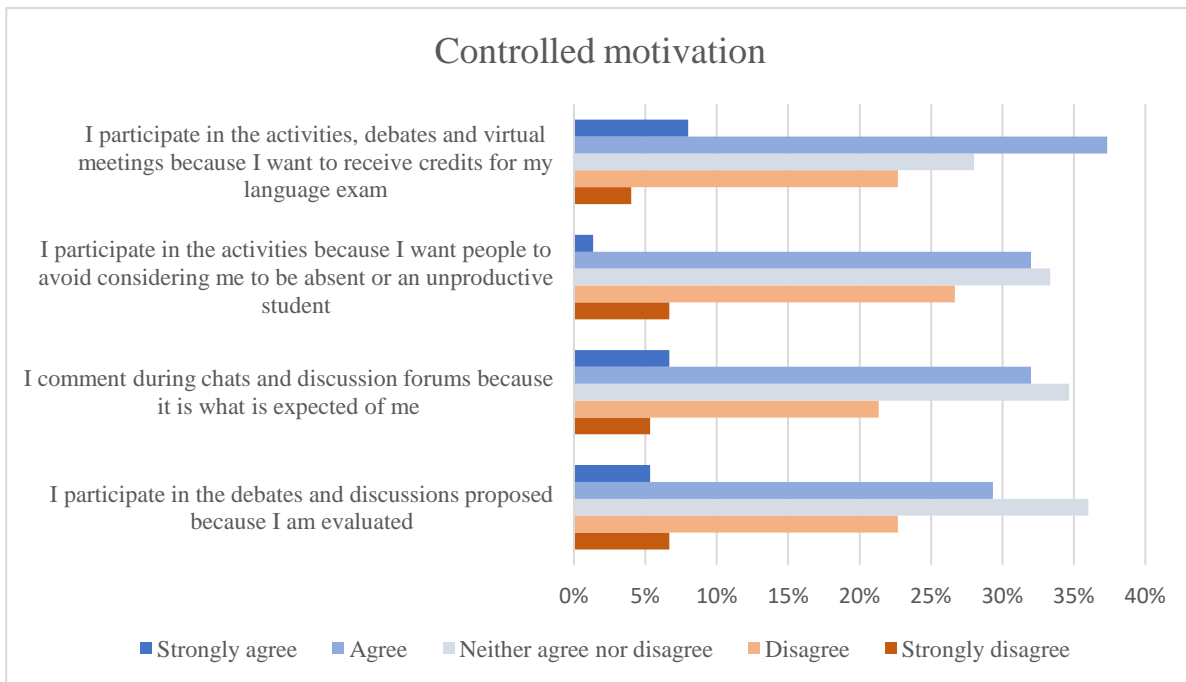


Figure 13 Controlled motivation

Item 2 aims at exploring a part of the self-determination continuum dealing with external sources of motivation, resulted from self-control (introjected regulation) or compliance with external norms of behaviour (external regulation). It seems obvious that students participate in a language course because being a part of their curriculum of studies, it is compulsory. Analysing the results in Figure 12, it is thus unsurprising that nearly 40% of the respondents *agree* with the statement saying that they participate in the activities because they want to receive credits for their exam. However, it appears that a significant number of students have other motivations to attend online language courses than receiving credits, as 28% replied that they *neither agree nor disagree* with this motivation, and more than 22% replied that they *disagree*. Therefore, it could be argued that in some language courses the sole participation in online activities does not afford credits towards the language exam.

Another aspect addressed in this item is the role of self-control on FL motivation, especially about societal expectations and compliance to context-specific norms. The second and the third statements of this item address this aspect. Results show a similar attitude to what are context-specific expectations and others' opinions about expected behaviours: 32% of the respondents *agree* both with the second and the third statement and more than 33% replied that they *neither agree nor disagree* with both statements. Despite these similarities, a significant difference in percentages was reported in the *strongly agree* responses for the two

statements: only around 1% of the respondents *strongly agree* with the fact that they participate in the online activities so as not to be considered absent or unproductive; whereas nearly 7% of the respondents replied that they *strongly agree* with the fact that they participate in the activities because this is what is expected of them. An even greater difference in the percentages between the two statements is reported in the *disagree* data: the fact of not being considered unproductive or absent was considered an insufficient motivation by nearly 27% of the respondents; on the other hand, just above 21% of the respondents claim that they disagree with the fact that they participate in the activities because this is what is expected of them.

Finally, being evaluated is considered another significant motivation to participate in the activities, as reported by nearly 30% of the respondents stating that they *agree* with this statement. However, more than 35% of the respondents show a dubious stance regarding this statement (*neither agree nor disagree*). Indeed, online activities might be evaluated or not, according to the specific characteristics of the course, as it can be also assumed by the high percentage of those who replied *disagree* (more than 20%).

Item 3 of this section is *Self-efficacy: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided*. This question is a five-point Likert scale which investigates how the sense of self-efficacy influences motivation in FL online learning. 75 out of 76 respondents replied to this question and the results are shown in Figure 14 below.

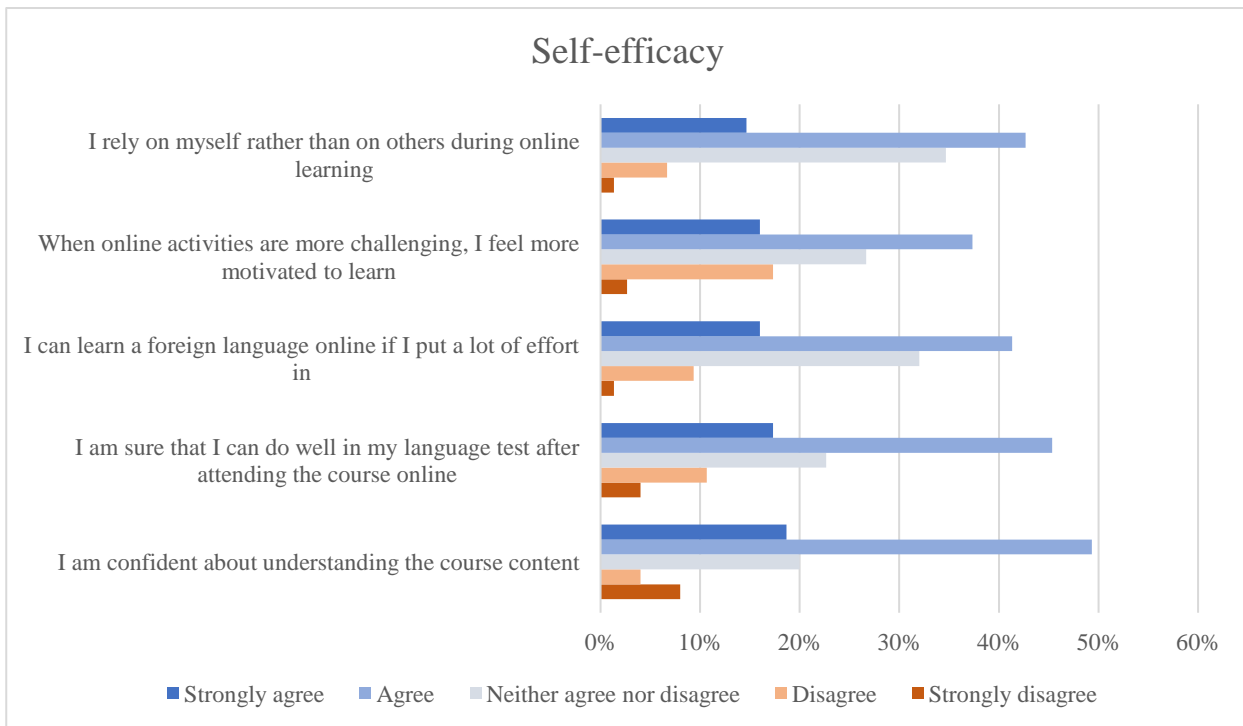


Figure 14 Self-efficacy

Analysing Figure 14, it appears that most of the respondents *agree* (more than 42%) or *strongly agree* (nearly 15%) with the fact that they rely on themselves rather than on others to carry out online activities. However, many respondents seem dubious about relying on just their abilities or effort in online learning, as more than 34% replied that they *neither agree nor disagree* and just above 6% stated that they *disagree*.

Developing the concept of self-reliance even further, the second statement of this question aims at investigating whether FL motivation is influenced by being personally challenged in engaging activities. It is encouraging to notice that 16% *strongly agree* with this statement and nearly 38% *agree* with it, counting for more than half of the respondents. Again, some of the respondents did not take a clear stance on this statement as nearly 27% replied that they *neither agree nor disagree*. Worryingly, a quite high percentage of the respondents stated that they *disagree* or *strongly disagree*, around 17% and 2% respectively, with finding challenging activities more motivating.

The third statement develops the idea of relying on one's own effort to succeed. Consistently with the results regarding the first statement, students seem to *agree* (around 42%) or *strongly agree* with it (16%). Just a minority of the respondents replied that they *disagree* or *strongly disagree* with it, arguably suggesting that personal aptitude is involved in learning an FL. Following the influence of personal effort on succeeding in

learning, the importance of attending an online course has been also explored. Most of the students indicated that attending the online course is pivotal in succeeding in the final language test as more than 17% *strongly agree* with this statement and around 45% *agree* with it. However, it should be also mentioned that more than 10% of the respondents *disagree* and 4% *strongly disagree* with recognising the efficacy of the online language course.

Finally, the ability of understanding course content is also being considered. Most of the students are confident that they can understand the course content (around 19% *strongly agree* and around 50% *agree*). Alongside the results reported for the previous statement, these results confirm that the students valued positively their participation in the online course in the light of their final exam. Consequently, students seem motivated to participate in the online course and their sense of self-efficacy stimulates them to persevere in learning.

Item 4 of this section is *Attribution theory: how much is your success in the course influenced by the factors mentioned below? (rate the factors from 1 to 5 where 1 has no influence and 5 great influence)*. This question shows a five-point semantic-differential scale investigating how attributive styles influence students' motivation to participate in online activities. The scale can be read as follows: 1 *no influence*, 2 *little influence*, 3 *some influence*, 4 *much influence*, and 5 *great influence*. The whole sample of the respondents (76 students) replied to this question. The results are shown in Figure 15 below.

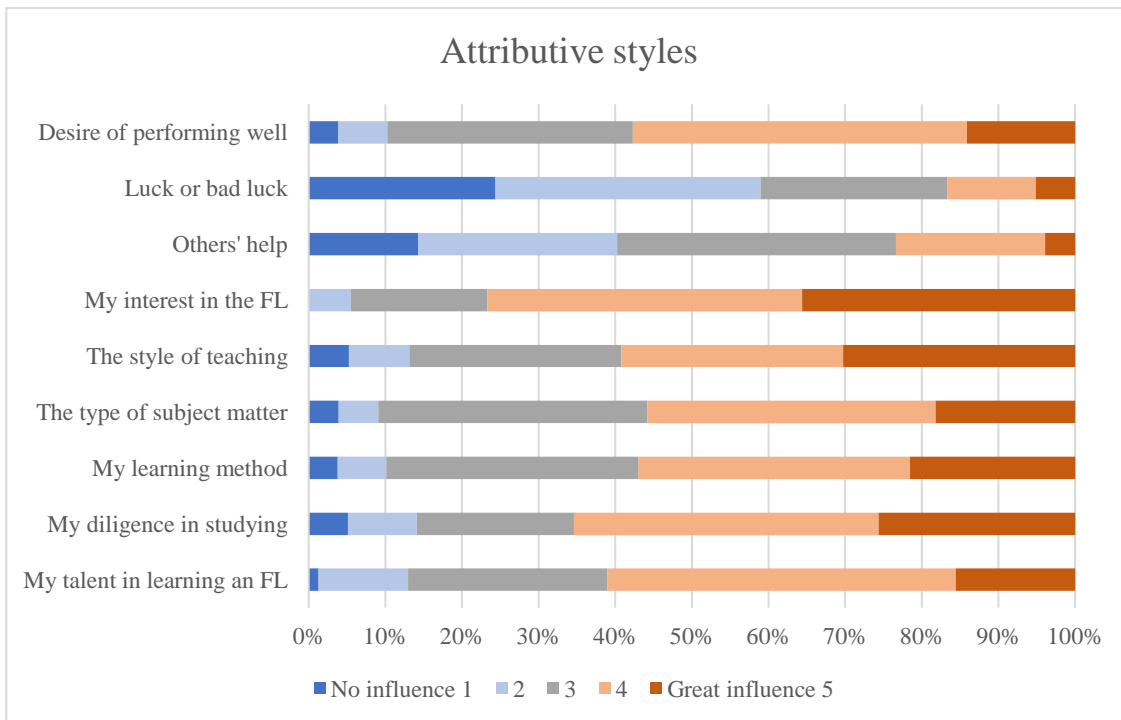


Figure 15 Attributive styles

The statements regarding attributive styles of success comprise dispositional stable and unstable factors and situational stable and unstable factors. As regards the dispositional stable factors, four different aspects have been investigated: the interest in the FL, the personal learning method, personal talent in learning the FL, and intelligence. Unsurprisingly, similar results were reported as regards personal talent and intelligence. More than 40 % of the respondents stated that talent has *much influence* (point 4) on their success in the online language course and around 15% of them indicated talent as a source of *great influence* (point 5). Interest in the FL accounts for the highest percentages of *great influence* (34,21%) and *much influence* (39,47%) responses, despite none of the respondents indicated the interest in the FL culture as one of the reasons for enrolling in the FL course, as seen in Chapter 3. Also, interest in the FL is the only statement for which no data was reported regarding the *no influence* option. Respondents also found that their learning method is crucial in learning an FL as *much influence* and *great influence* responses account for nearly 60% of all the answers. In contrast, more than 34% of the respondents stated that their learning method has only *some influence* on their success, arguably identifying other factors as more influential.

As regards dispositional unstable factors, the desire of performing well and students' diligence in studying were identified. The most striking results were reported with regards to the influence of diligence in studying

as nearly 70% of the respondents indicated diligence as having *much* or *great influence* on their academic success. Also, the desire of performing well was indicated as having a great impact on FL learning as nearly 60% of the respondents stated that it has *much* or *great influence*.

Moving on to situational stable factors, the style of teaching and the type of subject matter was identified. Both seem to be perceived as influential in the learning success, and consequently in the motivation to persevere learning, as around 50% of the respondents indicated that both have *much* or *great influence*. However, the teaching style appears as having a greater influence than the subject itself as around 30% of the respondents stated that it has great influence, in contrast to the subject matter with less than 20%. Consistently with these results, more than 35% of the respondents stated that the subject matter has *some influence*, whereas just above 25% regard the teaching style as having *some influence*.

Finally, situational unstable factors, such as luck or bad luck, and others' help, were investigated. These factors were generally regarded as less influential on learning success, as Figure 15 shows. Only a fraction of the respondents indicated these factors as having a *great influence* or *much influence* on their academic success. Just below 60% of the respondents stated that luck or bad luck has *no* or *little influence*, and 40% of the respondents identified others' help as having *no* or *little influence*. Consequently, it seems that others' help could be more influential on FL success than luck or bad luck. The figures are indeed consistent with this assumption, as just above 36% replied that others' help has *some influence*, whereas only 25% stated that luck or bad luck has *some influence*.

Item 5 of this section is *Demotivation*. Again, respondents are asked to express their level of agreement to three statements regarding demotivation in FL learning online. A total of 75 out of 76 respondents replied to this question. Results are shown in Figure 16.

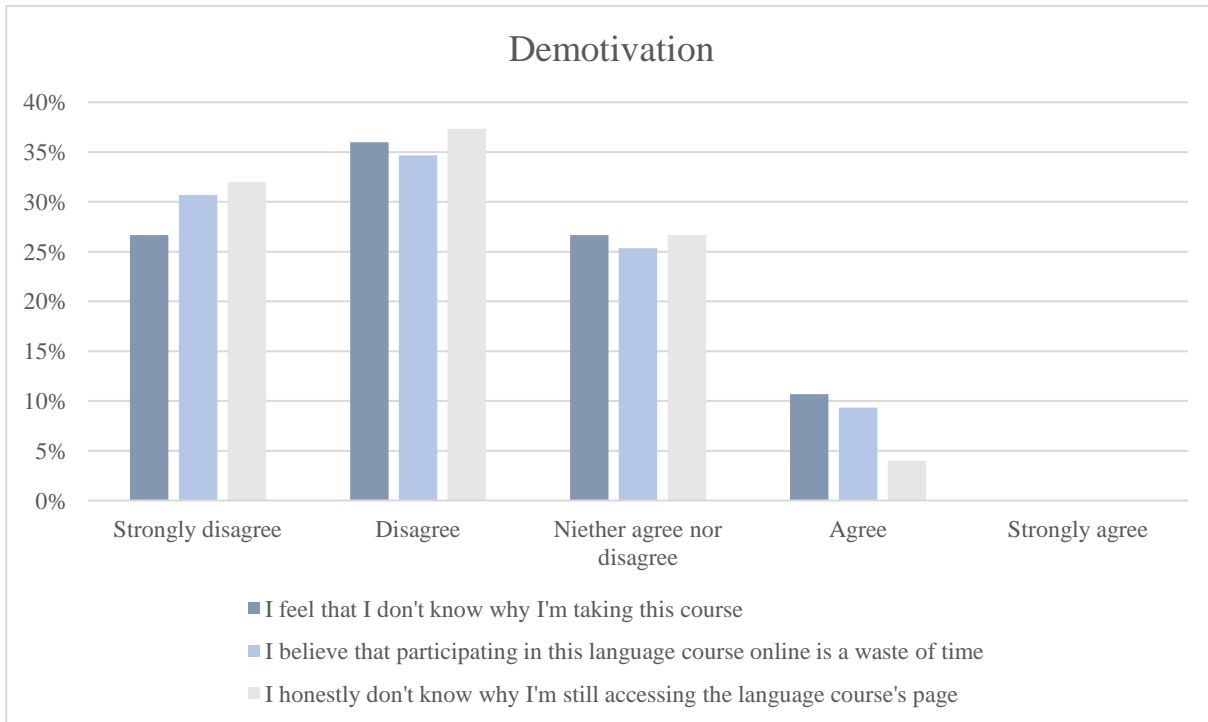


Figure 16 Demotivation

The graph shows that no respondents *strongly agree* with any statement regarding demotivation. However, a minority of them *agree* with the three items, especially with the total lack of control on why they are taking the language course (just above 10%). A similar percentage of responses (just below 10%) was recorded regarding the perception that participating in the language course is a waste of time. Percentages seem to soar significantly among those who are uncertain whether they agree or disagree with the three statements, with the result that all the reported percentages in this category stand around 25%. This is a worryingly high figure considering that this lack of intentionality and personal causation is indicated by a quarter of the total of the respondents. However, most of the respondents replied that they disagree or strongly disagree with the three statements, especially as regards *I honestly don't know why I am still accessing the language course's page*, with more than 37% of the respondents disagreeing and 32% strongly disagreeing.

6.2 Discussion

Autonomous and controlled motivation

As regards autonomous motivation, the results of the questionnaire (Figure 12) show that the respondents demonstrate to personally value the tasks and the activities required in the FL online course, hence they

consciously motivate themselves to participate. Consistently with previous studies (Mobarhan et al., 2014; Reinders, 2014), these results demonstrate that online learning is highly influenced by self-determined behaviour and self-regulated actions; participants in the study feel engaged in the activities because they consciously try to accomplish their need for relatedness, autonomy, and competence. These findings confirm the relationship between the Self-determination theory indicators (perceived autonomy, perceived competence, and perceived relatedness) and the learners' attitudes towards technology-enhanced language learning, as in previous studies (Fathali & Okada, 2017; Beaven et al., 2017; Barnard et al., 2009) studies.

Despite previous studies (Barnard et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2018) have demonstrated that self-regulation has a great impact on students' success and motivation to participate in online activities, in this study students indicate external factors equally significant for their engagement in FL e-learning. According to the Self-determination continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2000), external regulation determines students' compliance with certain norms of behaviour and regulates students' actions based on gaining rewards or avoiding punishment. Since the participants in the research are university students, it seems obvious that their participation in the activities is also determined by external motivations, such as getting credits for their exam or because this is what is expected of them. These findings could be further explored in future research.

Self-efficacy

As seen in previous studies (Bai et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2015; Su et al., 2018), there is a strong relationship between self-determined behaviour and self-efficacy, especially in online learning. However, as has been previously pointed out in Chapter 2, studies seem to have not fully explored the implications of the relationship between self-efficacy and FL e-learning, and findings in this context have produced contrasting results (Alhamami, 2019; Phuttharaksa et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2009).

Findings of the present study demonstrate that students show a high level of self-efficacy, attributing their success or failure in the FL online course to their efforts and capabilities. These results seem to confirm that a high sense of self-efficacy motivates the students to persevere learning, as in Bandura's theory (1997). Consistently with Zheng et al.'s (2009) study, the online learning context seems to influence the development of a positive sense of self-efficacy in the students who rely mostly on their abilities, their control over the learning process, and their effort to succeed in FL learning.

Despite showing a high sense of self-efficacy, these results should be interpreted in the light of other variables, such as goal setting, the shift of attribution, and inadequate feedback, as Phuttharaksa et al.'s (2018) study suggests. These factors might negatively influence students' sense of self-efficacy, as could be assumed from the data regarding feedback in Figure 11.

Attributive styles

According to this study's findings, students learning an FL online appear to attribute their success or failure in the course to dispositional stable and unstable factors; some of them also mention the influence of the teaching style (situational stable factor) on their performance in the FL course. Situational unstable factors, such as luck or bad luck and others' help, are reported as less influential.

As seen, studies on attributive styles in the FL e-learning context and their role on motivation would appear to be scarce. Despite the impossibility of comparing results with previous studies, this study arguably demonstrates that students' engagement in online activities is positively influenced by their evaluation of success which relies mostly on dispositional factors. This assumption is consistent with the characteristics of self-determined and self-regulated students which emerge from data on controlled and autonomous motivation, and on the role of self-efficacy in the e-learning context, as seen before.

Demotivation

Even though most of the respondents in this study expressed disagreement with the statements regarding demotivation, a worryingly high percentage of them showed uncertainty or agreement with the lack of intentionality and personal causation experienced in online learning. These findings are consistent with the data regarding motivation, self-efficacy, and attributive styles: most of the respondents show a highly self-efficacious and self-regulated learning style; in contrast, a minority of them had a less pleasant and successful experience of FL e-learning.

Since the intricate nature of motivation, self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-regulation, demotivation might be considered as the result of more variables, as in Phuttharaksa et al.'s study (2018). According to the Self-determination continuum (Ryan and Deci 2000), demotivation is experienced when there is low autonomy in learning, as well as non-self-determined motivations to participate in the learning process. In the light of the

data discussed so far, it could be argued that a minority of the students perceived a lack of intentionality in engaging in online activities. This assumption is confirmed by the fact that some respondents expressed their disinterest in the FL course they were attending, not to mention the fact that they did not provide full answers to some questions in the questionnaire.

In summary, to answer research question 3, studying an FL online does not appear to negatively affect the motivation to persevere learning. On the contrary, students seem to be overall motivated to participate in the online activities provided they are perceived to be useful, interesting, or significant for developing language skills. Students also seem to develop a high sense of self-efficacy, relying on their abilities and efforts to succeed in online language learning. In line with the Self-determination theory, more self-regulated and self-determined attitudes towards learning stimulate also a more autonomous and self-efficacious behaviour, typically identified in online learning.

Chapter 7 Final remarks

The research reported in this thesis has investigated how FL motivation could be affected by the distance mode of learning during the COVID-19 outbreak in the academic setting. This final chapter first summarizes the main findings of this study as regards the initial motivations given by the students for attending an online FL course and the type of motivation affecting the actual participation in the course, as well as an overall picture of FL motivation in the online setting concerning the sense of self-efficacy and attributive styles. This chapter also presents some pedagogical implications drawn from the results of this research, with a particular focus on providing some teaching tips for FL educators to make the e-learning experience more motivating for the learners. Insights for future research and the limitations of this study are also discussed.

7.1 Synthesis

This study has attempted to investigate and analyse FL motivation in the e-learning context from multiple perspectives. Initially, students' motivations for attending an online FL course were identified (see Chapter 3); then, factors affecting motivation during the actual FL course were investigated, in particular the role of individual and collaborative activities, the sense of self-efficacy, and attributive styles of success and failure (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Findings indicate that students experience a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motives to persevere in FL learning, which seems to be particularly affected by the online learning context brought about by the current sanitary emergency.

The students involved in this study appear to be motivated to initially join an FL course at University either because they must comply with certain norms of behaviour (external regulation) or because they have acknowledged the importance of studying an FL for their personal growth (identified regulation); these motives reflect a mostly external locus of causality according to Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT. Besides, identifying the pivotal role of an FL in their future life shows that the students have evaluated and "brought into congruence with one's other values and needs" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73) the need for studying an FL (integrated regulation).

The tendency of studying an FL for its practicality rather than for enjoyment or general interest in the FL and its culture is mirrored in the data gathered through the questionnaire. The analysis and discussion of the data in Chapter 5 demonstrate that students' motivation to persevere learning in the online environment is related

to their perception of the FL's usefulness. It appears that respondents consider activities to be motivating when they develop important language skills or are perceived to be convenient for the students' prospects, regardless of whether they are conducted individually or collaboratively. Through the content analysis of the questionnaire responses, it appears that the most relevant regulatory processes in participating in FL online activities are the conscious valuing and the congruence with one's values. This demonstrates that despite being externally motivated, students perceive to be motivating those activities that foster relatedness and competence, as well as autonomy, as seen in Organismic Integration Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

However, contrary to what respondents initially claimed, students seem also to value the activities according to their pleasantness. Only a minority of the respondents initially stated that they study an FL because they enjoy learning it; even more contrasting is the fact that none of the respondents seem to study an FL because they are interested in the FL culture (see Chapter 3). But then, analysing the data gathered through the questionnaire, it emerges that students value the activities also in terms of their level of engagement and pleasantness (see Chapter 5). From these findings, it can be understood that while students might not regard the interest in the FL as reason enough for learning it, they seem to find activities' pleasantness an important motivating component of participation in the online course.

This divergence between initial motivations for studying an FL and the questionnaire responses might be explained in terms of the difference between the initial phase before the start of an FL course and the phase during the FL actual course. Once the students engage in the activities their motivation to participate becomes more intrinsic and self-determined. At this stage, inherent satisfaction for doing the activities, as well as interest and enjoyment, seems to partly replace the aspects of self-control and conscious valuing.

The dual-component of FL motivation in e-learning is also reflected in the role of autonomous and controlled motivation on students' participation in online activities (see Chapter 6). Students engage in the online FL activities with the intent of fulfilling their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, thereby relying mostly on their intrinsic motivation to persevere in studying. Alongside intrinsic motivation, respondents also show awareness of what is expected of them as students, that is getting credits and completing their studies (controlled motivation).

Studying an FL online appears to be also fostering a high sense of self-efficacy as students rely mostly on their abilities and their control on the learning process to succeed in their studies. This conscious valuing of the

learning context is also mirrored in the factors to which students attribute their success or failure in FL learning. Students mostly mention stable dispositional and situational factors, disregarding the possible impact of unstable factors on their FL performance. This is indicative of a significant appraisal and arguably understanding of the learning context, in line with the conscious valuing of the FL learning activities mentioned previously.

In summary, consistently with Ryan and Deci's SDT (2000), this study demonstrates that the basic needs for autonomy, relatedness, and perceived competence, typically attributable to intrinsic motivation, are significant also to sustain extrinsic motivation. As will be further discussed in Chapter 7.2, the pivotal role of this research can be seen in identifying some of the conditions that foster the promotion of regulatory processes in FL online learning, which are a direct outcome of this study findings.

7.2 Pedagogical implications

The broad implication of this research is that FL motivation is affected by the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, regardless of what type of activities the students are engaged in. Given this, planning the online activities accordingly, providing effective feedback, and potentially increasing the use of social networking seem advisable. It also appears that FL motivation during the COVID-19 outbreak was not negatively affected by the new arrangement of the academic activities. Students seem to experience integrated and identified regulation when studying online, consistently with previous literature in this field.

Also, students seem to prefer activities that are perceived to be useful for their course of studies or future career prospects, or that meet students' tastes, regardless of the type of interaction required. Contrary to the initial hypotheses, collaborative activities are not preferred by the students. In support of this argument, some of the collaborative activities mentioned in this study are regarded as useless or not so motivating. The analysis of verbatim responses to the open questions revealed a high level of intrinsic motivation for participating in the online course. This further demonstrates that FL online motivation is characterized by a high level of self-regulation and autonomy along the lines of previous literature in this field.

Regarding FL teaching in distance mode, some insights could be derived from the results of this study. It is interesting to note that forum/chat participation appears to be very motivating according to the students' responses. However, it seems that most of the time forum/chat contributions are restricted to homework upload.

Students might benefit from a more meaningful and communicative way of using the forum/chat function on an e-learning platform. For example, a discussion on the relevant FL topics studied could be the incentive to participate more actively and at the same time to feel more involved in the FL activities.

Since autonomy appears to have a pivotal role in FL motivation, students also seem to appreciate an e-learning environment which offers, among other things, opportunities for independent study. In this regard, students participating in this research reported that asynchronous FL lessons are not so frequent in their language courses. Consequently, they might miss opportunities for a more flexible and autonomous form of learning. These findings shed light on the need to make video-recordings of FL lessons available for the students, thus providing them with ample occasions for revising and consolidating course topics.

As seen, students' motivation to learn an FL at University is mostly extrinsic. They value the activities for their practicality and usefulness. What emerges from the questionnaire responses is the need for meaningful activities, related to life-like situations and the students' course of studies, and possibly develop marketable skills. As regards the interaction allowed by the activities, respondents participating in the survey did not show a preference for individual or collaborative work. Nevertheless, they explicitly stated that collaborative activities are motivating when they allow students to co-construct their knowledge in a joint effort rather than activate competitiveness. These findings indicate that FL online learning might benefit from a more cooperative environment which stimulates dialogue and discussion among the students.

To sum up, it is important to note that this research has been carried out during a period of sanitary emergency in which face-to-face learning was completely suspended. With this in mind, several questions remain unanswered, especially as regards the role of FL motivation and its pedagogical implications in the e-learning context once the sanitary emergency is over. This will be briefly discussed in paragraph 7.3.

7.3 Insights for future research

Future investigations are necessary to validate the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn from this study. Interesting research questions for future research could derive from the context of this study, the sample of participants, the type of activities conducted online, and the effects of feedback and attributive styles on students' motivation.

As regards the context of research, this study is set in a unique state of sanitary emergency which has had an impact on students' well-being, also affecting their academic experience and attitude towards academic activities. Future studies might benefit from being conducted once universities return to face-to-face teaching, allowing students to reflect on their FL e-learning experience with hindsight. The possibility of continuing FL courses through blended or online learning even in the future and its effects on FL motivation warrants further investigation. Besides, future research should aim at expanding the sample of subjects, thereby avoiding the sample selection biases detected in this study.

In future work, the use of social networking as a form of communication between the students and the teachers might prove important. Seen as these types of studies are quite numerous and a great variety of social media applications have been explored (as seen in Chapter 2), it could be interesting to investigate how social media applications influence motivation in FL online learning. As regards online feedback, further work is certainly required to disentangle complexities about the effect of clarity and punctuality on FL motivation. These factors could be fully investigated through a specific questionnaire aiming at understanding the impact of online feedback on FL motivation, as well as on academic success.

As studies on FL motivation and attributive styles seem to be scarce to our knowledge, it could be advisable to explore this area further, especially as regards the intricacies between self-determination, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and attributive styles of success or failure in FL online learning. This area of research could be further analysed in a comparative study which explores FL motivation in face-to-face and online learning.

7.4 Limitations of this study

The limitations of the present study naturally include the sampling method and the type of data collected. The randomization of the respondents (as anticipated in Chapter 3) constitutes the burning issue of this research. Since respondents took part in this study voluntarily, the researcher could not monitor the sample, other than asking to read the informative consent and accepting it. Although all the participants have accepted the informed consent, some of them might not have been attending an FL online language course as part of their academic curriculum, thus invalidating the research findings. For instance, one of the respondents replied that he/she uses *Italki* as the main e-learning platform (as seen in Chapter 4). As *Italki* is a commercial website, it

could be argued that the respondent did not attend an FL course at University, but rather he/she paid for tutoring through an FL marketplace.

Besides, the Facebook group pages on which the questionnaire was published, are organized in the form of an exchange between the participants. Students answering a questionnaire expect, in turn, an answer to their survey. This significantly limits the possibility of having many respondents in a short period. Finally, these Facebook group pages are visited only by students or researchers who are employing a questionnaire as the main form of data collection for their research and are looking for suitable subjects belonging to the academic community. This further limits the availability of respondents to those who are doing research in the form of a survey.

Another limitation of this study involves the issue of data collection. As was previously mentioned in Chapter 3, it was not possible to collect significant soft data through the participants' interviews as planned, since only one of them gave her availability to be interviewed. Despite this shortcoming, some soft data was collected through four open questions in the survey, which were then analysed through the procedure of content analysis (see Chapter 5).

The findings of this study can be understood as the basis for future research on FL motivation in online learning, especially as regards the online activities required in an FL course. Broadly translated, our findings indicate that despite promoting autonomous and self-regulated learning, online FL activities need to be perceived to be useful and meaningful to motivate the students. This conclusion follows from the fact that internalised reasons for participating in an FL online course are pivotal for both individual and collaborative activities.

Conclusions

In this thesis, we have faced issues regarding FL motivation in online learning. By using a self-completion questionnaire published online, we tested the hypotheses that students would be more engaged in collaborative FL activities than in individual ones, and that the distance mode of learning would negatively affect students' motivation to participate in the online activities.

The findings of this study can be seen as an attempt to understand how FL motivation in an academic setting can be affected by a total e-learning experience. Despite the limitations, the analysis of the results led to the conclusion that students' motivation in FL learning online is highly self-regulated and self-determined. More generally, these findings are consistent with research showing that the e-learning context provides a more autonomous learning experience characterized by integrated motivation.

Besides, findings provide additional information about students' sense of self-efficacy and attributive styles of success or failure in FL online learning. Results indicated that students seem highly efficacious, believing in their capabilities to succeed in online learning and attributing their success in the language course mostly to constitutional stable factors. The data also indicated that online activities are motivating when they are perceived to be useful and effective, regardless of whether they are individual or collaborative. These findings are consistent with the more integrated type of motivation seen before.

Despite the limitations, these results are valuable considering the pedagogical implications they offer. Importantly, our data seem to indicate that academic FL motivation is deeply affected by students' perception of the activities, as regards their usefulness to accomplish both academic goals and career prospects, or future living arrangements. Nevertheless, students appear to be motivated also by activities' pleasantness and their level of engagement; in fact, these aspects were initially regarded as not decisive to initiate students' attendance in the FL online course. On this basis, educators can consciously plan for FL online learning to prevent students' loss of motivation and lack of control over their participation in the activities.

Appendix A

Section 1 Motivation in online distance environment for foreign language learning

Motivation factors in learning a FL at University in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Section 2 Consenso informato

Gentile studente,

mi chiamo Michela Gronchi e sto conducendo una ricerca nell'ambito della tesi Magistrale in Scienze del Linguaggio del Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e culturali comparati dell'Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

Scrivo per invitarti a partecipare ad un progetto di ricerca dal titolo "Motivation in online distance environment for Foreign Language (FL) learning". La ricerca è supervisionata dalla Professoressa M.C. Coonan.

La ricerca si focalizza sugli aspetti motivazionali relativi all'apprendimento di una lingua straniera online all'Università ed è rivolta a studenti di laurea Triennale e Magistrale di Atenei italiani. Il questionario ha lo scopo di individuare quali attività risultano più efficaci dal punto di vista motivazionale in un contesto di apprendimento di lingua straniera a distanza, ossia in un Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Prima di decidere liberamente se vuoi partecipare a questo studio, compilando il questionario, ti chiedo di leggere attentamente questo consenso informato:

- la partecipazione è completamente volontaria;
- la compilazione richiede 4 o 5 minuti;
- ogni partecipante è libero/a di non continuare la compilazione del questionario in qualsiasi momento;
- i dati raccolti saranno mantenuti strettamente confidenziali e non usati in nessun modo diverso da quanto specificato;
- i dati saranno anonimizzati;
- il tuo nome non comparirà in nessun report o pubblicazione.

Per partecipare alla ricerca occorre:

- essere maggiorenne;
- essere iscritto ad una Laurea Triennale o Magistrale;
- frequentare un corso di lingua straniera in un Università italiana erogato in modalità a distanza;
- aver letto con attenzione tutti i punti precedenti;

Se sei d'accordo con tutti i punti sopra elencati clicca "Avanti".

Section 3 Demographics

-Which age group do you belong to?

- 18-25
- 25-30
- Other

-Where is the University you are attending located?

- In the North-East
- In the North-West
- In the centre
- In the South or the islands
- Other

-Which foreign language are you studying as part of your University course?

- English
- Spanish
- French
- German
- Russian
- Other

-Please rate your current overall proficiency in the foreign language you are studying by ticking only one option.

- Beginner level
- Lower Intermediate level
- Intermediate level
- Upper Intermediate level
- Advanced level

-Why have you decided to study this foreign language?

- I want to use the FL in my future job.

- I want to get a job abroad where the FL is spoken.
- I want to get further education abroad.
- I agree that the FL may be needed in my future life.
- Because it is required by the course plan.
- Because I am interested in the FL culture.
- Because I enjoy learning it.

Section 4 Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

-What type of VLE platform are you using for online learning?

- Google classroom
- Moodle
- Blackboard Collaborate
- Microsoft Teams
- Other

-Which other instruments are you using for online learning?

- Google Meet
- Zoom
- WhatsApp
- Skype
- Emails
- Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)
- Other

-How frequent are the activities listed below in the course you are attending?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
Synchronous lessons with real time communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Asynchronous video lessons	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Forum/chat participation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Individual activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collaborative activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Homework submission	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

-What type of individual activities are mostly required in the language course you are attending on a VLE?

- Written essays
- Written exercises
- Comprehension activities
- Listening exercises
- Forum/chat contributions
- Other

-Which of the above individual activities do you find most motivating and why?

-Which of the above individual activities do you find least motivating and why?

-What type of collaborative activities are mostly required in the language course you are attending on the VLE?

- Completing a shared task
- Problem solving activities
- Group investigation into a topic
- Jigsaw learning (it is a method of organizing classroom activity; it breaks classes into groups and breaks assignments into pieces that the group assembles to complete the task)
- Student team learning in competitive activities
- Other

-Which of the above collaborative activities do you find most motivating and why?

-Which of the above collaborative activities do you find least motivating and why?

-Feedback: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
Feedback from the teachers to my questions and requests occurs within an appropriate time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I receive clear and precise evaluative feedback referring to the activities from the teachers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback from teachers contributes to bringing together teachers and students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Peer feedback is implemented as an opportunity to learn from one another.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Activities of self-assessment are often encouraged to develop students' awareness of their own learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 5 Motivation in language learning online

-Autonomous motivation: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I participate in the online activities because they help deepen my understanding of the contents studied.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I participate in the group activities because they help broaden my knowledge.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe that participating in and tending the course environment are necessary to learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I comment in the debates held for the pleasure of involvement in interesting discussions with professors and colleagues.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

-Controlled motivation: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I participate in the debates and discussions proposed because I am evaluated.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I comment during chats and discussion forums because it is what is expected of me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I participate in the activities because I want to avoid people considering me to be absent or an unproductive student.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I participate in the activities, debates, and virtual meetings because I want to receive credits for my language exam.

-Self-efficacy: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am confident about understanding the course content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am sure that I can do well in my language test after attending the online course.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can learn a foreign language online if I put a lot of effort in.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When online activities are challenging, I feel more motivated to learn.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I rely on myself rather than on others during online learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

-Attribution theory: how much is your success in the course influenced by the factors mentioned below? (rate the factors from 1 to 5 where 1 has little influence and 5 great influence).

	1 little influence	2	3	4	5 great influence
My talent in learning a FL	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My diligence in studying	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My learning method	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The type of subject matter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The style of teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My interest in the FL	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others' help	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Luck or bad luck	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Desire of performing well	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

-Demotivation:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel that I really do not know why I am taking this course.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe that participating in this language course online is a waste of time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I honestly do not know why I am still accessing the language course's page.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 6 Focus group

It is a small group of about 10 people focused on providing their insight about their experience in learning a foreign language in a VLE.

We are planning 2 sessions; you would attend just one which will take less than an hour. Do you think this is something you might be willing to consider participating in? If yes or maybe, please write your email below and you will be contacted shortly.

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