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**Distance Learning and Learner Autonomy: a
case study on the WAATI virtual program of
Italian language assistants**

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Abstract

In the last decade many studies have focused on learner autonomy and its role within the language classroom environment. At the same time, in the last couple of years the Covid-19 health emergency forced many countries all over the world to distance and online learning, with a resulting rediscovery of tools and systems functional for the distance education domain. Up to now, some studies have explored the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, but the number is still limited. As far as post-pandemic research on this matter is concerned, there is no investigation focusing on these two variables. For these reasons, the present work aims at exploring the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, by studying the opinions of teachers involved in the WAATI virtual program of language assistants. The program was held in 2021 for the first time virtually due to the pandemic and served as a case study for this research. The methods and instruments used follow the works of Borg and Al Busaidi (2012) and Rinesko and Kurniawan (2020). Despite the fact that in literature there are several studies highlighting the limits and difficulties of distance learning, in this work distance education is seen in a positive light, in particular as an opportunity to foster students' autonomy. Indeed, the results indicate a positive attitude of teachers towards the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning.

Introduction

In 2020, the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency changed inevitably the world and the reality as we used to know it. As far as the educational domain is concerned, online teaching and distance learning became a necessary resource, with a substantial improvement and rediscovery of ICT tools. This massive and unavoidable resort to distance learning highlighted a number of diverse aspects, both positive and negative, that will hopefully improve the quality and effectiveness of distance learning in the long run. Many are the environments that largely welcomed and benefit from the use of technology for delivering programs, in particular within the higher education domain. For the most diverse reasons university and college students tend to appreciate distance learning, and many of them do not wish to renounce to this new way of teaching and learning. However, how it will be explained in chapter I, distance learning is not something new. Australia in 1910 initiated distance courses for illiterate children living in isolated region of the country. Thus, the aim of distance learning has always been to make possible education for people physically unable to come to class. The substantial inclusivity of distance learning survives among the centuries until today, when the pandemic made it an indispensable tool. The aim of this research is indeed to study possible effects of distance learning on the learner autonomy of students. More specifically, the case study will involve the WAATI language assistants' program in which I had the chance to participate as an Italian language assistant. Hence, the present study, through the usage of a questionnaire, will investigate the perspective of teachers towards the relation between distance language learning and learner autonomy. Other studies have investigated learner autonomy and more specifically the relation between learner autonomy and the usage of ICT, namely Borg and Al Busaidi (2012) and Rinesko and Kurniawan (2020). In particular, the latter study underlines that teacher saw ICT as a tool to promote learner autonomy since it seemed to enhance students' independence and they seemed more engaged with the lesson.

As a matter of fact, WAATI (Western Australia Association of Teachers of Italian) made possible for the first time ever the realization of a program of virtual language assistants. The pandemic made impossible the realization of the program in presence, and the modality adopted was for the first time from remote. This made the program very different from the in-presence modality but at the same time it was more accessible for students who could not afford the travel costs, for instance. However, no previous study has investigated the features of distance language learning and its effectiveness as related to learner autonomy. More specifically, it is not clear whether it would be possible to shift completely the modality of a program of language assistants, from in presence to virtual as the WAATI program did, and obtain overall the same level of satisfaction and perhaps a positive feedback concerning students' learner autonomy. This is indeed one of the purposes of this project: to determine whether a program normally delivered in presence might have an additional value when delivered virtually. The additional value analyzed here is learner autonomy as related to distance language learning. Learner autonomy is a key factor and for this reason it has been chosen as the variable at the center of the present study. Moreover, only few studies have investigated the implications of distance learning on learner autonomy, and what is more not a single research on this issue was carried out after the outbreak of the COVID-19 emergency. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to draw a starting point for further research, since in this study there will be an analysis of the perspective of teachers towards the program and the attitude of students. More specifically, in Chapter I the reality of distance education, online learning and ICT was investigated in depth, in order to create a solid foundation for the research. In the same way, in Chapter II the definition and significance of learner autonomy was explored, analyzing the tie between distance learning and learner autonomy. Chapter III examines in detail Distance Language Learning (DLL) and introduces the WAATI program of virtual language assistants of Italian. The Study, which follows in Chapter IV, outlines the objectives, the participants, the methods and instruments used. The results of the questionnaire addressed to the teachers who participated to the program were explained in Chapter V and discussed in Chapter VI. What emerged from the data collected is an overall positive view on

the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, in compliance with the findings of Borg and Al Busaidi (2012) and Rinekso and Kurniawan (2020). More specifically, results confirm that teachers see ICT and distance learning as an opportunity to foster the autonomy, independence, and responsibility of students over their learning. Although this research investigates a case study, it deepens a field of study still neglected by literature, with great possibilities of development for further research. Suggestions for the future include an extended cross-section of data, collecting feedback from students in addition to the one of teachers. Distance learning is an ongoing field of study and research, with countless possibilities for the educational domain. For this reason, now more than ever, there is a need to take advantage of such means, and to fully use and discover their potentiality.

Chapter I – Distance learning

1.1 Distance Learning, Online Learning, e-Learning: definitions

Traditionally, distance learning is seen as linked to distance education, although the former is to be considered as the ability of learning at a distance and the latter the activity itself (Volery & Lord, 2000 in Moore et al., 2011). The most comprehensive definition of distance learning is provided by Lorraine Sherry in *Issues in Distance Learning* (1995). She classifies the distinctive points of distance learning as the following:

“(…) the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time (Perraton, 1988), the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor (Jonassen, 1992), and noncontiguous communication between student and teacher, mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1986; Garrison & Shale, 1987).” (Sherry, 1995, p. 338).

According to the definition of Dede (1996) found in Moore et al. (2011) an important feature of distance learning would be its usage of emerging media to promote “distributed learning opportunities” (Moore et al., 2011, p. 129-130). That is to say, distance learning allows for a more inclusive type of education, and this was indeed the very real reason behind its birth. Despite the plurality of definitions, the main features of distance learning can be identified as the following: the activity takes place between a learner and a teacher, it occurs in different places or time, and some instructional materials are used (Moore et al., 2011, p. 129-130). With regard to design considerations, Sherry (1995) argues that the characteristics to keep in mind when delivering a program in distance learning are four: interactivity, active learning, visual imagery and effective communication. Interactivity is a key factor for successful distance education; indeed, it involves interactivity on multiple levels: the student must interact with the teacher, the learning environment and his peers (Sherry, 1995). The interaction on multiple level is fundamental in that it allows the system to be reciprocal,

and it avoids distance learning to become independent study and work on the part of students. Active learning is linked to interactivity, but it implies that the learner takes charge of the learning goals and of the process of learning. In other words, the learner has to be an active and willing part of the process of learning (Sherry, 1995). Another important factor within distance education programs is visual imagery: as Sherry (1995) claims: “students must learn to discriminate between *junk* information and quality information, to judge its reliability or bias, to identify distortions and sensationalism, to distinguish facts from persuasion, and to understand how the technology itself shapes the information it carries” (Sherry, 1995, p. 346). The last feature to keep in mind is effective communication. It means that instructors need to be aware of what they want to communicate, in order to expect a certain progress and reaction on the part of students. Multiple authors among which Horton (1994), McLuhan and Sherry (1995), highlight the importance of the message, images or objects used to deliver the program. Instructional materials assume in fact an essential value within distance educational programs. After the spread of the Internet along with new and advanced systems of media, instructional materials and channels for the realization of distance learning have shifted modality, following the trend of new technologies. Indeed, as claimed by Conrad (2006, in Moore et al., 2011) the term *distance learning* evolved to describe also others forms of learning such as online learning, e-learning, virtual learning etc. The aim of this sub-chapter is in fact to draw a clear definition of distance learning, together with two other forms often associated to it: online learning and e-learning.

Online learning is seen by many authors, among which Benson (2002) and Conrad (2002), as a sort of implemented and recent version of distance learning which allows for a nontraditional and disenfranchised learning (Moore et al., 2011). More specifically, online learning can be described as follows: “the access to learning experiences via the use of some technology” (Benson, 2002; Carliner, 2004, Conrad, 2002; Moore et al., 2011). What may be inferred from this definition is that online learning differs from distance learning in that it does not imply necessarily any physical distance in time or space. In other words, online learning means that technology is used as a mean of

education but there is no difference in time or space with regard to the instructor and learner. Thus, technology is the medium of learning and as such it allows for diverse learning experiences and environments. The term *distance* instead, implies a shift in time or space which is not related to the definition of online learning. The impact of the pandemic has certainly implemented technologies associated both to distance and online learning, however, the coronavirus emergency was characterized by *distance* in that there was an impossibility of contact among people. In fact, this research and in particular the following subchapter will focalize on distance learning and its evolution through the years until the pandemic.

Last but not least, e-Learning seems to have not a clear definition, although authors agree on some points. According to Triacca et al. (2004), e-Learning would be a type of online learning, since it inevitably involves technology of some kind in the learning process.(m?) Following the line of Nichols (2003), e-Learning is accessible using technological tools that are “either web-based, web-distributed or web-capable” (Moore et al, 2011). On the contrary, Ellis (2004 in Moore et al., 2011) argues that e-Learning also includes audio and videotapes, satellite broadcast and interactive TV. On this matter there is not a definite and shared point of view, instead, the plurality of definitions and ambiguity of technologies involved, may connect the definitions of online learning and e-Learning. In other words, it would seem plausible to follow the line proposed by Triacca et al. (2004) which sees e-Learning as a type of online learning. However, e-Learning is different from distance learning for the same reason mentioned before for online learning: there is no implication for the teacher and student to be in different places or time when the lesson occurs. This is also the reason why e-Learning and Online Learning may be easily associated.

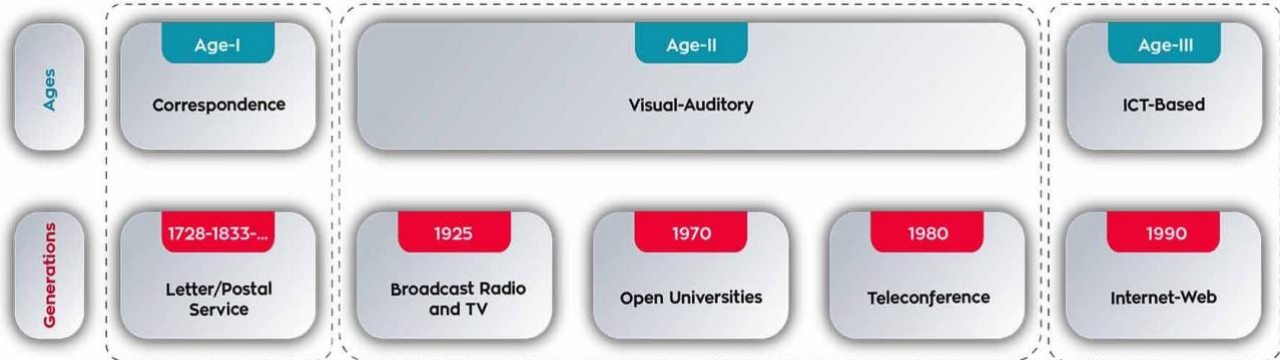
Today, the three definitions seem to have in common one thing: the use of technology as a medium for the learning process. This may have been different in the past for distance learning since it was born in the nineteen century and technology was not fully developed yet. Initially the postal system was used to deliver instructional materials, however, the history of distance learning will be the focus of the next section. To briefly

resume the three definitions: distance learning is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time and the use of printed instructional material or some type of technology (Sherry, 1995; Moore et al. 2011). The main feature of online learning is that it allows the learning experience to happen through the usage of technology. In the same way, e-Learning is based on the concept of technology, either web-based, web-distributed or web-capable (Nichols 2003 in Moore et al, 2011).

1.2 Distance Learning before and after the pandemic

As was briefly mentioned in the previous section, it is important to distinguish between distance learning before and after the outbreak of coronavirus. In fact, as it will be illustrated the pandemic recreated a sort of watershed within the distance education domain, and there was a massive rediscovery of tools and systems typical of distance learning. But first of all, the aim of the present section is to trace back the history of distance education to understand its evolution and progress throughout centuries. Indeed, distance education dates back to the 1700s and 1800s and its first form was the correspondence school model (Harting & Erthal, 2005). At this point comes very useful the classification provided by Bozkurt (2019), in which the history of distance learning is divided into three ages at the macro level and five generations at the micro level (Figure 1.).

Figure 1: Ages and generations of DE (Bozkurt, 2019).



In the first age distance learning takes the name of correspondence study since the learning content was delivered via mail using the postal system. As Bozkurt (2019) outlines efficiently, the instructional materials consisted of written or/and printed material since at that age there was printed technology. The target group of this period is composed of people traditionally left out from formal education, namely women, workers and farmers (Bozkurt, 2019). As a consequence, this form of distance education served well to equilibrate social injustices and rates of illiteracy. As was mentioned before in this chapter, distance education is based on solid egalitarian principle and its purpose was initially to enlarge and make easier the access to education for as many people as possible. Besides, as Bozkurt (2019) argues, the origin of distance education is fundamental in that there would be a connection with critical pedagogy and the begins of globalization. From the historical point of view, the very first record of distance education dates back to 1728, when Caleb Philipps used the mail to advertise shorthand lessons (Verduin & Clark, 1991 in Bozkurt, 2019). Later, in the 1840s Isaac Pitman, an English teacher, decided to use the postal system to deliver his shorthand contents. At that time adult learners were the protagonists of distance education. (Bruschi & Perissinotto, 2020). After Pitman there was a flourishing of distance learning, and in the late 1800s correspondence study spread in America with Anna Eliot Ticknor (Bozkurt, 2019). In 1892 distance learning received academic recognition at the University of Chicago (Bozkurt, 2019), therefore, before the nineteen-century distance learning reached university and college students. In 1910, the Australian public administration gave the go-ahead to distance programs addressed to illiterate children living in isolated region of the country (Bruschi & Perissinotto, 2020). Indeed, in the 1920s, distance education achieved and expanded to the secondary school curriculum (Bozkurt, 2019).

Approaching the visual-auditory age, radio, television and teleconference became the means used to deliver distance education. The transition from postal services to live educational radio reduced the limitations of the first age of correspondence study and allowed the learning process to be more immediate and interactive (Bozkurt, 2019). With concern to the radio, by 1923 more than 10% of radio stations were owned by

educational institutions and therefore used for educational purposes. Following the events reported by Bozkurt in his review (2019), in the 1930s different educational television programs started to be experimented. Later, in 1970 a lesson was wholly presented for the first time on television by Coastline community. During those years, until the end of the 1980s, there was a remarkable progress within telecommunications systems and the growth of satellites and cable television further promoted distance education, and “opened doors for the era of DE” (Bozkurt, 2019, p. 257).

The third and last age is characterized by the presence of ICT and new technologies. With the advancement of learner-centered curriculum and high-quality computer-based multimedia, distance learning increases its efficiency reaching the standards of in presence education (Bozkurt, 2019). As can be observed in detail from figure 2, interactivity and flexibility along with other variables experience a positive shift due to the implement of modalities and characteristics of delivery technologies.

Figure 2: Technology-based characteristics of distance education (Taylor, 2001)

Models of Distance Education and Delivery Technologies	Characteristics of Delivery Technologies						
	Flexibility			Highly Refined Materials	Advanced Interactive Delivery	Institutional Variable Costs Approaching Zero	
	Time	Place	Pace				
FIRST GENERATION							
The Correspondence Model							
• Print	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	
SECOND GENERATION							
The Multimedia Model							
• Print	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	
• Audiotape	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	
• Videotape	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	
• Computer-based Learning (e.g. CML/CAL/IMM)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
• Interactive video (disk and tape)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
THIRD GENERATION							
The Telelearning Model							
• Audio tele-conferencing	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	
• Video-conferencing	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	
• Audiographic communication	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	
• Broadcast TV/Radio and audio-teleconferencing	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	
FOURTH GENERATION							
The Flexible Learning Model							
• Interactive multimedia (IMM) online	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
• Internet-based access to WWW resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
• Computer-mediated communication	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
FIFTH GENERATION							
The Intelligent Flexible Learning Model							
• Interactive multimedia (IMM) online	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
• Internet-based access to WWW resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
• Computer-mediated communication, using automated response systems	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
• Campus portal access to institutional processes and resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	

Bozkurt (2019) in his article stresses the importance of terminology concerning distance education (DE) and open distance learning (ODL). Open distance learning results to be primarily an educational policy (Bates, 2005), and therefore an evolving concept with no precise definition (Bozkurt, Koseoglu, and Singh, 2019; Heydenrych and Prinsloo, 2010). An interesting observation made by Bozkurt (2019) and Bates (2005) is that the term *distance* analyzed in the previous section, has evolved through time and in most cases may involve psychological or social distance rather than geographical or physical distance. This may be particularly true for the latest period of distance education, and even more for the stage tied to the coronavirus emergency.

With regard to the evolution of distance learning during the pandemic, major issues arose within the distance education domain. As noted by Sahlberg (2020), UNESCO estimated that 1,5bn of children were not able to attend school to avoid the spread of the SARS-CoV-2. The pandemic exposed children to inequalities due to the need of computers and advanced technological systems to access distance learning. However, quoting Sahlberg: “It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has not created any new inequalities, but it has certainly made existing ones more recognisable to many more of us” (Sahlberg, 2020, p.360). Moreover, worldwide closures of schools affected more than 100 countries in the world (UNESCO). Besides, as noted by Onyema et al. (2020), there are several concerns about the massive closures of schools, including “possible loss of interests in learning, youth involvement in crimes and poor academic performance” (Onyema et al., 2020, p. 111). Another issue would be the special assistance needed by students with special needs and learning difficulties, who require more guidance and help by the teachers. In distance learning those students tend to be inevitably disadvantaged since they often need a more physical approach for the learning process to be effective. According to the UNESCO¹, among the more adverse consequences of school closures there are:

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences>

- Interrupted learning: children and youth are deprived of learning opportunities, besides, under-privileged learners who have not opportunities beyond school are the most disadvantaged.
- Poor nutrition: many children and youth rely on the meal provided by school, therefore, with school closure nutrition is compromised
- Confusion and stress for teachers: many teachers were not used to distance or online learning before the pandemic, thus, the sudden closure of schools and forced shift to distance learning often provoked stress, anxiety and confusion on the part of teachers.
- Parents unprepared for distance and home schooling: parents in many cases were not used to distance learning or online learning. In some cases, the necessary technological tools and systems needed for distance learning were not available. That is the reason why distance learning during the pandemic accentuated some already existing inequalities.
- Increased exposure to violence and exploitation: with school closures phenomenon such as early marriages, children recruited into militias, sexual exploitations and teenage pregnancies increase.
- Social isolation: this may be considered as one of the most dramatic consequences of closure of schools during the pandemic. Social contact is fundamental in school age, and schools closure prevent children and youth to develop and have in person social activities.

The consequences of school closures have been so devastating because nobody was prepared to a forced transition to distance learning. Nor the modality or the reason for this shift was to be predicted. However, as stated by Sahlberg (2021), the pandemic has shown that schools are much more than a place of knowledge acquisition. Schools are to be intended as a social and cultural environment, where relationships and social activities take place. In his article, Sahlberg (2021) argues that the disruption due to the pandemic may actually help education to become more equitable. The pandemic may trigger new and massive efforts to rebalance inequalities that have recently emerged. A

relevant outcome of the pandemic is the importance of being self-directed in leading and learning. Quoting Sahlberg: “Self-directedness strengthens student engagement, brings about authentic learning and helps schools respond better to emerging inequalities.” (Sahlberg, 2021, p. 17). This aspect is strongly related to the aim of this work, which is to study the relation between distance learning during the pandemic and the autonomy of students.

To conclude, distance learning has a long history before the pandemic. It existed already during the 1700s and evolved from the postal system to the internet and web-based technologies. Unavoidably, COVID-19 emergency caused a disruption within education. Several schools in the world were forced to close, and this led to negative consequences. Distance learning was new and the sudden transition from in presence to distance school was often poorly managed. Inequalities and other problems highlighted in this sub section arose worldwide. However, this disruption accentuates the focus on the importance of education and schools, and efforts to reduce inequalities due to the technological gap have been made (Sahlberg, 2020, 2021). Besides, students’ self-directness and autonomy have emerged to be fundamental characteristics in learning within the pandemic period of distance education.

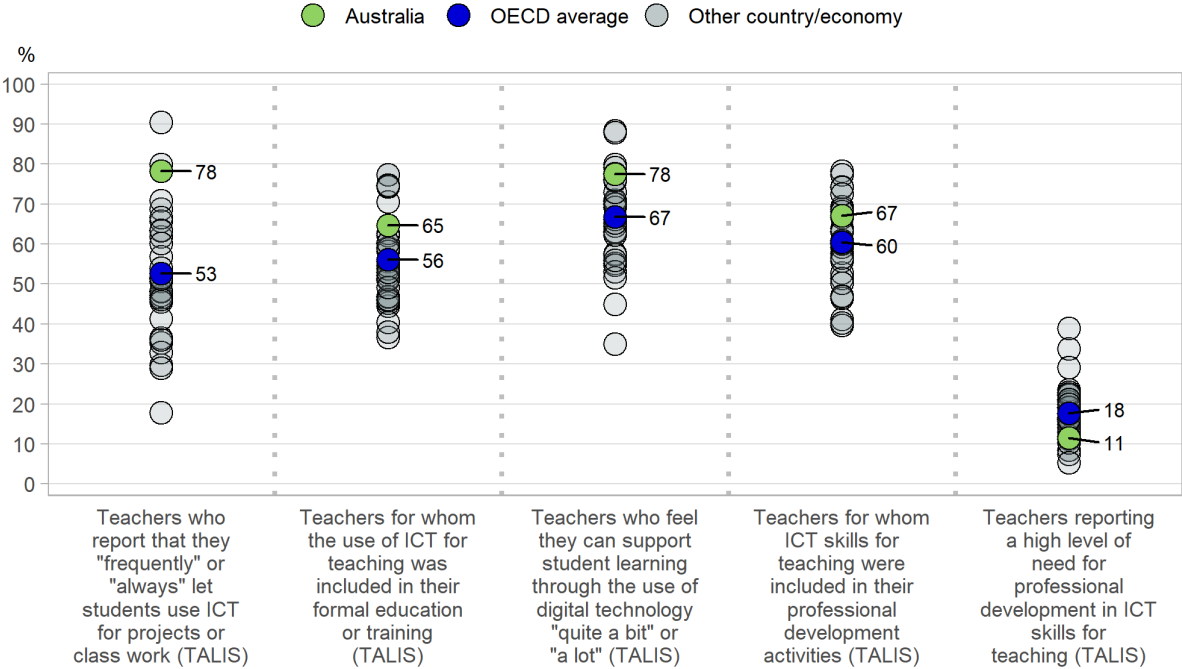
1.3 Italy and Australia: two approaches to distance learning

As already mentioned in this chapter, Australia’s first record of distance learning dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Instead, as far as Italy is concerned, only around 1950 the very real attempt to concretize distance learning was made. More specifically, *Scuola Radio Elettra* was the name of the distance learning Italian model that widespread through all Europe (Bruschi & Perissinotto, 2020). Besides, *Scuola Radio Elettra* was a model addressed to a specific and limited target of people, whose interests was to deepen the domain of electronical devices. Italy and Australia depict indeed two different situations: Australia needed distance learning in order to reach children in isolated regions of the country, whereas Italy had no such need at the time.

For this reason, it may be argued that Italy experienced a harder time when facing the emergency of Covid-19 and the resulting *Dad* (the acronym for *Didattica a Distanza*, meaning distance learning). In addition, while the pandemic caused a massive lockdown of schools in Italy, Australia faced a quite different situation, with extremely reduced lockdowns accordingly to each state and territory. For instance, states such as Victoria and New South Wales experienced more intense closures if compared to the Northern Territory and Western Australia. In Western Australia for example, there was a total of three weeks of distance learning, whereas in New South Wales children were not able to go to school for seven weeks (Sahlberg, 2020). This shift to distance learning brought some positive effects as well as some negative consequences. The increased use of technology to engage students in both synchronous and asynchronous learning is one of the main points emerging with this wave of distance learning. This aspect constitutes what may be called a double-edged sword: it is positive since it allowed for a discovery of new technological tools for teaching and learning but at the same time it created a sort of digital divide and inequalities arose between students who could access technology and those who could not. Sahlberg (2020) in his article “Will the Pandemic change schools” deeply explores the matter of inequalities within the pandemic, claiming that the Covid-19 emergency has indeed exacerbated the preexisting social and educational inequalities. What is important to notice is that countries differ in their readiness to support and embrace digital and more specifically distance learning. As stated by Sahlberg, the shift between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged schools is crucial: “In Australia two-thirds of 15-year-old individuals are enrolled in schools where teachers are ready for integrating digital technologies in their teaching.” (Sahlberg, 2020). This makes the real difference among countries achieving quality in the arrangement and maintenance of distance learning though time: the steadiness of the system in receiving a digital shift of some kind. In comparing Italy and Australia, since the latter is the country at the center of this investigation, what emerges is that Italian teachers overall felt not ready to distance learning, with high percentages in primary and kindergarten schools (82% and 90% of teachers affirm that they were not ready for distance learning, Ciurnelli, Izzo, 2020). This is also true for Australia, but, as the

aforementioned citation from Sahlberg (2020) indicates, Australian teachers were overall ready for an integration of ICT in teaching. Indeed, as can be noticed by figure 3², Australia seems to show high percentages even when compared to OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) average. Thus, the preexisting level of technology integration of each country played an important role with regard to the readiness to embrace distance learning. However, on the part of students, according to Ali (2020) after the adoption of several technological devices in educational institutions such as laptops, projectors, tablets and interactive white boards, the staff members claim that students are particularly happy to use ICT and look forward to technology integrated learning. This willingness of students to integrate ICT in their learning process may be tied to the fact that they are to be considered as digital natives, and the bond with technology is inevitable for such generations of students.

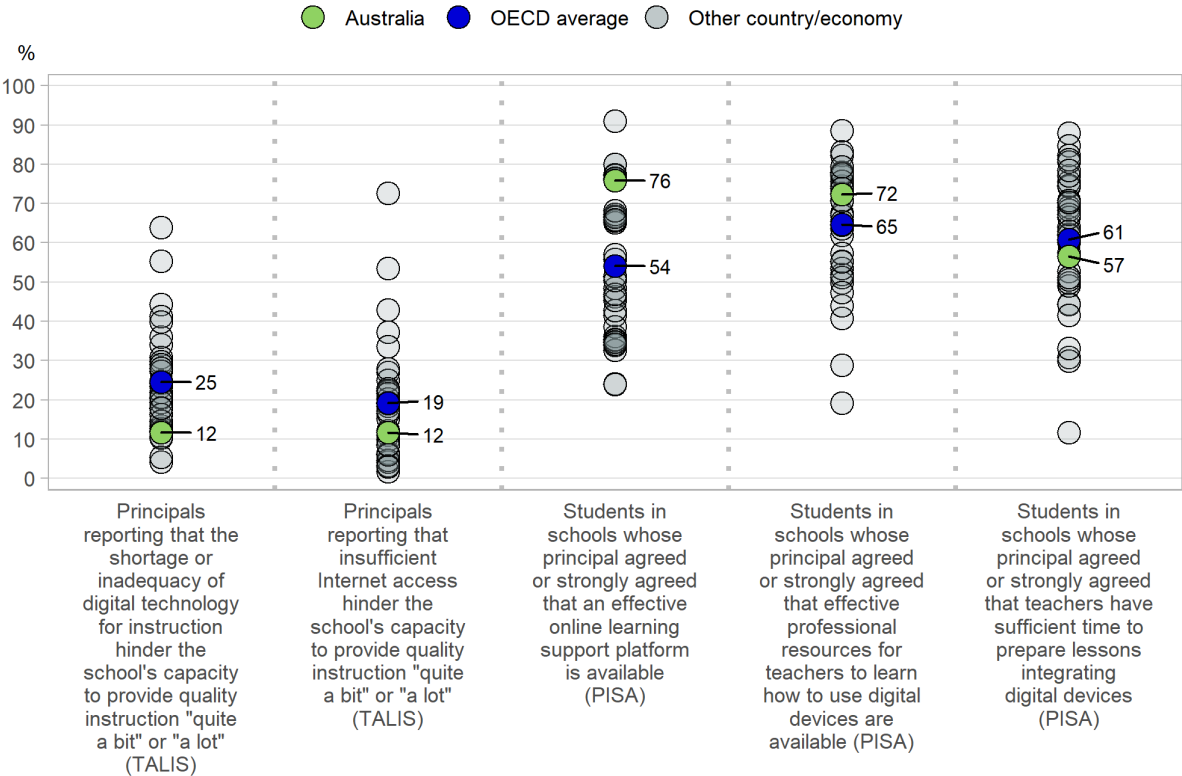
Figure 3: Teachers' preparedness for ICT-based teaching prior to the crisis



² OECD, TALIS 2018 Database.

It may be useful to compare the situation of teachers to the situation of schools and students, as showed in figure 4³. It may be observed that Australian students tend to be quite encouraging towards the use of digital technology for instruction and online learning overall. But most importantly, over than 70% of Australian students agree or strongly agree on the fact that an effective online learning support platform is available in their school, along with the presence of resources for teachers to learn how to use digital devises (figure 4). This is highly indicative of the effective preparedness of teachers and students before the outbreak of the pandemic and the consequent closures.

Figure 4: School and student preparedness for ICT-based learning prior to the crisis.



³ OECD, TALIS 2018 Database and PISA 2018 Database.

To resume, in this subchapter there was a brief analysis of the approach to distance learning of two countries: Italy and Australia. In particular, Australia is at the center of the investigation carried out in this work, thus, the situation of this country before the pandemic was scrutinized in depth. The key factor analyzed was the preparedness of teachers, students and schools to digital integration and ICT usage within the instructional domain. Thanks to the graphics of the OECD report outlined in Figure 3 and 4, it emerged quite clearly that Australia showed a remarkable degree of readiness to online learning and ICT integration before the crisis due to the pandemic. However, no country was truly prepared to the radical shift to distance learning imposed by the outbreak of Coronavirus.

1.4 ICT, media, and distance learning: towards a digital integration

As was shown throughout the present chapter, distance learning seems to be inevitably related to media and ICT. In particular, this connection is evident in the third age of distance learning, characterized by the presence of internet and web-based tools (Figure 1, section 1.2). Thus, the aim of this subchapter is to explore and investigate the relation between technology and distance learning, trying to highlight how ICT and media are or may be integrated within the distance education domain.

According to Mascheroni and Ólafsson's report (2014) investigating the habits of children from six European countries, it appears that smartphones are the most used devices on a daily basis. As expected, the use of smartphones grows significantly with age, going from 28% of children aged 9-12 years old having access to a smartphone to an average of more than 60% of teenagers. Moreover, age constitutes a distinctive feature since younger children tend to use more laptops on daily basis whereas teenagers are more likely to use smartphones (Mascheroni and Ólafsson's, 2014). As far as internet access is concerned, some children are provided with a smartphone that does not connect to the internet, while others have access only to free wifi networks. However, this data seems to be quite variable in that it is differentiated in terms of age and country of

children. Something very important to notice is that school is the second most common context of internet access, in fact many of the interviewees claim to use the internet at school daily (23%) or weekly (36%). The devices that are more likely to be used to access the internet at school are smartphones and tablets; with a higher percentage of teenagers accessing internet. As Mascheroni and Ólafsson's underlines in their report, it is important to consider school as a key environment in which children can be educated and guided to be safe online users, in particular for those children whose parents are not familiar with smartphones and online safety education. With regard to online activities carried out by children, communicative and entertaining activities involving the use of social networks and media sharing platforms are clearly increasing. Once analyzed the relation between media, ICT and students, the question would be whether online learning and digital tools can be successfully integrated in the educational domain. As Michele Baldassarre e Valeria Tamborra outlines in their article "Education with media, education to media. A reflection about the teaching and learning practices with media", using digital and ICT tools in teaching activates creative processes of problem solving and temporarily endures the students' motivation. Besides, it would seem that successful attempts to integrate media in education include a hybrid approach in which technology does not replace traditional tools such as the physical book or notebook. The counter problem however would be that even though learning is initially perceived as easier, in the long run students' motivation and improvement may decrease. Thus, digital learning would experience a sort of stagnation in terms of progress in the long run. An important factor to take into consideration here is the preparedness of teachers and educational environment: as it was discussed in section 1.3 schools needs to be properly equipped for a digital shift and so need teachers to be prepared for an integration of technological tools in teaching. Here comes as vital the figure of site facilitators: their role is extremely important in that they support teachers, families and students in the shift to digital learning. They normally are school employees, not necessarily specialized in the educational domain. On-site facilitators are key figures in that they provide support in the following situations:

- They share their digital and web-based knowledge facilitating the process of developing online learning skills
- They motivate students and monitor their progress throughout the year
- They facilitate communication among families, students, and teachers
- They solve problems related to the internet or online tools, giving advice and support to successfully learn online (Borup et al., 2019).

Hence, the presence of on-site facilitators in an educational environment would certainly implement the success of digital integration.

To sum up, ICT and media seem to be essential to the world as we know it today. In fact, the pandemic accelerated the process that would lead to a digital integration within the educational domain. Certainly, no country was ready to such a sudden shift to distance learning, however, a new awareness was raised. The need of digital integration and online learning in schools has become more evident than ever. A key figure in this process would be the on-site facilitator, a school employee in charge of supporting students, teachers, and families to get acquainted with online learning and technological tools. Thus, the conclusion reached at the end of this chapter is that the winning strategy for the future may be a blended method that would merge online and traditional approach, with teachers and staff highly prepared to face the incoming and unavoidable digital shift.

Chapter II – Learner Autonomy

2.1 What is learner autonomy

The present section is aimed at drawing an exhaustive definition of learner autonomy. More generally, this chapter will be focused on describing the relation between learner autonomy and distance or online learning, as web-based environments. It is not easy to articulate an unequivocal definition of this concept since several scholars tried to explain what learner autonomy really is. Among them, Holec (1981) defines learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec 1981, p.3). This definition has been extensively used within the learner autonomy domain, given the fact that it efficiently encloses the meaning and significance of this concept. In other words, the learner needs to take responsibility of his own learning process (quoting now Benson & Voller, 1997), in order to become fully active and aware within the process of learning. Deci (1996) explaining the meaning of learner autonomy uses the word “commitment” which is indeed a key term to understand the concept. The learner should indeed feel a sense of commitment and willingness towards the activities entailed in the learning process. The ability to create and elaborate a positive and active attitude when facing a learning environment constitutes learner autonomy. Hence, an autonomous learner is able to set the basis for a lifelong learning and personalize learning by making more effective and motivating the whole learning experience. Once illustrated the many facets of this concept, it may be useful to pause on the implications of this definition. As noted by Little (n.d.) autonomous learners are motivated learners: they are supposed to be aware of the fact that success depends on themselves and not on other people. According to Menegale (2015, 1013) indeed, motivation is one of the most important factors influencing learner autonomy: if it is true that an autonomous learner is a motivated learner is also true that motivated learners tend to be more autonomous. That is because learner autonomy plays a role on the level of intrinsic motivation rather than on the extrinsic one. That is to say, intrinsic motivation involving personal reward and

satisfaction is the one that should be propped and influenced by the development of learner autonomy. Another factor influencing learner autonomy is metacognition, meaning the full awareness implied in learning how to learn. This aspect is crucial in that it entails a certain level of awareness throughout the whole process of learning, from the aim and the procedures to the strategies adopted to carry out the activities (Menegale, 2015, 2013). The third factor involved in learner autonomy is self-efficacy, which would be “the believes that individuals have about their capabilities to complete a particular task successfully” (Bandura, 1995). The last aspect influencing learner autonomy is central to this matter: attributions. In other words, the success or failure in learning have to be attributed to certain elements rather than others, in order to be fruitful in terms of learner autonomy. Here comes in use Weiner’s attribution theory, that is, the importance of the locus of control. Therefore, the success or failure in a given activity is to be attributed to the factors over which there is some level of control, namely effort. Factors such as luck, ability and task difficulty are instead uncontrollable, and no attribution must be given to them. In other words: effort is under the control of the learner, whereas all the other elements aforementioned are not. If the chance to have a positive result in a given activity is attributed to the task difficulty or luck for example, the learner will not have any control over these factors, with a resulting sense of powerlessness. This is the reason why attributions are so important: rely on each one’s own effort is fundamental to become an autonomous learner. To resume, there are four factors that play a central role in learner autonomy: motivation, metacognition, self-efficacy, and attributions. But how is it possible to translate these theoretical concepts in concrete models and strategies to develop learner autonomy in learning environments? There are indeed several models based on the works of the main authors of the field, namely Holec (1981), Nunan (1997) and Little (2001). What these models have in common is the importance of taking decisions concerning the whole learning process (from the objectives to the methods and final evaluation), together with an effort to raise awareness, interest and involvement in the learners. More specifically, Nunan’s model underlines the central and proactive role of the learner, achieving at the end the final stage of transcendence (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Nunan, 1997, p. 195 in Dang (2012)

Level	Learner Action	Content	Process
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using.	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies.
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer.	Learners make choices among a range of options.
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and contents of the learning program.	Learners modify/adapt tasks.
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives.	Learners create their own tasks.
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the class- room and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world.	Learners become teachers and researchers.

The reflection upon each one's own learning, including the expectations, and the self-assessment of the understanding are as well fundamental in terms of learner autonomy. Consequently, an autonomous learner is a good and successful learner.

So far, the significance of learner autonomy has been underlined in many respects, but what is missing is a close view to the teachers and students' perspectives on autonomy. Benson (2008) focuses on this matter in his chapter in "Learner and Teacher Autonomy. Concepts, realities and responses", arguing that autonomy in learning is inevitably based on a broader concept of autonomy, seen as *personal autonomy*, beyond the classroom environment. More specifically, the point of learner autonomy shifts from the learning context to become an issue of moral and political philosophy, being autonomy present in every aspect of life. Hence, if the intention is to make students' autonomous learners, then this can mean either to help them becoming autonomous as individuals, or to propose activities aimed at making them act autonomously. This is a dilemma introduced by Boud (1981, found in Benson, 2008) that teachers tend to face when dealing with autonomy in learning. It is evident now that the point of view of teachers towards autonomy may not be that linear and straightforward. As a matter of fact, the claim made by Benson (2008) is that from the teachers' point of view autonomy concerns primarily classroom-based learning within the curricula. Instead, the learners' perspective on autonomy is intended as a more general issue, including leaning and life outside the classroom. A more practical investigation on teachers' perspectives has been carried out by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), whose research explores English language teachers' beliefs and practices towards learner autonomy. Their work is vital to this paper since the questionnaire employed within the case study under examination here is based on the first part of their questionnaire. In particular, the results of their investigation highlight the fact that teachers have a positive attitude towards learner autonomy, but most importantly there was no references to the long-term benefits of autonomy outside the classroom, in accordance with Benson's (2008) claim. Later in this research there will be an analysis of teachers' perspectives towards learner autonomy in general and on this concept in relation to distance and online learning. Indeed, the case study is to be intended as a mean to verify the terms of the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, as it will be anticipated in section 2.4. To resume this first part of chapter II, the definition of learner autonomy was outlined, highlighting different scholars' views, and analyzing the factors influencing autonomy.

Teachers' and students' perspectives on autonomy has been explored, following the line proposed by Benson (2008). The meaning of learner autonomy may be summarized by the idea of students engaging and taking responsibility over their own learning process, but as it will be shown in the next section, this concept assumes even more significance within the context of language education.

2.2 Language Learner Autonomy

The present section will investigate and deepen the domain of language learner autonomy, given the fact that the concept of learner autonomy is often related and applied to language learning (Little, 2007). In addition, this work will focus on the delivery of a language program online, thus language learner autonomy is a key issue to analyze within the context of this research. Learner autonomy should be seen as positively related to the level of target language proficiency, since they are “not only mutually supporting but fully integrated with each other” (Little, 2007, p. 15). The good language learner has a strong drive to communicate, practices, monitors own and other's speech, and makes memorization meaningful, among the other things. These characteristics are essentially related to learner autonomy, besides learner autonomy incite intrinsic motivation, which is fundamental to make effective the learning process. As explained by Little (2007) in his article “Language Learner Autonomy: Some Fundamental Considerations Revisited”, language learning involves multiple attempts to communicate, with the majority of theories presupposing the presence of an input, interaction and output. Often, in the traditional classroom environment, language learners tend to play a passive role, not interacting as much as needed to reach a good level of proficiency and self-confidence. Instead, the efforts to communicate in the target language play an important role and contributes to the consolidation of learner autonomy. At his point Little explains that the development in language learning is driven by three pedagogical principles, which are the following:

- **Learner involvement:** learners need to share responsibility of different aspects of the learning process, namely activities, materials, settings and evaluating learning outcomes. The teacher performs an important role in this stage since learners will need guidance in the process of gradually taking charge of their own learning.
- **Learner reflection:** at the same level of learner involvement but to be looked at as a different path, learner reflection comprehends a certain degree of awareness on the part of learners within their own process and content of learning. This means that critically thinking of what they are doing and learning is meaningful and necessary to become autonomous learners. Thus, this can mean to create a dialogue between teacher and students, or between students themselves.
- **Appropriate target language use:** this last principle implies that the target language must be considered as the preferred medium to communicate in the classroom. In other words, language learning is effective when the target language becomes the medium within the classroom environment.

Therefore, in practice the language teacher may adopt and maintain an approach aimed at enduring and activating learners' autonomy, following the pedagogical principles exposed by Little. More specifically, what the teacher can do is using the target language as much as possible, both as medium and as the target of any given activities. In addition, students need to be helped and guided in the process of monitoring their learning, choosing tasks and evaluating their progress (Little, and Dam, 1998). Lastly, interaction is to be considered as a key element in the process of input-interaction-output, which is essential for the process of foreign language acquisition. In fact, proficiency in any given foreign language is, among the other things, the result of an interactive process (Little, 2007). As already mentioned above, learner autonomy is possible when teacher autonomy is also present and developed, otherwise students will not be provided with the necessary support and guidance. Apparently, learner autonomy and language learning are two sides of the same coin. In this section the concept of language learner autonomy was explored, following the line proposed by Little and Dam (1998). What

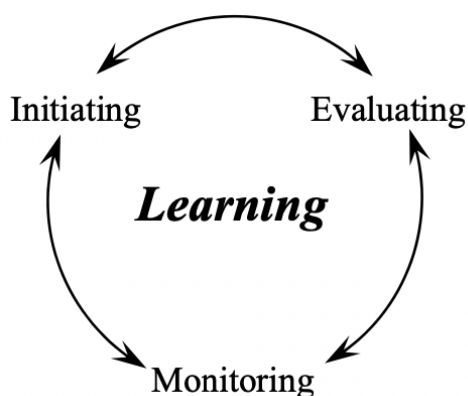
emerges from this analysis is that within foreign language acquisition learner autonomy is functional for the success of learning. In the following subchapter, the focus will shift to the relation between learner autonomy, ICT, online learning and distance learning.

2.3 ICT, distance learning, online learning, and learner autonomy

This section will dive into one of the most significant issues of the current research, namely the relation between ICT and learner autonomy. This is a core question since the investigation carried out in this work will specifically explore the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning. In chapters IV, V, and VI the case study at the center of the investigation will be analyzed and the results, together with the discussion, will hopefully shed some light on this matter. However, the research up to now seems to highlight a gap in the knowledge with respect to the relation between learner autonomy and ICT. Some studies have been carried out, but they tend to focus on specific online programs such as CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) or on Web 2.0 as related to social media content and platforms. As a matter of fact, the former study proposes that in order to promote learner autonomy the appropriate language curriculum would be object-centered, (Blin, 2005). That is, a concrete collective object is more likely to stimulate learner autonomy if compared to a more abstract one. For instance: proposing a specific assignment is more effective if compared to more theoretical instructions. Besides, the importance of collective tasks is a functional aspect in that it enables students to set a common objective. Lastly, according to the findings of her research, Blin (2005) argues that the mediating components within the learning activity are essential to enhance learner autonomy. In other words, setting explicit rules and organizing the division of work and assignments is significant to the extent of promoting autonomy and independence within the learning environments. It would seem that these findings are in line with the study carried out by Morgan (2012) on learner autonomy and the potential of Web 2.0 tools for language learning. In fact, in his study the importance of explicit teaching is underlined, together with the importance

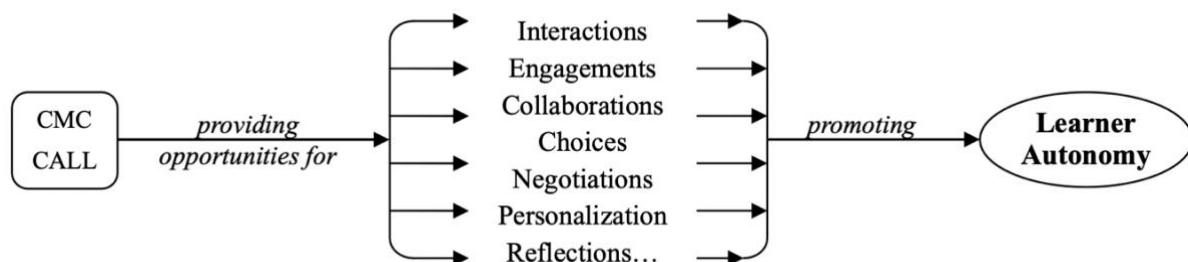
of confidence on the part of students in order to effectively use the target language using the tools of Web 2.0 as a medium of communication (Morgan, 2012). What the teacher can do is encouraging students to self-monitor their learning through the use of a diary, and to set their learning objectives through assignments. It is important to notice that the preexisting students' mastery and literacy of Web 2.0 tools was not only adequate but also meaningful to the development of learner autonomy. Integrating the use of ICT in the language classroom increases the level of awareness of student' preexisting literacy. As argued by Morgan (2012), this investigation highlights the multi-dimensionality of the process of learner autonomy within the language classroom, and brings new potential to the field. More evidence of this comes from Dang & Robertson (2010), whose research delve into EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and the employment of a web 2.0 Learning Management System within a higher education environment. What emerges from this investigation is a three cyclic relationship involving students ability to initiate, monitor and evaluate their own learning process (Figure 6). These abilities represent the three features displayed by an autonomous learner, and it would seem that CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and in general ICT may bring several potential benefits to learner autonomy. Certainly, the relation between learner autonomy and the virtual and web-based reality needs to be kept under observation (Dang & Robertson, 2010).

Figure 6. The cyclic relationship of the three intertwined processes of learner autonomy found in Dang & Robertson (2010).



In order to clarify the benefits of ICT and the programs just mentioned to promote learner autonomy it may be useful to have a look at Figure 7. As can be noticed, CMC and CALL provides the chance for a number of actions such as interacting, engaging, personalizing and reflecting which are functional to promote and maintain over time learner autonomy.

Figure 7: The relationship between CMC and learner autonomy in EFL education Dang & Robertson (2010).



Another paper by Ting (2015) proves that digital literacy acquired by students outside school can implement learner autonomy within the school learning environment. This means that with the new generations of digital natives ICT assumes even a more significant role if compared to the past. The last investigation examined in this section is aimed at exploring the teachers' view on the matter of learner autonomy and its relationship with ICT. The research is conducted by Aji Budi Rinekso and Eri Kurniawan (2020), and it is of great importance within this context since part of the questionnaire used for this work derives from the questions addressed in their investigation. What is interesting in their study is that along with an analysis of the teachers' understanding of learner autonomy, there is an insight of teachers' actions to promote learner autonomy using ICT within the language classroom. This includes matters of self-regulation such as finding topics on the internet, or choose collectively apps or games for learning and using ICT to motivate and engage students. The results from this analysis confirm that teachers, and more specifically in this case English teachers, have a good understanding of learner autonomy and a positive attitude towards the use of ICT within the classroom environment to promote learner autonomy. As a

matter of fact, the key point of my work is not only to confirm those results but also to test the functioning and development of learner autonomy within a language assistant program delivered remotely for the first time ever. Moreover, the studies mentioned in this section concerns higher education, while the present research explores the perception of teachers from primary and secondary school.

To resume the contents of this chapter, the definition of learner autonomy was given, and in section 2.1 the concept of language learner autonomy was further explored. Learner autonomy as the ability to take charge and awareness of one's own learning has been connected to ICT by a number of studies analyzed in this last section. As a result of those research, the level of learner autonomy of students seems to be positively related to the use of ICT or web-based technologies. The importance of these findings is vital to the purpose of the present work.

Chapter III – Delivering a Foreign Language Online

3.1 Distance Language Learning: Perspectives and Organization

Distance Language Learning is essentially related to the purpose of this work. As it will be explained in sections 3.3 and 3.4, the investigation carried out here will explore the reality of virtual language assistants, consequently distance language learning (called DLL from now on for reasons of convenience) is functional to this extent. As claimed by White (2010), technology-mediated learning environments are destined to grow significantly in number. In fact, the crisis due to the pandemic of Covid-19 and the rapid development of web-based systems contribute to the growth of this compelling need. However, Hiple and Fleming (2002) discussing the definition of Keegan (1990) agree on the fact that there are two key features to analyze in order to define distance education, apart from the separation in space of learner and instructor. Namely, communication must be *electronically based*, and it must be *bi-directional* (Hiple and Fleming, 2002). This last aspect of bidirectionality is fundamental since, as argued by the authors, it is the only appropriate modality to promote effective and valid language instruction. Anyway, interaction within distance education is a crucial aspect to promote, as already highlighted in chapter I. Focalizing the attention on the role of *language* in distance education, Stella Hurd (2006) with her article “Towards a Better Understanding of the Dynamic role of the Distance Language Learner: Learner Perceptions of Personality, Motivation, Roles and Approaches” shed some light on this matter. Firstly, she underlines that DLL is a matter of the last decade, probably because languages are particularly difficult to approach virtually. Language learners, especially, need to be autonomous and self-regulated, also the assessment of language speaking skills turns to be tedious in distance mode. Among the other things, the findings of the research conducted by Hurd (2006) highlight the importance of motivation when learning a language in distance modality. Indeed, DLL is regulated and depends on a multiplicity of factors, namely:

- Motivation: according to Gardner's socio-educational model mentioned in Hurd (2006), motivation within language learning can be *integrative* i.e. the learner wishes to be integrated to the target culture, and *instrumental* meaning that the desire to learn the language comes from academic or work-related aspirations (Hurd, 2006). This distinction may be correlated to Deci and Ryan's (1985) model based on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation was already considered in this work, more precisely in chapter II in relation to learner autonomy. Extrinsic motivation is correlated to factors peripheral to the individual (e.g., a reward or parent's approval), whereas intrinsic motivation comes from inside: students' inner desire to learn something, just because they want to. Normally, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are often combined, but with regard to language education and DLL, intrinsic and integrative motivation have a particularly important role.
- Self-regulation: this aspect may seem quite similar to learner autonomy; in that it implies a certain degree of autonomy in the stage of control and management of the learning process. More specifically, self-regulatory behaviors include monitor the motivation, actions and strategies adopted throughout the whole process of learning. Several studies have demonstrated that self-regulated students are more likely to have positive outcomes especially in online courses (Lin et al. 2017).
- Personality: the link between personality and L2 or FL is as well very important within the perspective of distance language education. According to Dörnyei (2005) personality constitutes a crucial variable in the learning process, especially in SLA. With regard to language education and DLL, an example of how much personality can influence the learning process and outcomes may be the performance of students with speaking and writing activities. More extroverted students will not have problems to interact, while others can find speaking skills particularly hard to develop.

- Strategies: DLL strategies are a fundamental factor in students' success within the whole learning process. Language learning strategies have been extensively explored, but DLL strategies are still a domain to discover and deepen. There are indeed some strategies particularly appropriate for online or distance learning: for instance, the use of highly fragmented learning modules, so that students can interiorize the concepts in a more effective way (Kukulka-Hulme, Shield, 2008). More specifically, as argued by Trifonova and Ronchetti in their article "Where is Mobile Learning going?" (2003) modules should be short, around 5-10 minutes and users should ideally spend the waiting time learning by doing quizzes or forums or reading on their mobiles. Another efficient strategy to be used in DLL is the audio-visual stimulation and consequently the combination of visual imagery and written text. According to Sydorenko (2010) the usage of video can implement the students' vocabulary knowledge, besides visual material is a useful type of input since it is authentic and crucial to reinforce and recall preexisting vocabulary.

Once clarified the perspectives and factors influencing DLL, it will be now explored the facet of organization. The delivery of a program of DLL has many variables, one of them is the choice between asynchronous and synchronous modality. While the former implies the use of materials i.e. videos or recorded lesson and tools such as websites, forums or e-mails, the latter has live lessons as its essential tool. In other words, the distinction between the two is based on the variable of real-time interaction. With regard to the language field, the synchronous modality allows for a greater level of interaction which is crucial for the learning process to happen successfully. On this level, the issue of socialization is significant too in that within a synchronous environment it would be possible to engage more students and conduct group activities. For example, zoom.us allows for breakout rooms to be supervised by the organizer. However, activities of peer-tutoring and peer review are possible also with the asynchronous modality. The *flipped classroom* may be considered as a valid compromise since it is a blend of asynchronous and synchronous, more interactive learning. A study conducted by Young et al. (2014)

confirms that this model is positively received by the interviewees, with a preference for small groups activities. Thus, hybrid models of e-learning may be the solution to integrate both modalities, obtaining efficient results in terms of learning and organization of the course.

In conclusion, the success and modalities of DLL depend on many variables, as it was outlined in this section. Indeed, motivation, self-regulation, personality and strategies influence substantially DLL in multiple ways. In addition, the organization and choice between the synchronous and asynchronous modality is significant in that it allows for different levels of interaction and dynamism.

3.2 Distance Language Learning during the Covid-19 health emergency

Nowadays, the spread of Coronavirus is still influencing and modifying society as we used to know it. In particular, the pandemic forced teachers and learners to drastically change their way to teach and learn. In many cases, the change in methods, instruments and activities was totally sudden and unexpected. Thus, in this section it will be explored the impact of the pandemic on the world of Distance Language Learning (DLL). According to Maria Vittoria Lo Presti (2020), whose study investigates the dimension of language courses for language certifications, there were three main issues to deal with when lockdowns were announced:

- **Continuity:** when schools were forced to sudden closures there was a desire to maintain a certain level of continuity in terms of what was the routine performed when the language course was delivered in presence.
- **Contents:** the issue of contents was particularly relevant in that it was essential to understand how the contents could be adapted to distance learning.
- **Activities and materials:** this third issue is different from the content issue since it is orientated towards the stimulation of motivation and interest of students. Given the fact that the course was delivered remotely, it was difficult to elaborate

activities and materials that could efficiently stimulate the interest of students within the distance mode (Lo Presti, 2020).

All these issues needed to be solved in order to properly manage and articulate DDL during the Covid-19 health emergency. In fact, what made difficult the overcoming of the crucial aspects listed above was the lack of time for preparing students and most of all teachers to the shift to the distance modality. The shift was so sudden and unexpected that was quite hard to guarantee continuity, on the same level, there was not the necessary time to adapt contents, activities, and materials in a proper manner. However, with the passing time the educational system gradually adjusted to new digital tools, materials and activities, reinventing the traditional approach. This modification was quite revolutionary and highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of DLL and Distance learning in general. For this reason, what will follow is an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of DLL as it was conceived with the breakout of the pandemic in March 2020. For reasons of clarity and convenience will follow a bulleted list for both aspects.

Strengths of DLL

- Increased use of technology to engage students in both synchronous and asynchronous learning, for instance taking advantage of tools such as kahoot, quizlet, education perfect and flipgrid.⁴
- The chance to connect with native speakers and online tours – (e.g. virtual language assistants, virtual tour of museums or landmarks).
- Saving time for teachers for using online submission tools which efficiently assess student's work providing data; for example, some tools are education perfect, quizizz, socrativ, edpuzzle and seesaw.
- Saving time and money for students and teachers more generally, especially for commuters.

⁴ Some of the tools were suggested by one of the teachers' participating to the WAATI program of language assistants.

- An increased use of technology within the classroom may also constitute a further connection with students who are usually familiar with ICT.
- Inclusivity: students who cannot be physically present in the classroom for the more diverse reasons can take advantage of online language courses.
- The possibility to create interactive digital contents to stimulate the interest and motivation of students (e.g. using videogames or audio-visual material).

Weaknesses of DLL

- Risk of social isolation, both of teachers and students.
- Reduced levels of face-to-face interaction.
- Need of high levels of autonomy and self-regulation in students, in order to be motivated and engaged with classes and homework.
- Digital fatigue.
- Content and activities adaptation for virtual modality may be time-consuming for teachers.
- The need of adequate tools and internet network for students and teachers. This point may be seen as the downside of inclusivity: technology is not always accessible to everyone.
- Not all teachers and students are technologically-savvy, consequently an on-site facilitator would be needed in many situations (see section 1.4 for details on this figure).
- The mediation of a technological related tool within the learning process makes way more difficult to motivate and engage students, for this reason with distance education students would need an action of self-motivation.

As can be noticed, some points constitute two sides of the same coin: for instance, DLL is inclusive in one sense, being available for those who cannot move from their house, but at the same time it is not inclusive since not everyone can afford the necessary technological tools. On the same way, creating digital material and using web-based

tools can be initially stimulating for students since it is closer to their everyday world, but in distance learning it is also more difficult for teachers to create connections with students and to motivate them. What may be argued is that in the very first stages, online learning may be appealing and effectively working for students; but in the long run they will probably lose interest and motivation (Baldassarre and Tamborra, 2020). However, it is inevitably difficult to draw some clear and definitive conclusions on DLL.

In the next section of this chapter the focus will shift on the program at the center of the investigation carried out in this work, namely WAATI and the language assistant program.

3.3 WAATI, the role of language assistant, in presence and virtual modality of the program

WAATI is the acronym for Western Australian Association of Teachers of Italian. It is a nonprofit organization representing all the teachers of Italian in WA. WAATI aims to promote the Italian language and culture throughout WA, both at the level of teaching and learning, in institutions of all levels (higher institutions, primary and secondary schools). In doing so, language assistants are indeed a fundamental resource for the organization since one of the main tasks of language assistants is to give a fresh and better view on costumes and life in Italy. But first of all, it may be necessary to clarify the role of the figure of the language assistant. According to Lyndsay Buckingham (2018), whose article investigates the reality of language assistants in bilingual classrooms, language assistants are not teachers, but rather assistants supporting the teacher in daily activities. More specifically, language assistants (abbreviated with LA from now on) collaborate with the teacher thanks to their cultural knowledge and stimulate students' interest towards the foreign language and culture. Other tasks include the preparation of material and resources to be used in classroom, helping students especially with regard to their oral skills, and assist the teacher during classes. However,

the LA should never substitute the teacher (Buckingham, 2018). It is now clear that the aim of the LA is to sustain and support the teacher in a wide range of activities, in particular improving the oral skills of students and giving insights on the target language's culture and customs. As can be noticed, the LA is a fundamental resource for the language classroom environment, both as a great support for the teachers and help for the students. From this premise, in 2012 the WAATI program of language assistants started, initially in collaboration with the Università del Sacro Cuore in Milan which provided aspiring Italian language assistants. LAs choose to participate to the program on a voluntary basis, in many cases as an internship in accordance with the university, and they were provided accommodation from a host family chosen by the school.⁵ Indeed, WA schools needed to apply for an assistant and they provided accommodation in a host family for all the duration of the term. Here may be useful an account provided by one of the teachers, Lynne Rockliff, who also hosted many LAs over the years:

“Hosting an Italian Assistente has probably made the biggest change to the Italian program at my schools. (...)

These young, enthusiastic and outgoing people took on any and every job imaginable from helping prepare lessons, to running small groups, to writing songs for the junior children, to sourcing suitable material on the net, to marking work, to giving oral language models and practice, to teaching songs and games, to ... the list is endless. They also involved themselves with the school community in general, joining in staff functions and extra-curricular activities with the students. Nothing was ever too much to ask!

And the difference for the kids was amazing! Suddenly Italian was very real and present! There were young people who lived there and who were happy to chat about how things are in real Italy! Young people who understand the world bigger than the local school, where knowing another language is normal and required. Young people who like things similar to the kids, but who can function in more than one language! There were always many tears when the assistenti had to go – all round – kids, teachers and assistenti!”

⁵ All the technical information is taken from the official site of WAATI: <https://www.waati.com.au/assistenti/>

Lynne Rockliff 2012 – 2014⁶

As can be noticed, the program brought several benefits to the local communities, from the most diverse point of views. Students tended to be more motivated, and they felt a real connection with the language they were studying. Many of the local communities were outside the cities, in the Australian outbreak. Thus, in cases of small communities the benefits brought by the program were even amplified. This is how the program was managed and delivered when it was “in presence”, namely before the pandemic. In fact, when in 2020 the breakout of the Covid-19 health emergency happened, travelling became quite difficult, and the situation seemed not to stabilize in months. More specifically, in Australia regulations tied to borders and access to the country were particularly strict. For these reasons, at the end of 2020 the WAATI activated the virtual mode, giving birth to a completely new modality of the program. The number of hours for each assistant remained unchanged between the two modalities, with 20h of work per week. However, these hours could not be spent in the classroom with the virtual modality, so part of it was spent creating material and activities for students, or else correcting students’ written productions. The management of the hours for each assistant depended on the teacher, who could choose whether she preferred to have live lessons with the LA every day or if she needed more materials and activities to be prepared by the LA. For this reason, with the virtual modality the experience could be very different for each language assistant, and the management of the time of work was rather flexible. In the section that will follow the virtual modality and its delivery will be described in detail, with evidence of activities and tasks created.

⁶ Taken from the official website of WAATI: <https://www.waati.com.au/assistenti/>

3.4 The virtual modality of the program and its actual delivery

The WAATI program of virtual language assistants started with its very first official meeting between assistants and coordinators on the 6th of January 2021. The first meeting was composed of the fourteen language assistants who participated to the first virtual program, together with the coordinator of the program and president of WAATI, Laura Bava, and the secretary of the WAATI and Italian teacher Megan Delport. The fourteen assistants came from diverse and several higher institutions, namely University Ca' Foscari of Venice, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan and from different typologies of degrees and backgrounds. The program involved thirteen primary and secondary schools of Western Australia and around ten local Italian teachers. The assistants were about to start on the 4th of February 2021 with approximatively 20 hours per week of work, until the end of the term which was in the end of March. The activities included assisting students with oral tasks, preparing materials, correcting students' written works, and tutoring small groups with speaking activities. These are just some of the daily tasks of language assistants, however, in this section there will be some examples of my own experience as a language assistant and thus some of the activities and tasks I devised personally. Apart from the material I created during the week I had two fixed live lessons with students, one with a small group of girls during their last hour of school, the other was a tutoring session with two girls on their last year. The latter group had a more advanced level of Italian and each one of us was from remote since sessions took place in the afternoon (WA time zone). Besides, during the tutoring session I was free to handle the material I devised and the speaking activities as I preferred. On the contrary, the other group of around ten girls was all together in their classroom and had about one computer every two girls. Normally the teacher had the control over the management of time and activities, and although the group was not numerous, the fact that students were physically in the same room was sometimes reason of distraction and confusion.

Figure 8: Example of a speaking activity devised as an Italian language assistant

Guarda l'immagine e rispondi a queste domande. Usa le parole nel box.

1. Chi vedi nell'immagine?
2. Dove si trova?
3. Che cosa sta facendo?
4. Che cosa vedi nella foto (oggetti)?
5. Riesci a capire in che stagione/periodo è stata fatta la foto?
6. Come si sente secondo te questa ragazza? Perché?

**piatto posate tovagliolo
mangiare ristorante
pranzo felice tagliare
donna pizza margherita
estate aperto giorno**



Figure 9 constitutes a key example of an activity created to stimulate oral production. It could be easily adapted to less advanced levels, with the instructions in English and eventually a translation of each question in English. Normally the students needed preparation for such activities, so that they could elaborate answers with no pressure. Figure 10 instead, is a sample of a listening activity devised, which was to be carried out in class with the teacher. Since Italian was the target language and mother tongue of language assistants, normally authentic material was created, like audio files and recordings. Indeed, LAs were often asked to create audio files with the help of family or friends, when possible, in order to have different voices (like in figure 10, which was indeed a dialogue).

Figure 9: Example of a listening activity devised as an Italian language assistant

Listen to the phone conversation between Ambra e Tommaso and answer to the questions.

Question	Answer 1	Answer 2
Where do they decide to go?	To a concert	To the cinema
What time are they going to see the film?	8.00	9.00
Who else is going to come?	Alice and Matteo	Beatrice and Mattia
Who proposes to go to the cinema?	Tommaso	Ambra
Do they talk about dinner?	No	Yes

The number of live lessons with language assistants was heavily conditioned by the time zone, since when in WA was morning and classes were held in Italy was night. For this reason, the live classes LAs could normally participate were in the early afternoon or late morning (WA time zone), which corresponded to early morning in Italy. In fact, between Italy and WA there is a difference of six/seven hours in terms of time zone. This certainly was one of the drawbacks of the virtual modality, being the level of face-to-face interaction with students and local teachers drastically reduced if compared to the in-presence mode. Conversely, not everyone could afford the travel costs to arrive in Australia when the program was still in presence, and this may be one point in favor of the virtual modality. It may now be useful to schematize the advantages and disadvantages of the two modalities, as in the table that will follow (figure 11), in order to understand the differences between the in-presence and virtual mode.

Figure 10: Table of advantages and disadvantages of the two modalities⁷

	In presence	Virtual mode
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accommodation guaranteed by a host family - Full immersion in the life and customs of the place - Deeper connections and greater levels of interaction with students, teachers, and local people - Witness every class and lesson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No travel costs or any type of expenses - Inclusivity: the program could be joined by everyone, included people with health problems or in any other invalidating situation - Creating wide range of materials and activities, both traditional and digital
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Travel costs at the expense of the LA - Possible cultural shock 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduced levels of face-to-face interactions - Small number of synchronous classes because of the time zones - Difficulty to bond with students - Technical problems due to the use of technological devices

Besides, while the LA in virtual modality gained more knowledge and expertise in creating materials and devising digital and traditional activities (I personally used kahoot different times) the in-presence LA witnessed all classes, gaining more expertise in assisting the teacher in real-time activities and lessons. Eventually, the advantages and disadvantages seem to reflect the weaknesses and strengths of distance learning. As a matter of fact, the virtual modality does not allow for great level of face-to-face interaction whereas in-presence mode does. On the other hand, the virtual mode is more

⁷ The table is based on my own personal experience as a virtual LA and on the testimonials of in-presence LA found on the website of WAATI: <https://www.waati.com.au/assistenti/>.

inclusive since it would be accessible to everyone. The aim of the present study however is to take this program as a case study to test the relation between distance learning and learner autonomy. Given the fact that in any case the situation did not allow for the assistants to come physically in WA, the idealization of the virtual mode was the most suitable option to keep the program running. Another question that will hopefully have an answer by the end of this work is whether the virtual modality of the program might be a valid option for the future, in particular for those who wish to live an experience as LAs but cannot afford the travel costs or are in an invalidating situation. This does not mean that the virtual modality has to substitute the in-presence mode in the long term, but that the two options can be combined when needed, or in particular situations. Moreover, this could be a turning point for WA schools, since there would be an integration of traditional lessons and web-based sessions with virtual LAs. This would lead towards an ICT integration and a variety of approaches to learning and teaching, with a resulting multifaceted and lively environment. In the next chapters, thanks to the questionnaire, it will be possible to analyze the opinions of teachers adhering to the WAATI program, and evaluate the effective success of the virtual mode.

In this chapter, Distance Language Learning was explored in depth. In section 3.1 it was highlighted that certain factors are particularly relevant within DLL, namely motivation, self-regulation, personality, and strategies adopted. As claimed by Hurd (2006), language learning especially seems to be problematic when in distance mode, because students need to be much more autonomous, self-regulated and motivated if compared to the traditional setting. Besides, the levels of interactivity are significantly lower, with possible loss of interest on the part of students in the long term (Baldassarre and Tamborra, 2020). However, the choice between asynchronous and synchronous modality, together with other variables can significantly modify the outcomes of distance education. All these considerations lead to the creation of a bulleted list displaying the strengths and weaknesses of DLL (section 3.2). The last two sections illustrated the reality of WAATI and the double version of the program of language assistants. More specifically, in section 3.4 the virtual modality was explained in detail

with examples of activities delivered and a recapitulatory table of advantages and disadvantages of the virtual and in-presence modalities. This thorough explanation of the program was necessary in sight of the study that will be presented in the next chapters.

Chapter IV – The Study

4.1 Objectives

The purpose of this study is to deepen and examine the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning. In particular, the WAATI program of virtual language assistants will serve as a case study to empirically test the aforementioned relationship. As highlighted before in this work, there seems to be a consistent gap in the knowledge concerning the post-pandemic research within the study of the relation between learner autonomy and distance education. For this reason, the present investigation aims to underline potential ties and connections starting from the perspectives of teachers. The objectives of this study have been divided in three macro-categories accordingly to the structure and division of the questionnaire. Hence, the three objectives of this research are the following:

1. Objective One: Teacher’s perspectives on learner autonomy

The first objective is to collect an overview of teachers’ perspectives on learner autonomy. More specifically, the questionnaire was devised following the questions proposed in Borg and Al Busaidi’s article (2012), which investigates English language teachers’ beliefs and practices. However, as it will be explained later, the participants and instruments at the center of this work are completely different from the ones in Borg and Al Busaidi (2012).

2. Objective Two: Teacher’s perception of the relation between learner autonomy and ICT

The second objective aims to explore the teachers’ perception of learner autonomy and ICT, in other words how these two components may be eventually related. The corresponding part of the questionnaire follows the line proposed in the study by Rinesko and Kurniawan (2020), in which ICT is seen by the teachers as a tool to promote learner autonomy. The second objective is fundamental to the purpose of this research; besides it serves as bridge between objective one and three.

3. Objective Three: Opinions on the WAATI virtual language assistants' program

The third objective concerns the case study at the center of this investigation: the WAATI virtual language assistants' program. The objective is to analyze teachers' opinions on the two modalities compared (virtual and in-presence) and understand whether the virtual modality was positively received and overall appreciated. In particular, among the other things, the aim would be to test whether the virtual modality may be a valid option for the future. This objective is motivated by the fact that the virtual modality would constitute a more inclusive option for students and interns who wish to apply for the program but do not have the means to physically go to Australia. Moreover, this objective also includes opinions of teachers on students' learner autonomy and the virtual modality, as a test to verify whether a real connection between the two components has been perceived.

These objectives constitute the heart of this project and lead to the three research questions that will follow in the next section.

4.2 Research Questions

The research questions outlined in this section emerged directly from the objectives of this work. While the first two research questions are introductory and general, the third is the most articulated since the opinions asked to the teachers participating to the virtual program were diverse and concerned different subjects. Moreover, the third research question explores one of the most neglected matter by literature: the relation between learner autonomy and post-pandemic online/distance education. However, the program under analysis is just a case study, but this could be the starting point for more compelling further research.

More specifically, the research questions this study will try to answer are the following:

1. Question One: What is the perspective of teachers on learner autonomy?

The aim of the first research question is twofold: introduce the participants to the concept and reality of learner autonomy and test their level of familiarity with this matter. This research question corresponds to the first part of the questionnaire and was based on the article by Borg and Al Busaidi's article (2012). The answer to this issue is important in that it gives an idea of the perspective of the participants on learner autonomy, which is fundamental for the subsequent research questions and objectives.

2. Question Two: How is it perceived the relation between distance learning and distance learning? Is it positively seen by teachers or not? Does the use of ICT promote learner autonomy?

The second research question aims at investigating the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning. Once set the foundations given by the perspectives of teachers on learner autonomy, this research question introduces ICT and its use as related to learner autonomy. The purpose here is to test whether the participants actually perceive any relation between the two variables, and if so to explore its nature, positive or negative. This second point may confirm the results found by Rinesko and Kurniawan (2020), according to which teachers saw ICT as a mean to promote learner autonomy. Hopefully, thanks to the second section of the questionnaire it will be possible to answer this research question.

3. Question Three: What are the opinions of teachers on the WAATI virtual language assistants' program? Does it seem that students' learner autonomy has improved with the virtual modality? May the virtual modality be a valid option for the future?

As anticipated, the third research question is the most articulated and complex part since it includes two aspects of the same issue. The WAATI virtual language assistants' program is at the center of this point, and the purpose is to find out what are the opinions of teachers who participated to the virtual program. In particular, the opinions concern two variables of the program: the perceived effectiveness of the virtual modality, if compared to the in-presence mode, and the effects of the

virtual modality on learner autonomy. The former aspect aims at providing evidence on whether the virtual program may be a valid option for the future, in order to extend this possibility to as many aspiring language assistants as possible. The latter issue investigates the core of this research: the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning. Thanks to the case study, it will be possible to understand whether distance education positively influences learner autonomy or not. Hence, the case study presented aims at answering two fundamental research questions, through the opinions of teachers who participated to the program.

Once explained in detail the three research questions that originated from the three main objectives of this work, it will be now possible to see in detail who the participants of this study are.

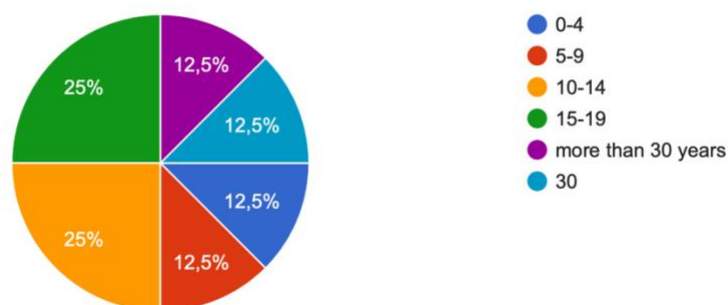
4.3 Participants

The participants of this study are the teachers who participated to the WAATI virtual language program. Since the program has been ideated recently, more specifically it was launched in January 2021, the number of teachers who collaborated and participated was limited. For this reason, the number of teachers to whom the questionnaire was addressed was restricted. In order to reach them, the president of WAATI and coordinator of the program Laura Bava, provided a mailing list comprehensive of all the names of teachers, which amounted to a total of ten subjects. In this way it was possible to address them a group mail containing the link to the questionnaire and all the information about this research. The participants are teachers of Western Australia, but as already stated their first and essential feature is that they participated to the WAATI virtual program of language assistants. Their names are not known since the questionnaire is totally anonymous; but they are teachers both from primary and secondary schools. In particular, one of the questions of the questionnaire highlights that the 75% of participants works in a secondary school, the 12,5% works in a primary school, and the other 12,5% is employed both in a secondary and primary school. In

Australia, primary schools start from kindergarten until Year 6 or 7 (12/13 years old), and secondary school goes from Year 7 until year 12⁸. Schools in Australia can be government schools (public and state schools), independent schools (private) and Catholic schools⁹. This is important since the participants came from all these typologies of institutions. Examples of schools adhering to the program are the Mandurah Catholic College, and Perth Modern Schools. The former is a catholic school while the latter is an independent school. As far as the teachers' nationality is concerned, half of them is Italian, 37,5% is Australian and 12,5% is Italo Australian¹⁰. Italian is one of the most common second and foreign languages studied in Australia, the reason is that there are many communities of Italian immigrants who came in Australia during the 20th century. Indeed, the advantage of languages such as Italian, Greek or Chinese is that among learners there is a number of background speakers (Lo Bianco, 2009). Another information on the participants coming from the questionnaire is their years of experience as Italian language teachers in Western Australia. The results, as showed in figure 12, are rather variegated with participants having 0-4 years of experience and others having more than 30 years of experience in teaching Italian in WA.

Figure 11: Results on the questions on years of experience as an Italian teacher in WA.

Years of experience as an Italian language teacher in WA
8 risposte



⁸ Information is taken from general knowledge and the official website of the Australian government <https://www.studyaustralia.gov.au/english/australian-education/education-system>

⁹ Information is taken from general knowledge and the official website of the government of WA <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/schooling>.

¹⁰ The data reported was taken from the questionnaire analyzed more in detail in Chapter V.

This data implies that the range of participants is wide, and diverse. This is a plus point for this study since the subjects have demonstrated to have different backgrounds and to belong to different environments.

In the next section the methods and instruments chosen and used for this study will be explained in detail.

4.4 Methods and Instruments

Once given the objectives, research questions and participants at the center of this study, it will be now explained the methods and instruments employed. The instrument chosen to carry out this research is a questionnaire, composed of four sections. The first section encloses the first objective and research question, the second section the part concerning ICT and learner autonomy and the third and four sections are focused on information about the participants and the third objective and research question outlined above (see section 4.1 and 4.2 of this chapter). The questionnaire includes a preliminary and introductory section whose aim is to introduce the participants to the theme of the research and to explain the purpose and objectives of the study. For reasons of clarity, this subchapter will be divided accordingly to the sections of the questionnaire, in order to explain them more in detail.

1. Learner autonomy

This section comprehends 32 statements for which participants are required to give their opinion on a scale from 1 to 5. At the beginning of the section, it is specified that 1 correspond to strongly disagree and 5 to strongly agree. The statements on which teachers were required to give their opinion were taken from Borg and Al Busaidi's article (2012) in which at the center of the investigation there was English language teachers' beliefs and practices. As already specified, this section aims at introducing the subjects to the thematic of learner autonomy, by exploring their perspectives on the matter.

2. Learner autonomy and ICT

This second section is composed of twelve statements for each of them the participants are required to give their opinion on a scale from 1 to 5. In addition to this, there are four open questions. The statements on the relation between learner autonomy and ICT are taken from Rinesko and Kurniawan's study (2020), in which they investigate the English teachers' perception of ICT on learner autonomy. This research was fundamental to this work since it clearly highlights the lack of literature on the matter of using ICT to promote learner autonomy within a language classroom. Hence, this was indeed a starting point for this study, and this section of the questionnaire is aimed at surveying the opinions of teachers on this issue. Since the work of Rinesko and Kurniawan was one of the few studies on the matter, some of the statements used in the questionnaire are taken from their questionnaire and will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter. As far as the four open questions are concerned, they are of fundamental importance in that they allow for a more detailed and deep investigation of teacher's opinions and point of view.

3. WAATI virtual language assistants' program

This part of the questionnaire is composed of four multiple choice questions focused on specific aspects of the participants, and two open questions on the WAATI virtual program of Italian language assistants. The questions about the participants deal with information such as the schools in which the participants work, their nationality and years of experience as Italian language teachers. The other two open questions concern the WAATI virtual program, asking to list at least one strength and weakness of the program and whether the virtual modality was fruitful for the autonomy and independence of students. These two last questions aimed at introducing the following section and give a more detailed and exhaustive idea on the participants' point of view.

4. Virtual mode and in-presence modality

This last section is composed of five statements for each of which participants had to express their opinion, through a scale from 1 to 4. This time the scale was set up on four rather than five in order to avoid neutral choices. These five statements are fundamental in that they explore the subjects' view on the success of the virtual modality of the program in terms of promoting students' learner autonomy.

As it can be observed, the methods and instruments adopted comprehend a questionnaire involving different and diverse typologies of questions.

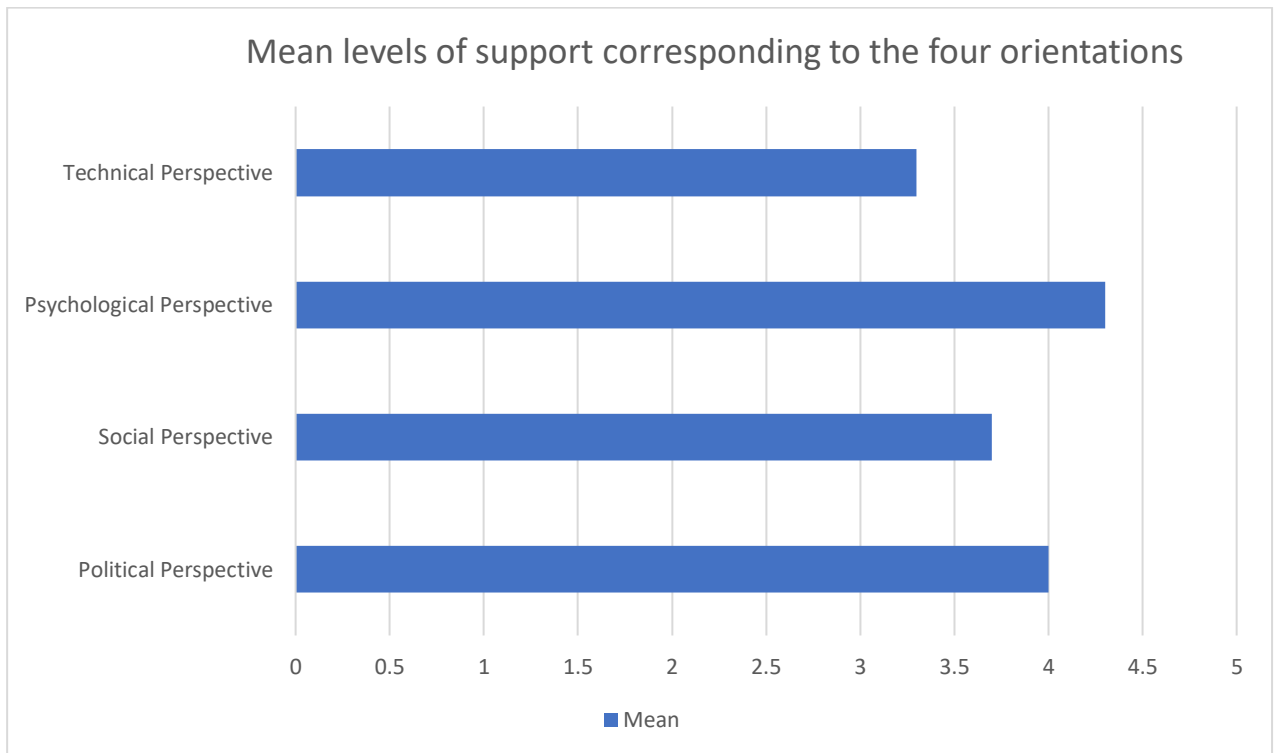
In this chapter information about the study was analyzed in depth: the objectives of this research, the research questions, the participants, methods and instruments adopted. This analysis is functional to understand the results of this investigation, which will be explained in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter V – Results

5.1 Teachers’ perspectives on Learner Autonomy

In this chapter the results of the questionnaire at the center of the present investigation will be explained. This first section corresponds to the first part of the questionnaire, focusing on the opinions of the participants on learner autonomy. The statements chosen for this part were taken from Borg and Al Busaidi’s article (2012) and will follow the same method of analysis. Indeed, in order to analyze the results of the items of the first part of the questionnaire they will be divided accordingly to the four orientations proposed by the authors, namely, psychological orientation, political orientation, technical orientation and social orientation. The graph in Table 1 illustrates the mean levels of each orientation, showing that the psychological orientation was the most supported by teachers, with a mean of 4,3.

Table 1: Mean levels of support for four orientations to learner autonomy.



In order to better understand what psychological orientation means, the five statements corresponding to this orientation will be reported as follows:

- Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.
- Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.
- The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.
- Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.
- To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.

As it can be noticed, these items reflect a psychological view on learning autonomy, focusing on the individuals' abilities or motivation in terms of developing learner autonomy. In particular, more of the half of the participants strongly agree on the last statement on learners evaluating their own learning, with a mean of 4,62. Hence, data seem to indicate that the psychological perspective is the most supported view on learner autonomy on the part of teachers, in compliance with the findings of Borg and Al Busaidi's (2012). The second most supported perspective is the political orientation with a mean of 4, followed by the social perspective (3,7) and technical perspective (3,3). Starting from the political orientation, some statements representing this view are the following:

- Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.
- Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.
- Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.
- Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials and methods of assessment.

As the statements show, the political orientation involves learners making choices about their learning. In other words, the political view focuses on responsibility, participation,

power and control of students over the management of the learning process (Borg and Al Busaidi, 2012, Ramadhiyah and Sri Lengkanawati, 2019). As far as the social perspective is concerned, the items representing this orientation refers to the interaction and social participation in the development of learner autonomy (Borg and Al Busaidi, 2012). Some examples of the sentences reflecting this orientation are the following:

- Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.
- Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.
- Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.
- Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy.

The duality here is represented by the contrast between cooperative work and work carried out autonomously. Data show that teachers seem to believe that rather than working alone (this item has a mean of 3,12), in order to promote learner autonomy, students need to complete tasks alone (with a mean of 4). With regard to group activities and cooperation, participants did not show a clear inclination, upholding what argued by Borg and Al Busaidi (2012), that is a tendency to have an individualistic perspective on learner autonomy on the part of teachers. The last orientation in terms of support is the technical one, represented by the following items:

- Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.
- Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.
- Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access center.
- Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.

As can be observed from the statements above, technical orientation refers to physical environments for learning, different from the settings of formal education. Moreover, technical orientation involves also activities carried out and learning strategies adopted

to promote learner autonomy. The fact that this perspective was the least supported out of the four orientations may imply that participants have not a definite view on the physical settings and activities that foster learner autonomy.

This first part of the questionnaire, however, includes other items covering a number of concepts and constructs which will be listed below:

- The role of the teacher within learner autonomy: this theme received a consistent approval, for instance the item “the teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy” has a mean of 4,75, which is the highest value of all the questionnaire. Besides, statements belittling the figure of the teacher received the lowest support from participants (with a mean of 1,87).
- Age and learner autonomy: some items concerned the age of learners, and the results indicate that participants tend to believe that learner autonomy is regardless of age. More specifically, the item “it is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults” has a mean of 4,5 with more than 70% of the participants agreeing or strongly agreeing to this statement.
- Proficiency and learner autonomy: this is an interesting issue since subjects seem to believe that proficiency is a variable affecting and influencing the development of learner autonomy. The item “promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners” has a mean of 2,25; showing that participants are reluctant with respect to this matter, the second item linked to this topic “the proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy” with a mean of 3,75 confirms this argument.
- Teaching methodologies: the topic of teaching methodologies and learner methodologies showed some uncertainty as well. The results indicate no clear orientation neither towards a more teacher-oriented environment nor to a learner-centered curriculum. The statement: “ learner-centered classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy” with a mean of 3,75 indicate a slight

preference for the learner-centered curriculum, however it still denotes a certain level of hesitation.

- Effective language learning: as far as the matter of effective language learning and learner autonomy is concerned, participants seem to attribute a positive value to this relationship. Indeed, the item “Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner” has a mean of 4,37, with more than 80% of subjects that agree or strongly agree to this statement.

These topics and themes are relevant to the extent of this research, for this reason they were inserted in the first part of the questionnaire and analyzed in this section. However, in the Appendix extended data with percentages and means will be available. In the next section, the results for the questionnaire concerning the second part of the questionnaire at the center of this work.

5.2 Learner autonomy and ICT

In this section the second part of the questionnaire will be analyzed. The sentences chosen for the Likert-Scale items were partially taken from the work of Rinesko and Kurniawan (2020) and will follow a similar method of analysis. This section will explore the support and level of agreement of teachers toward the relationship between learner autonomy and ICT. In particular, the first eight sentences reported in table 1 cover the topic of ICT and media as related to the learning process and students’ motivation or interest. As can be noticed from the table, the mean is never lower than 3, which is significant in terms of approval on the part of participants. Indeed, the lower value correspond to a mean of 3 that on a scale of 5 correspond to “unsure”, having a neutral value. The item having the highest level of support with a mean of 4,62 and a mode of 5, is statement number 6, “Apps or games can increase students’ motivation”. It may seem that Italian language teachers, which are the participants of this study, particularly appreciate and use such tools within the language classroom. Nevertheless, they do not

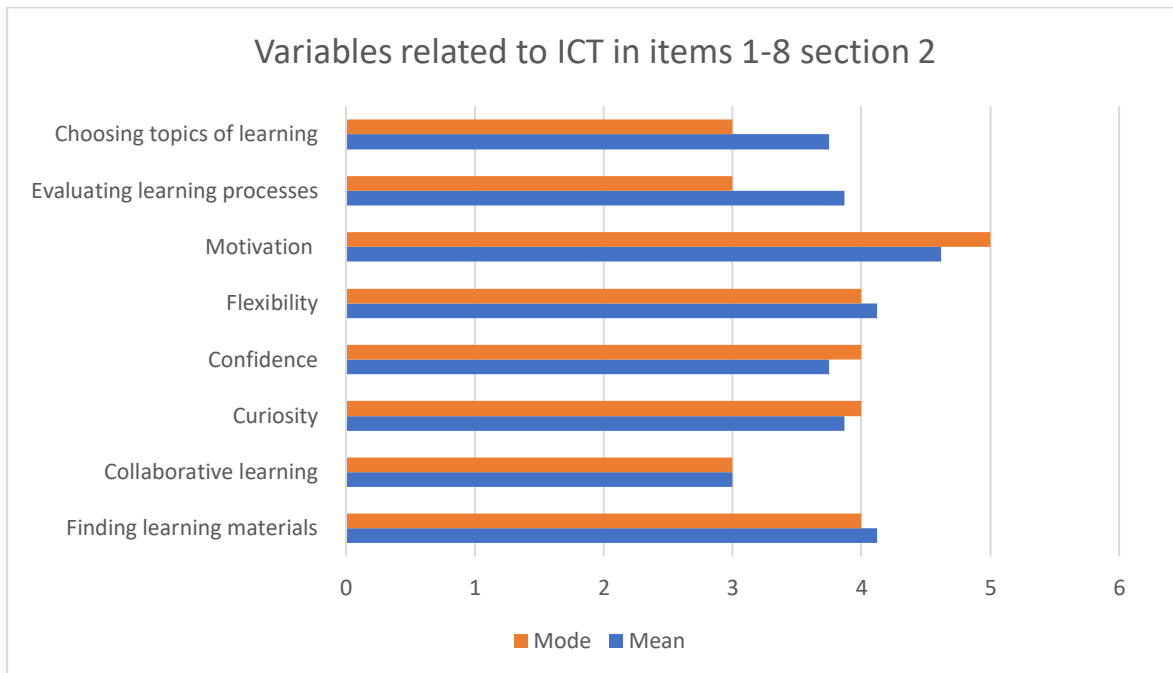
seem quite sure about using apps or games to evaluate the learning process (statement number 7, mean of 3,87).

Table 2: Mean and mode for items of section two of the questionnaire, items 1-8.

Statement	Mean	Mode
1. Online resources are a key source for finding learning materials independently.	4,12	4
2. Social media enhance collaborative learning.	3	3
3. Web-based online resources inspire students' curiosity.	3,87	4
4. ICT presentation tools increase students' confidence.	3,75	4
5. E-learning increases students' flexibility in learning.	4,12	4
6. Apps or games can increase students' motivation.	4,62	5
7. Apps or games are suitable for evaluating learning progress.	3,87	3
8. Online resources are suitable for choosing topics of learning.	3,75	3

The second statements in terms of levels of agreement received, are the number 1 and 5 with a mean of 4,12. The mode of both of these statements correspond to 4. They concern students' flexibility in learning and students' ability to find learning material independently thanks to online resources. After this, the item concerning student's curiosity, number 3, correspond to 3,87, followed by two statements with a mean of 3,75, namely number 4 and 8. Up to now, it would seem that teachers tend to have a positive view of ICT as related to students' motivation, curiosity, flexibility and independence. The statement with the lowest mean, which is 3, concerns social media and collaborative learning. More specifically, 62,5 % of participants have chosen 3 on a scale of 5, meaning that they are unsure about this topic. As can be also seen from the graphic representation in Table 3, the higher mean and mode correspond to motivation as related to the use of apps and games, besides also students' flexibility in learning and ICT as related to finding learning materials has a mean higher than 4.

Table 3: Variables related to ICT in items 1-8, section 2.



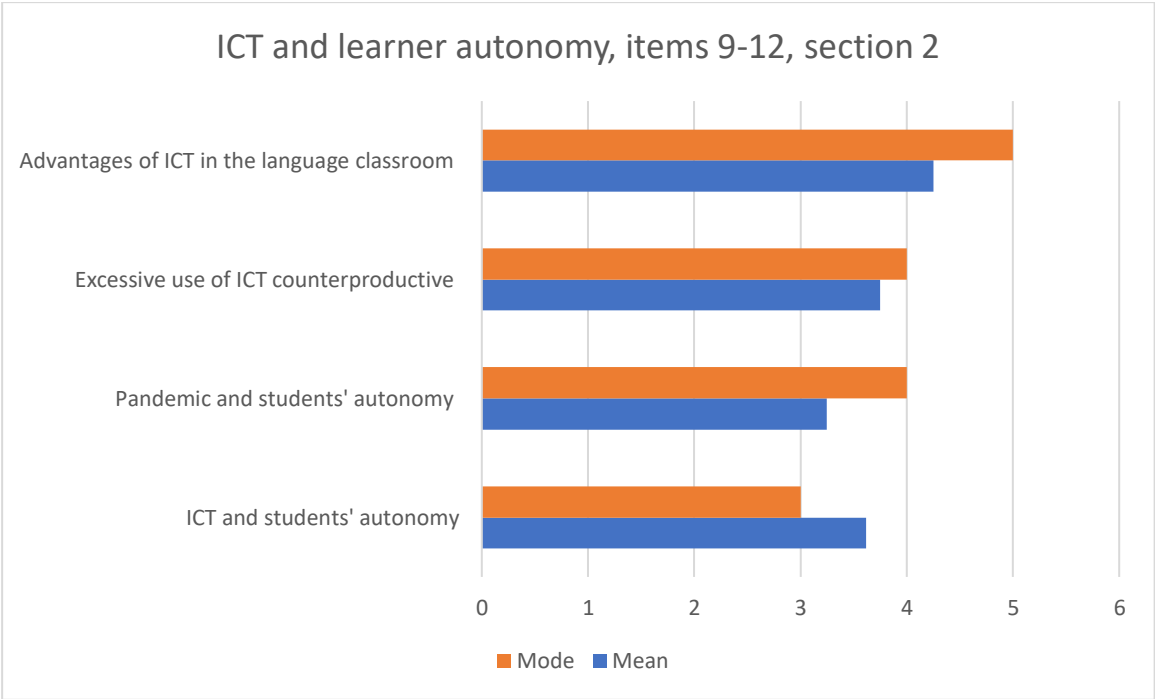
It will be now possible to analyze the last four items of this second part of the questionnaire, which are focused in particular on the relation between ICT and learner autonomy. Here again, the mean is never lower than 3,25, and accordingly the lower value with reference to the mode correspond to 3 (Table 3).

Table 4: Mean and mode for items of section two of the questionnaire, items 9-12.

Statement	Mean	Mode
9. The use of online learning platforms and softwares enhance students' autonomy.	3,62	3
10. During the pandemic of Covid-19 the massive usage of ICT in teaching has positively affected students' independence and autonomy in learning.	3,25	4
11. An excessive usage of ICT in a language classroom may be counter productive.	3,75	4
12. Today there is a need to use and take advantage of ICT within the language classroom environment.	4,25	5

As can be seen from the tables (table 4, table 5), the statement with highest mean is number 12, “today there is a need to use and take advantage of ICT within the language classroom environment”, with 4,25. The following is item number 11, asserting that an excessive usage of ICT is counterproductive with 3,75. There is a similar mean (3,62) for the item “the use of online learning platforms and softwares enhance students' autonomy”. The last statement, concerning the pandemic period has a mean of 3,25, in particular more than 35% of participants disagree or strongly disagree with that statement, while more than the 70% agree or strongly agree. For this item no one of the subjects has chosen 3, corresponding to unsure, meaning that they seem to have contrasting opinions on this matter. However, the mode corresponds to 4 for this item.

Table 5: ICT and learner autonomy, items 9-12, section 2.



At this point it will be essential to interpret and study the results of the open questions. Indeed, the answers to this kind of questions will be a key point to better understand the results of the Likert-scale items. The first open question is:

1- In your opinion, how much students' can benefit from the usage of ICT within the language classroom environment?

A couple of answers underline the fact that ICT brings some advantages within the language classroom environment only when it is used effectively. Besides, one of the participants states: *I think a balance of ICT and regular activities is one of the keys to success in the language classroom.* Instead, another answer highlights a possible drawback “*a little. It is good for researching but can be counterproductive*”. However, this last answer was the only one emphasizing a negative aspect of the use of ICT in the language classroom. Two more answers in particular efficiently resume a positive view on the matter:

The benefit is high because they have the opportunity to communicate and collaborate online with other students. A great example is the WAATI Virtual Program which allows students to progress not only with vocabulary and grammar, but especially improves their communication skills and confidence. This practice gives the opportunity to become independent learners, able to make choices and to have agency in what they do. (Answer 1)

ICT can motivate students, create healthy competition and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in different ways. They can also use ICT to communicate with native speakers and form meaningful connections. (Answer 2)

The stress here is put on ICT as a way to enhance students’ motivation and confidence together with communication and collaboration skills. In addition, a technology-rich environment would allow for meaningful opportunities and connection with native speakers. In particular, the last sentence of answer 1 underlines the relevance of ICT for the autonomy and independence of students. With regard to the second open question, it was constructed as follows:

2- Overall, did the pandemic allow for a positive rediscovery of ICT within the classroom? Why?

There are different kinds of answers and opinions concerning this issue. Two answers are negative; one asserting that the pandemic and rediscovery of ICT prevented students from human contact and communication, the other indicate a personal preference of the participant for focusing more on face-to-face contact in the classroom environment. Other two answers are significant in that they confirm what was already argued in this work: *It was used to a great extent even before* and *I don't think that it was really any different to what we are currently doing in the classroom*. These two answers are significant in that participants, being teachers of Italian in WA, confirm that they were already familiar with ICT even before the pandemic and that the pandemic did not cause drastic changes or closures in WA if compared to other countries, like Italy for example (see chapter I section 3 for more information on this matter). Positive reactions to this issue include the followings:

1-Generally yes, in some ways. I strongly believe that it is paramount that students communicate speaking face to face, especially the language learners. The WAATI Virtual Program is allowing to have both the advantages: use the ICT to communicate face to face. Teachers must not rely 100% on ICT and alternate between traditional practice and activities which require ICT.

2-Yes. The pandemic forced teachers to be creative with ICT. It also improved both students' and teachers' digital literacy skills.

Although these are not the only positive answers to question 2, they constitute the most exhaustive accounts on the matter. Answer 1 highlights the importance of a blended method, merging technology with a more traditional approach, while answer 2 stresses the fact that as a consequence to the pandemic and use of ICT both teachers and students' digital literacy skills has improved. Overall, more than 50% of the participants answered affirmatively to this second open question, confirming that the pandemic and the use of ICT was perceived as somehow beneficial for both students and teachers. The third open question investigates more in detail the opinions on the relation between ICT and learner autonomy:

3- In your opinion, has the usage of ICT and video conferencing tools helped the students in gaining more autonomy? Why?

Despite the fact that the large majority of answers were noticeably positive, one negative answer underlines the fact that it can be distracting, and another subject states that *in some instances, however, some students chose not to engage in some online lessons*. Interestingly, two other positive answers point out the fact that students with no sense of autonomy experienced some trouble in absence of guidance and that the teacher need to properly manage the lesson, in order to effectively use ICT. This may mean that it will be easier to promote learner autonomy through a technologically based environment when students' have previously familiarized with autonomy in learning. However, more than 60% of reactions to open question number 3 were extremely positive, for instance the following answer underlines the benefits for students' autonomy and independence:

Definitely! With bad things always come good things too! The students had and still continue to have the opportunity to learn without major interruptions. Whichever platforms schools use the students can still progress with their learning, adding more independence, responsibility and agency. The COVID-19 situation mostly allowed them to take responsibility about their work and progress, making decisions on what, how and when to complete task given by the teacher. And again, leading them to become independent learners.

As can be observed, the focus here is the autonomy and independence gained by students' during the period of the pandemic, which forced the majority of them to use video conferencing tools and ICT. In particular, students had to make decisions on how to organize and manage their time and schoolwork. Another answer involves a critical point of the distance learning experienced during the pandemic:

Yes. It has provided students with a new mode of learning and a new way of connecting with others. However, it has still been predominantly teacher-led and ICT hasn't been used to its full capacity to promote learner autonomy.

Here the participant highlights the fact that learner autonomy could be promoted to an extended level if the teaching mode was more learner centered. These suggestions imply a certain level of awareness of teachers participating to this study. The fourth open question is crucial in that it approaches the issue of the perceived effectiveness of the WAATI virtual language program of language assistants:

4- Do you think that the virtual language assistant program could be a valid option for the future? If you can, explain your answer.

Out of eight answers to this question just one is clearly negative:

Not sure... the students really missed that contact and it didn't really help with working with small groups etc. time difference made it hard. Only motivated students took advantage of one on one speaking. More work for the teacher.

Another answer is positive, in the sense that it agrees on the validity of the virtual modality but express a preference for the in-presence modality. Another participant highlights the fact that it would be valid if run properly, with real engagement and interest on the part of students.

However, there are several positive answers, as the following:

Absolutely yes - it has helped the Yr 12 students gain more self-confidence while improving their language skills.

Yes, definitely. It is free, easily accessible and mutually-beneficial to the teacher, students and virtual assistant.

Absolutely. I would love to have a virtual language assistant even when it is possible for travel to Australia once again. The opportunity for students to engage after school and in the evening was fantastic and the students gained a great deal from this program.

Yes as it adds another dimension to our classes. It truly enables students to engage with someone who is living overseas.

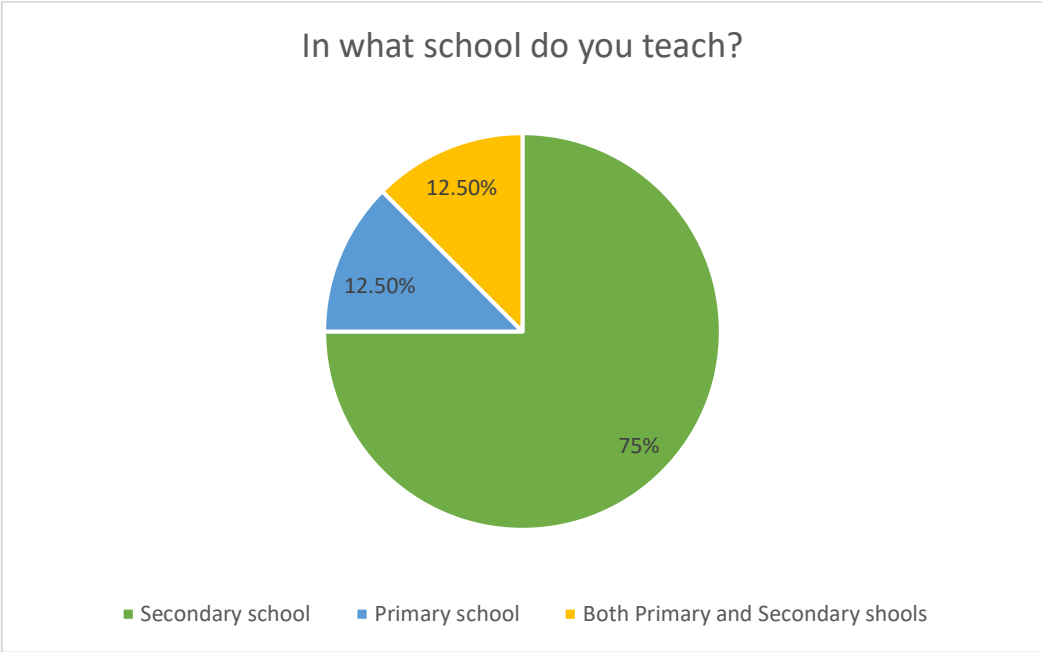
Yes, can reach the students and teachers everywhere.

The virtual program has brought several benefits to students and teachers, and it would seem to be also a valid option for the future, according to the opinions of participants. In the next section the issue will be deepened as it will be possible to analyze the results of an open question concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

5.3 WAATI virtual language assistants’ program

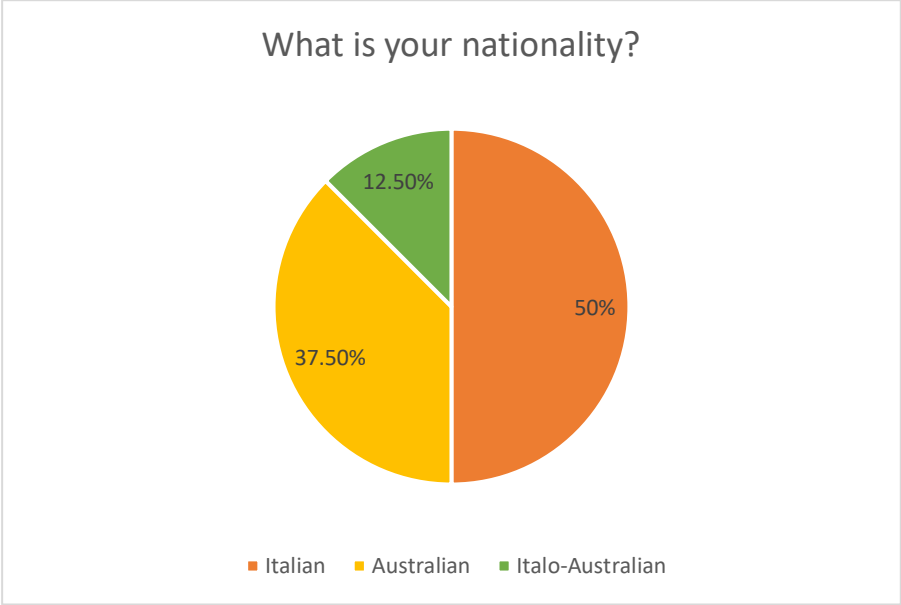
The four questions of this section were aimed at gaining information about the participants in relation to the program of virtual language assistants. Besides, there are also two open questions concerning the virtual modality of the program as compared to the in-presence one. The first question, whose results are illustrated in table 5, explores the aspect of what type of school the participants teach in. As can be seen from the diagram, the large majority of subjects state that they teach in a secondary school (75%), and two minor parts of the participants corresponding to 12,5% declares that they work in a primary school or both institutions. It may be useful to remind that Australian school system is divided in years, thus primary and secondary institutions comprehend students from Year 4 to Year 12.

Table 6: Question: In what school do you teach?



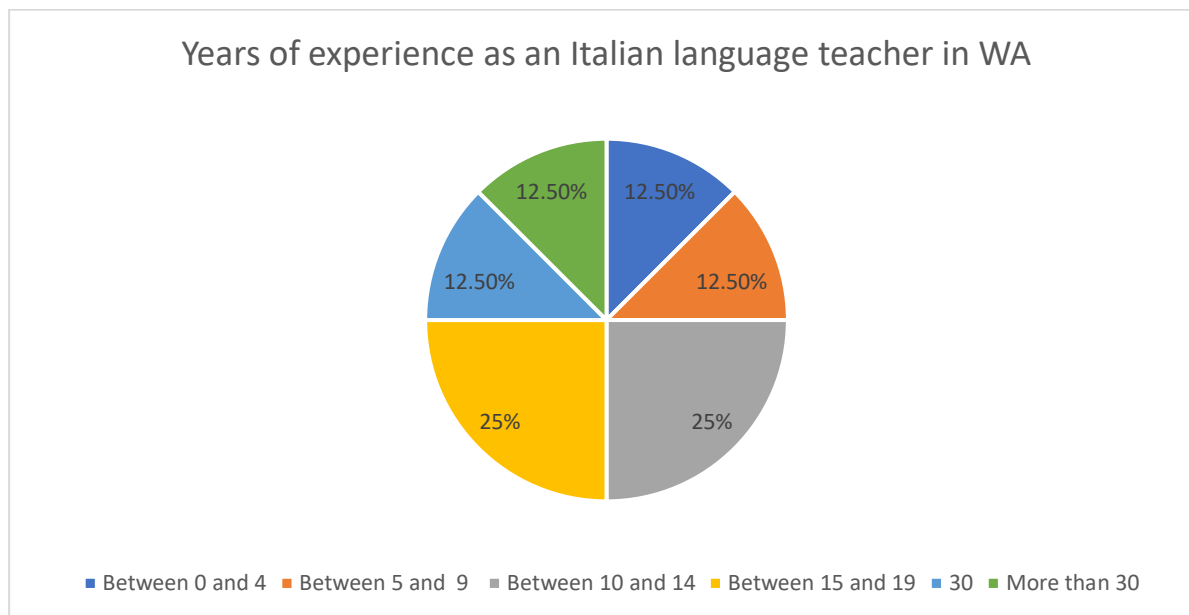
The second question present in this section is about the nationality of subjects. Here two possible answers were given, Italian and Australian but one participant choose the answer “other” declaring to be Italo-Australian (Table 6). This data highlights the fact that more than 50% of participants teaching Italian in WA have Italian as their mother tongue or at least was the language spoken by one of their parents. The 37,5% of subjects declare to be Australian, and just one participant, as already explained, is Italo-Australian.

Table 7: Question: What is your nationality?



The third question addressed in this section concerns the years of experience as an Italian language teacher in Western Australia. As already anticipated in the previous chapter, (see section 3 chapter IV), the answers of this question were quite variegated, with teachers having from 0 to 4 years of experience, to teachers having more than thirty years of experience. As can be seen from table 7, 25% of participants have between 10 and 14 years of experience, and another 25% have between 15 and 19 years of experience. The other participants are equally divided with 12,5% each for the others range of years of experience.

Table 8: Question: Years of experience as an Italian language teacher in WA.



Interestingly, the 75% of participants has more than 10 years of experience, and the 50% has even more than 15 years of experience. Two subjects have 30 and more than 30 years of experience, which is a significant fact, since they will certainly have lived many in-presence programs of Italian language assistants. On this matter, the fourth question of this section asked whether subjects participated to the WAATI virtual program of language assistants, and the totality of answers (100%) are positive, as expected. Coming to analyze the open questions of this section, the first one is articulated as follows:

- **Can you list at least one strength and one weakness of the virtual modality of the language assistants' program?**

According to the majority of participants (62,5%), the main weakness of the program was the time difference in terms of time zone between Italy and Australia. In fact, in chapter 3.4 it was already highlighted how the time difference was cause of reduced levels of face-to-face interactions between students and language assistants. The answers to this open question seem to indicate that time difference was perceived as the

major problem by teachers. Another weakness noticed by one participant concerns problems with technology and internet connection. With regard to the strengths of the program they are more differentiated if compared to the weaknesses, which was mainly the time difference. Among the principal strengths it can be found:

- No need to find a host family for the language assistant
- Time difference on the other hand allowed for 1 to 1 sessions
- Italian assistants could participate without travelling
- Students had the chance to practice conversation with native speakers, especially senior students, and gained a perspective from a young person living in Italy
- Students' self-confidence and linguistic skills improved, and they experienced cultural aspects of the language use first-hand.

Apart from the last two opinions, which could be true both for the virtual and in-presence modality, the first three points effectively underlines the strengths of the virtual program if compared to the in-presence one. In particular, on the one hand time difference made it difficult to have the assistant during the school hours, but on the other hand it promoted tutoring groups and individual sessions. Another significant aspect may be correlated to the age and linguistic level of students: senior students, in Year 11 or 12 seem to have benefit the most from virtual language assistants. Returning to the focal point of this investigation, the last open question that will follow explores once again the opinions of participants with regard to the program and its relation to learner autonomy.

- **In your opinion, did the virtual language assistants program enhance the independence and autonomy of students? Why?**

This question obtained a 62,5% of positive answers, and the remaining 37,5% of negative answers. For this last question it may be useful and necessary to examine each question, so what will follow are the three negative answers.

1. *Not with all my students, only those that were more confident in working independently.*

2. *Not really at my school as we were limited by how exactly we could use the assistant. Students were not allowed to be on their own with the assistant after hours etc.*
3. *Not really.*

First of all, answer number 1 is only partially negative. It seems to imply that even though some students' autonomy remained unchanged, other students more confident in working alone or managing their time had a positive result in terms of learner autonomy. The second answer instead is negative, but the cause is not the virtual program itself, but the impossibility to properly use the assistant due to some school restrictions. The third answer finally, does not provide any explanation. This analysis allows for a reclassification of these apparently negative accounts, being only partially negative or negative for external limitations, not ascribable to other schools or the virtual program. Let's now have a look at the positive answers:

1. *Yes, because the students had to identify their own areas of weakness to determine what they would work on with the VLA for each of these sessions. They also had the responsibility of making any changes required to times.*
2. *Yes, because students had to ensure that they had to be prepared: turned up for their lesson, had their answers handy and complete any homework they were given.*
3. *Yes, it does. The students communicate with the Assistente independently and get to take more initiative. This is because they feel empowered and they are willing to challenge themselves to new learning journeys.*
4. *Yes. My students had to communicate more effectively as they were restricted to the size of a screen and had to use ICT to initiate and participate in interactions. They also had to respond to a new teacher and adapt to different teaching styles.*
5. *Yes.*

As can be observed, the virtual modality has allowed students to develop skills such as flexibility to different teaching styles involving also ICT, independence and autonomy in managing their homework and preparation for tutoring groups or one to one session. These two aspects are strictly related to the virtual mode of the program, since otherwise students would not have had the opportunity to interact with technology and virtual language assistants. It seems that this enabled them to develop a certain degree of autonomy which is different, and maybe more grounded, than the in-presence mode would have allowed. In the next section it will be possible to evaluate in a clearer manner the opinions of teachers for what concerns learner autonomy and virtual modality.

5.4 Virtual mode and in presence modality

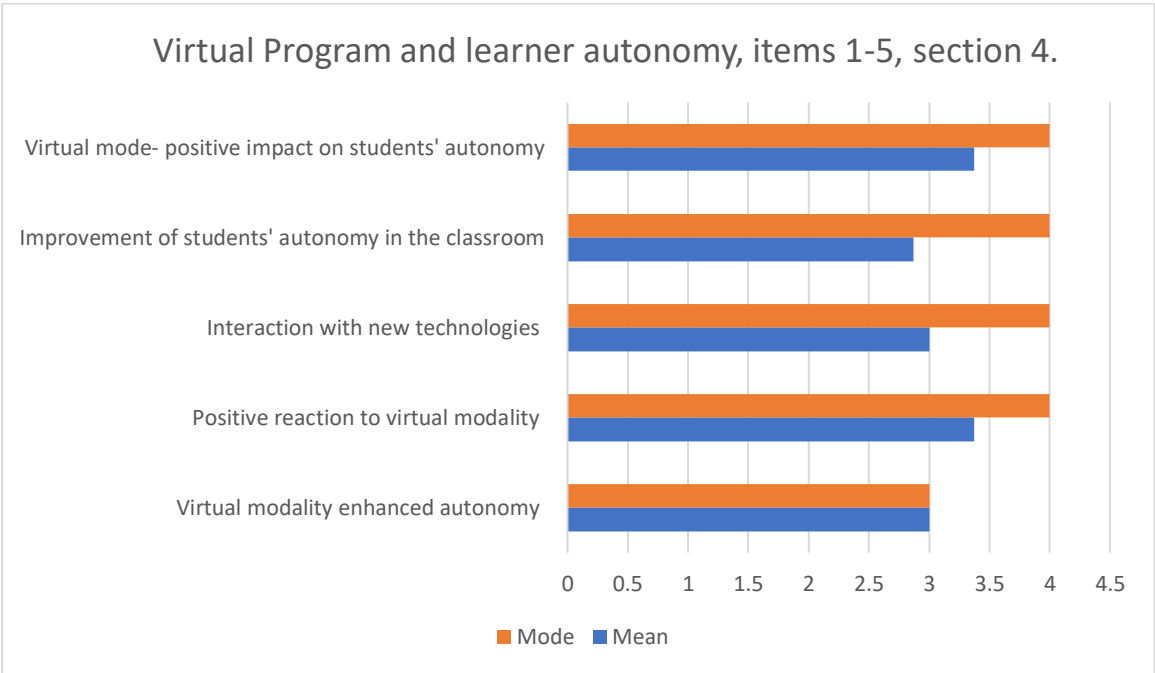
The last section of the questionnaire is composed of five Likert-scale items, which are set up on a value from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). In this case the intermediate value was removed in order to avoid neuter answers. In this way, participants could either agree or disagree to statements, without the unbiased option.

Table 9: Mean and mode for items of section four of the questionnaire, items 1-5.

Statement	Mean	Mode
1.If compared to the in-presence modality, with the virtual mode the students seemed to have enhanced their autonomy in learning.	3	3
2.Students had a positive reaction to the virtual modality of the program.	3,37	4
3.Thanks to the virtual modality, students learned to interact with new technologies and online learning tools.	3	4
4.After the program, there was an improvement of students' autonomy in the language classroom environment.	2,87	4
5.The virtual mode of the program had a positive impact on the students' autonomy.	3,37	4

Results indicate a threshold never lower than 70%, corresponding to a mean of 3. The statement with the lowest mean, corresponding to 3 and to a percentage of 71,87% is number 3: “Thanks to the virtual modality, students learned to interact with new technologies and online learning tools”. On the contrary statements reaching a mean of 3,37 and a percentage of 84,37% of support from participants are number 2 “students had a positive reaction to the virtual modality of the program” and number 5 “the virtual mode of the program had a positive impact on the students’ autonomy” (Table 9). In all statements the mode is 4, which is the highest value on the Likert-scale, apart for item 1 which has a mode of 3 (Table 10). In any case, the results indicate that for this section participants expressed a majority of 3 and 4, corresponding to agree and strongly agree.

Table 10: Virtual Program and learner autonomy, items 1-5, section 4.



Overall, participants seem to have showed a positive attitude towards the relation between learner autonomy and the virtual modality of the program, with high percentages of support for each statement of this section. This could be said for the

questionnaire in general, the open answers in particular helped to properly interpret the Likert scale items. However, the findings emerged so far will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter VI – Discussion

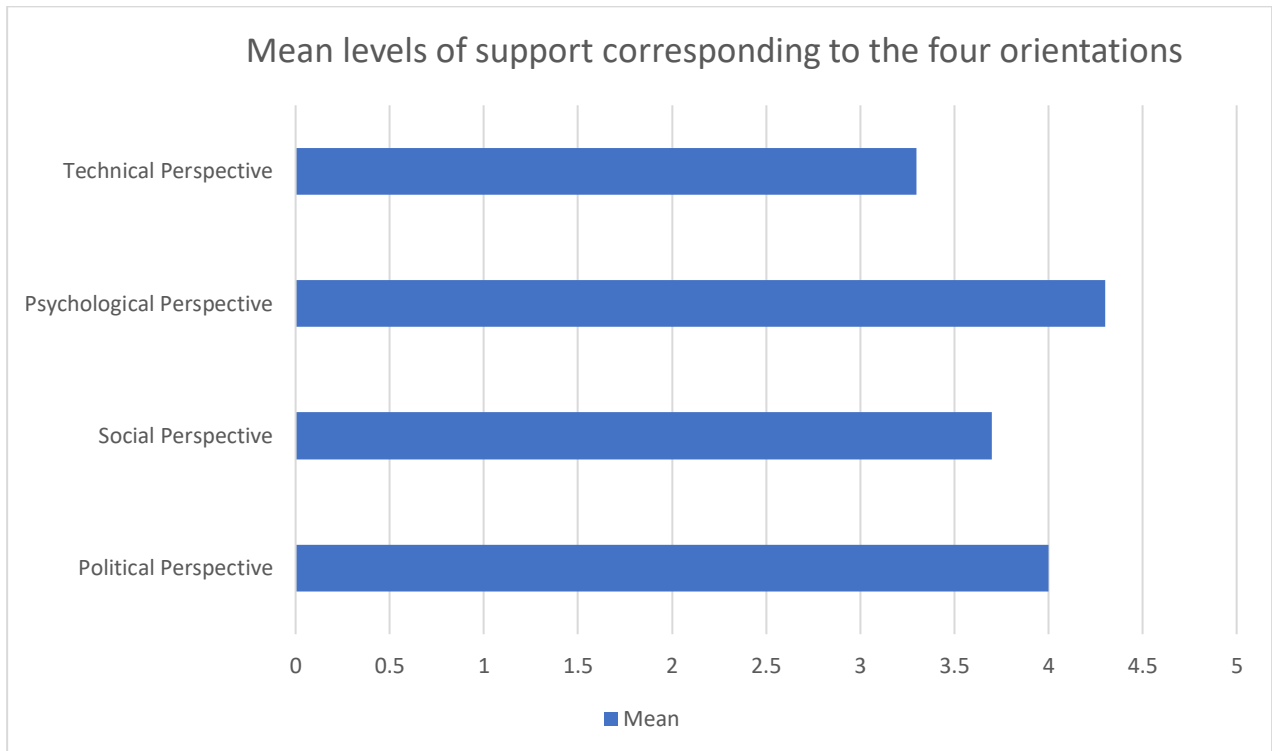
6.1 Discussion on Objective One: Learner Autonomy

In this first section of Chapter VI, the discussion will focus on Objective One of this work: teacher’s perception of learner autonomy. The corresponding research question for this objective is the following, as reported in Chapter IV:

What is the perspective of teachers on learner autonomy?

In order to answer to this question, it will be necessary to have a look at Table 1 from the previous chapter, illustrating the mean levels of support for four orientations to learner autonomy. For reasons of convenience and clarity the table will be reported also below.

Table 1, Mean levels of support for four orientations to learner autonomy.



Four orientations, namely psychological, political, social and technical were used to analyze the results of this first section Likert-scale items. In line with the findings of Borg and Al Busaidi (2012), the psychological orientation is the predominant perspective with a mean of 4,3. It is followed by the political perspective with a mean of 4, then social perspective (3,7) and finally technical perspective (3,3). The fact that the psychological perspective was the most supported by participants, namely teachers, may imply that their view is predominately linked to the attributes and features that permit learner autonomy (e.g., evaluate and monitor one's own learning, learning how to learn, etc.). Besides, what emerged from this first section of the questionnaire is a strong support for the role and importance of teacher in promoting learner autonomy, together with a belief that age does not affect the development of learner autonomy in students. Less clear is the orientation of subjects with regard to the relation between proficiency and learner autonomy, however, it would seem that with a mean of 3,75 of support subjects believe that proficiency does not affect students' ability to develop learner autonomy. With regard to teaching methodologies, the learner-centered classroom has received more support if compared to the teacher-centered classroom, in terms of promoting learner autonomy. For what concerns effective language learning, there is a positive attitude on the relation between learner autonomy and effective language learning, indeed the item "Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner" has a mean of 4,37. To answer the research question addressed at the beginning of this section, the perspective of teachers on learner autonomy correspond to the psychological orientation, which received the higher support according to the results of the questionnaire. The fact that this outcome is consistent with the findings reported by Borg and Al Busaidi (2012) is significant in that confirms a given pattern in the perspective of teachers on learner autonomy.

6.2 Discussion on Objective Two: Relation between learner autonomy and ICT

The present section will be focused on objective two: exploring teacher’s opinions on the relation between learner autonomy and ICT. This objective corresponds to twelve Likert-scale items and four open questions. More specifically, the research question addressed for this objective was formulated as follow:

How is it perceived the relation between distance learning and learner autonomy? Is it positively seen by teachers or not? Does the use of ICT promote learner autonomy?

This research question may seem a bit more complex and articulated if compared to the one of Objective One, however, the open questions allow for an in-depth analysis of the matter. It will be suitable to start by analyzing Table 3, reported below for reasons of convenience.

Table 3: Variables related to ICT in items 1-8, section 2.

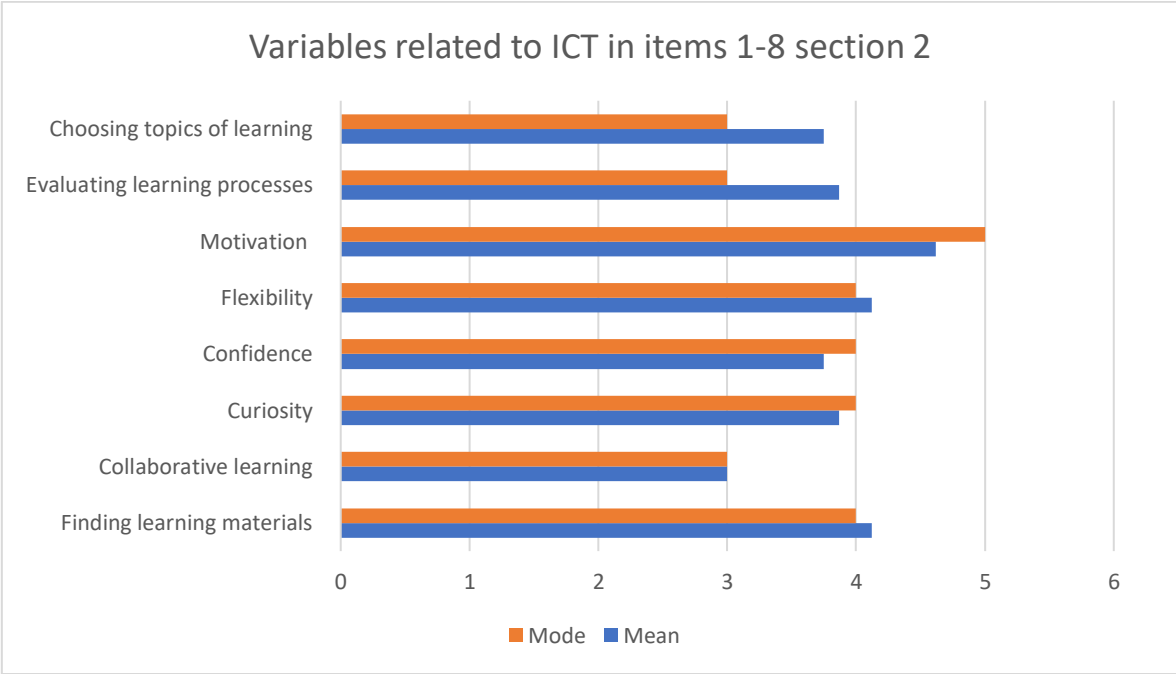
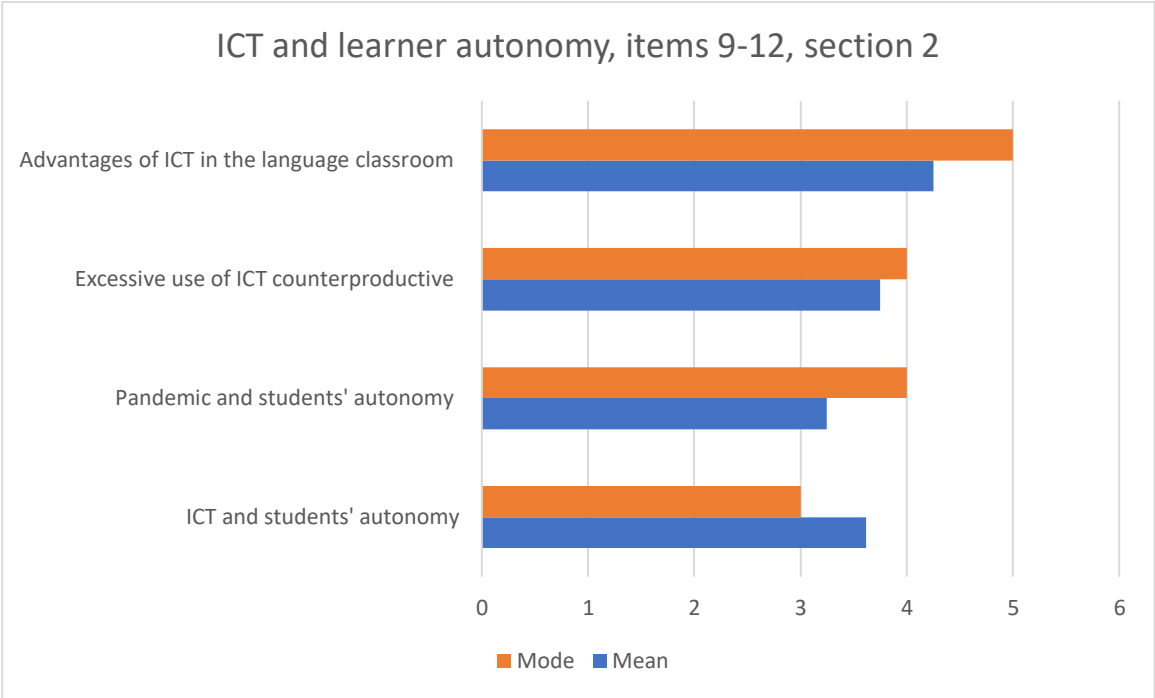


Table 3 illustrates the mean and mode for each variable associated to ICT. In particular, motivation as related to apps or games seem to reach the higher mean, with 4,62 and a mode of 5. Besides, flexibility and finding learning materials are also variables that

in relation to ICT received consistent support by teachers, with a mean of 4,12 and a mode of 4. Other variables such as curiosity and confidence have similar values, with a mean fluctuating between 3,5 and 4 and a mode of 4. The lowest variable with the lowest value corresponds to collaborative learning as related to social media, with a mean and a mode of 3. With regard to autonomy and ICT it will be necessary to analyze table 5, as reported below.

Table 5: ICT and learner autonomy, items 9-12, section 2.



These four items highlight that participants fully agree on the need of take advantage of ICT within the language classroom, with a mean of 4,25 and a mode of 5. There is also general agreement on the fact that an excessive use of ICT is counterproductive, together with the fact that the use of online learning platforms enhance students' autonomy (mean of 3,62). On the independence and autonomy gained by students' during the pandemic the mean correspond to 3,25, meaning that participants have contrasting opinions on this matter. It is important to remember that the pandemic in WA did not provoke massive school closures and did not cause drastic consequences on the school system. As already explained and underlined by some participants in the

open questions, ICT were used to a great extent in the classroom even before the pandemic, as a consequence it was not possible to notice a great difference in terms of autonomy in students between before and after the pandemic period. In order to answer the research question reported at the beginning of this section, the results of the Likert-scale items allow to say that teachers seem to have a positive view of the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, as the variables of table 3 illustrate. Moreover, the analysis of the open questions in chapter V highlights the fact that participants agree on the fact that the use of ICT in the language classroom promotes learning autonomy, as reported for example by this subject: *The COVID-19 situation mostly allowed them to take responsibility about their work and progress, making decisions on what, how and when to complete task given by the teacher.* Multiple answers testify the positive effects of ICT on the independence of students; however, some subjects underlined the fact that students with no sense of autonomy prior to the pandemic period experienced some troubles in engaging in online activities and lacked the motivation needed to fully benefit from the use of web-based systems. This may be an important factor to keep in mind in order to effectively employ ICT to the benefit of students' learner autonomy. To resume the results of this section, the findings related to the open questions in particular are in accordance with the results found by Rinekso and Kurniawan (2020) in which participants saw ICT as an opportunity to foster students' autonomy and interest towards the lessons.

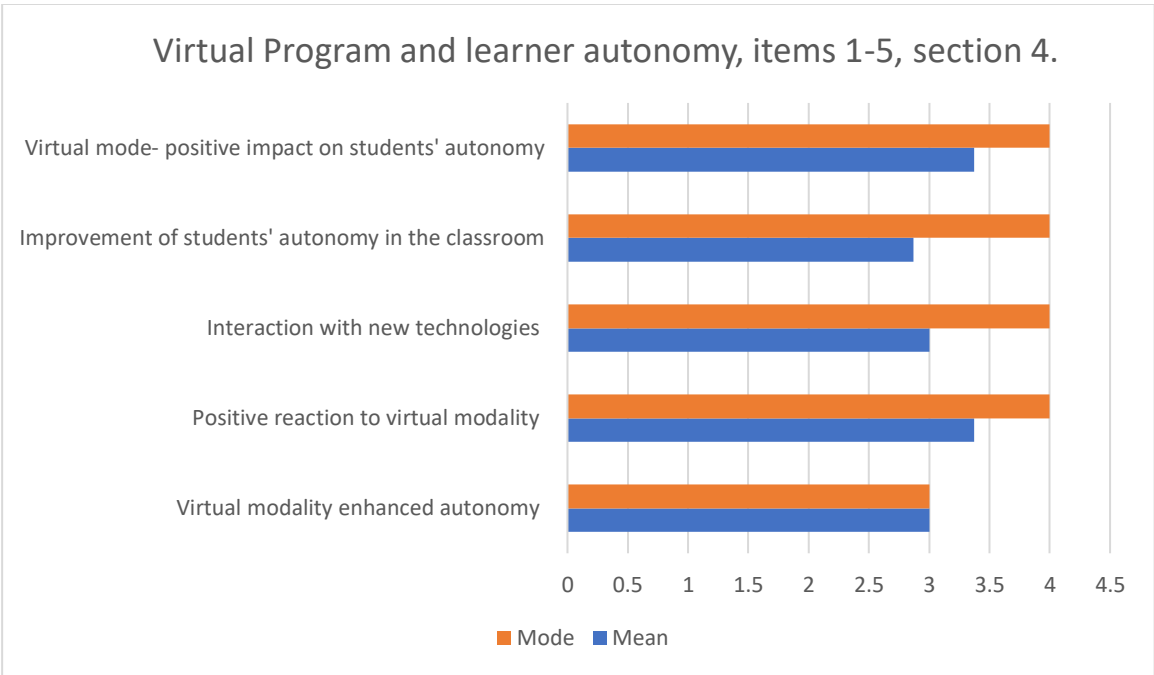
6.3 Discussion on Objective Three: WAATI virtual language assistants’ program

In this section Objective Three will be discussed, and in order to do so the research question addressed will be the following:

What are the opinions of teachers on the WAATI virtual language assistants’ program? Does it seem that students’ learner autonomy has improved with the virtual modality? May the virtual modality be a valid option for the future?

In order to answer to these questions, it will be essential to use the answers of the open questions of section 3 of the questionnaire. But first of all, it will be necessary to analyze the results of the Likert-scale items of section 4, reported below in the graphic of table 10.

Table 10: Virtual Program and learner autonomy, items 1-5, section 4.



For this Likert-scale items the scale was from 1 to 4, in order to avoid unbiased and neutral values. Two items have a mean of 3,37, revealing a general agreement on the fact that the virtual mode of the program had a positive impact on students’ autonomy and that students’ reaction to the program was positive. Other two items with a mean

of 3, concern the advantages of the virtual modality if compared to the in-presence one, in terms of interaction with technologies and students' autonomy. One item displays a mean of 2,87, which concerns the improvement in terms of autonomy after the virtual program. In order to answer to the first research question addressed in this section it will be essential to resort to the open questions present in the questionnaire. With regard to what are the opinions of teachers on the virtual modality of the program, the strengths and weaknesses illustrated exemplify that the time difference was the main problem observed by teachers. On the contrary, several positive aspects have been detected, for instance there was no need to find a host family for the language assistants, who had indeed no travel costs to bear. Besides, the time difference and the fact that the assistant was not present in the classroom, allowed for one-to-one sessions, for which students needed preparation and motivation. In fact, a quite widespread opinion of teachers was that only motivated and interested students could fully profit from the virtual program of language assistants. Nevertheless, results show that opinions on this matter are generally positive. With regard to the second research question, the 62,5% of participants affirm that the WAATI program of virtual language assistants has in some way enhanced students' autonomy. However, 2/3 of the negative answers are ascribable to external reasons, such as school restrictions or lack of independence in some students. Positive answers include the fact that students gained more independence since they had to be prepared for each session with the language assistant, they had to take initiative and communicate more effectively because of the use of technology, they had to identify their own areas of weaknesses and to take responsibility over their learning process. These elements provided by participants are significant in that they can be attributed to learner autonomy. To sum up, according to the majority of answers it would seem that students had effectively improved some aspects of learner autonomy thanks to the virtual program of language assistants. For what concerns the third research question addressed at the beginning of this section, the validity of the virtual program was at the center of one of the open questions of the questionnaire. The results highlight that for the large majority of the participants the program remains a valid option for the future, since it was beneficial for students,

teachers and assistants, and helped to a great extent students in gaining more confidence with the target language. The only negative answer stresses the problems due to time difference and underlines that only motivated students took advantage of the virtual assistant. Since just one answer is negative it can be said that the virtual program of language assistants was successful in helping students, and according to the opinions of teachers could be a valid option for the future.

Conclusions

In the last two years the spread of Coronavirus has modified the approach to distance and online learning, opening new frontiers and overthrowing detrimental limits and bias. Distance education has become an undisputed need in many cases, and this necessity led to a rediscovery of the benefits and advantages of distance learning. Motivated by the compelling need and reshaping of distance education, this work investigates the relation between distance learning and learner autonomy. These two phenomena were rarely associated before in literature, more specifically no research studied this relation in a post-pandemic light. Thus, this study is aimed at a better understanding of the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, in the light of a case study involving a virtual language assistants. In particular, Chapter I, II, and III investigates the theoretical background for this research, namely Distance Learning, Learner Autonomy and Distance Language Learning. Besides, the WAATI program of virtual language assistants will be illustrated in detail, being the case study of this research. The following chapters, IV, V and VI focus on the study and results obtained from the questionnaire. The questionnaire explores indeed the attitude and beliefs of teachers towards learner autonomy, following the report of Borg and Al Busaidi (2012), and investigates teachers' perception of ICT using Rinesko and Kurniawan (2020) model. The results obtained indicate a positive attitude of teachers towards the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning. More specifically, participants seemed to agree on the fact that ICT and more generally distance learning have positive effects on the independence and autonomy of students, including the fact that they seem to be more responsible over their process of learning. Factors such as motivation and the preexisting level of autonomy prior to the virtual program have been reported to be essential to the development of learner autonomy in students. The results obtained draw a starting point for further research, covering the domain of distance learning and learner autonomy. The fact that distance learning might be seen in a different light, hopefully more positive and constructive, is one among the

educational implications of this work. At the beginning of the pandemic, and most of all in Italy, the management of distance education was disorganized and consequently distance learning was seen as extremely unproductive and problematic. The aim of this study, and one among its educational implications, is that it demonstrates that distance education has great potentiality, when delivered properly. Thanks to this research, distance learning can now be seen as an opportunity to foster students' autonomy. The Italian school system could yearn for a digital integration, in order to properly embrace and manage online and distance learning. Distance education should not be seen as a burden and limit, but as an opportunity to develop and promote specific abilities and skills, both of students and teachers. Virtual programs such as the WAATI program of virtual language assistants constitute an example of positive and constructive digital integration and distance education. In the same way, other institutions could follow a similar model, with the purpose of promoting a positive view of digital tools within the educational field. To resume: the results of this work indicate a positive attitude of teachers towards the relation between distance education and learner autonomy, and they prove the feasibility of delivering such a program remotely. Hence and more importantly, findings open plenty of possibilities for a field of study bound to become more and more important and relevant over the years.

Strengths and weaknesses of the study

The strengths of this study lay in its nature and purpose: to explore the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, especially with regard to a virtual program born in the pandemic period. As highlighted before, only few studies analyze the dynamics between learner autonomy and distance learning, and there is no research investigating this on the light of post-pandemic distance education. Moreover, this study may be of great importance for further research, being unique in its genre. The fact that the case study at the center of the work exemplifies the two phenomena studied also gives a sense of functionality and practicality to the study. Besides, the

results of this research constitute an additional reason to see distance education in a positive light, since it seems to foster learner autonomy. The weaknesses of this research are to be ascribed to the lack of substantial and exhaustive literature on the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, and to the limitations of the case study, being specific to a restricted reality. Indeed, the questionnaire is restricted to the teachers' opinions, and no empirical mean to test students' learner autonomy before and after the program was used. This could be a valid aspect to deepen for further research, besides, distance education seems to be still necessary, and it is likely that there will be a growing need to study all its features and potentialities in the next years. Although this research presents some limits, the study constitutes a relevant and current investigation on two issues rarely correlated: distance learning and learner autonomy. The investigation that follows bring interesting perspectives for further research, as it will be explained in the next section.

Implications and suggestions for further research

Implications for further research include an increased awareness concerning the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning. The fact that distance education is often associated to negative aspects and limited results in terms of learning outcomes needs to be reconsidered in the light of this study. As a matter of fact, distance learning and ICT have become essential tools within the domain of education, and in the next years they are likely to assume more and more relevance and importance. For these reasons, the benefits of distance learning need to be studied and analyzed, and this was one of the main objectives of the present study. This research was restricted to the opinions and perspective of teachers on the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, thus, a suggestion for further research may be to extend the study to the opinions of students, or eventually to test their level of autonomy using appropriate tools and methods. Besides, this work used a case study

as an empirical way to approach the matter, but future research could set up a proper experiment with accurate variables and data. What emerged from this study was that teachers see in a positive manner the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning; however, this is just the first step towards what could become a relevant issue within the field of distance education studies. Hence, the aim of this research was to shed some light on the relation between learner autonomy and distance learning, and the results open plenty of possibilities to properly deepen and study the issue.

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Appendix: The questionnaire

Hereafter the questionnaire used for this research will be reported. It includes the four sections exemplified earlier in this paper and the presentation section with instructions and details of the investigation.

Learner Autonomy and Distance Learning

This investigation is conducted by Aurora Zecchinato, with the supervision of Dr. Monica Banzato and Dr. Francesca Coin.

We would like you to help us by answering the following questions concerning Learner Autonomy and Distance Learning. In particular, the case study at the center of this investigation is the WAATI virtual language assistants program.

This survey is conducted as a part of a thesis research for a master degree in Language Sciences at Ca Foscari, the University of Venice. It is aimed at understanding the potential consequences of distance learning on the learner autonomy of students, by analyzing the perspective of teachers.

Completing the survey will take approximately fifteen minutes. Your responses will be confidential and the data collected will be treated accordingly to the Italian law for privacy, only for research and educational purposes.

We are interested in your personal opinion. Please give your answers sincerely as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation.

Thank you so much for your time and help!

***Campo obbligatorio**

Learner Autonomy

In this section you will be asked to give your opinion about the statements below by ticking ONE answer for each. You will have to choose on a scale of five in which 1 correspond to strongly disagree and 5 to strongly agree. Do not focalize on your current job, rather, consider your experience as a language teacher more in general.

1. Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

2. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

3. Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

5. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

6. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

9. It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

10. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

11. Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

12. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

13. Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centred classrooms. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

14. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

15. Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

16. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

17. Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

18. Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access centre. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

19. Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

20. Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

21. Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

22. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials and methods of assessment. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

23. Learner-centred classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

24. Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

25. Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

26. Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

27. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

28. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

29. The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

30. The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

31. Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

32. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

**Learner
Autonomy
and ICT**

Give your opinion about the statements below by ticking ONE answer for each. At the end of the present section you will be also asked to answer to four open questions. Please, try to be as much honest and authentic as possible in your answers.

33. Online resources are a key source for finding learning materials independently. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

34. Social media enhance collaborative learning. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

35. Web-based online resources inspire students' curiosity. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

36. ICT presentation tools increase students' confidence. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

37. E-learning increases students' flexibility in learning. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

38. Apps or games can increase students' motivation. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

39. Apps or games are suitable for evaluating learning progress. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

40. Online resources are suitable for choosing topics of learning. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

41. The use of online learning platforms and softwares enhance students' autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

42. During the pandemic of Covid-19 the massive usage of ICT in teaching has positively affected students' independence and autonomy in learning. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

43. An excessive usage of ICT in a language classroom may be counter-productive. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

44. Today there is a need to use and take advantage of ICT within the language classroom environment. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

45. In your opinion, how much students' can benefit from the usage of ICT within the language classroom environment? *

46. Overall, did the pandemic allow for a positive rediscovery of ICT within the classroom? Why? *

47. In your opinion, has the usage of ICT and video conferencing tools helped the students in gaining more autonomy? Why? *

48. Do you think that the virtual language assistant program could be a valid option for the future? If you can, explain your answer.

**WAATI virtual language
assistant program**

In this section you will find close and open questions about your role of teacher during the WAATI virtual language assistant program.

49. In what school do you teach? *

- Primary school
- Secondary school
- Altro: _____

50. What is your nationality?

- Italian
- Australian
- Altro: _____

51. Years of experience as an Italian language teacher in WA *

- 0-4
- 5-9
- 10-14
- 15-19
- Altro: _____

52. Did you participate to the WAATI virtual language assistant program? *

Yes

No

Altro: _____

53. Can you list at least one strength and one weakness of the virtual modality of the language assistants program? *

54. In your opinion, did the virtual language assistants program enhance the independence and autonomy of students? Why? *

Virtual mode
and in
presence
modality

In this last section the focus will be the virtual modality of the program as correlated to learner autonomy. Please, give your opinion about the statements below by ticking ONE answer for each.

55. If compared to the in presence modality, with the virtual mode the students seemed to have enhanced their autonomy in learning. *

1 2 3 4

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

56. Students had a positive reaction to the virtual modality of the program. *

1 2 3 4

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

57. Thanks to the virtual modality, students learned to interact with new technologies and online learning tools. *

1 2 3 4

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

58. After the program, there was an improvement of students' autonomy in the language classroom environment. *

1 2 3 4

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

59. The virtual mode of the program had a positive impact on the students' autonomy. *

	1	2	3	4	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree
