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Implementing focus on form in Skype-based instruction

A case study

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*To Alex and those who helped me
and supported me during the past months.*

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Abstract

The last decades have witnessed increasing use of synchronous computer-mediated communication, of which Skype, a VoIP software, is a representative. Due to its integrating visual communication with written communication in real time, Skype could arguably be considered as a good candidate for implementing a type of language teaching which relies heavily on the communication of meaning but at the same time fosters the development of grammatical and lexical knowledge through what Long and Robinson have defined as focus on form, namely “an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features [...] triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production” (1998). The research is a case study aiming at investigating the effectiveness of focus on form in Skype-based teaching on a subject learning Italian as a foreign language. Such effectiveness is interpreted both in terms of acquisition of the forms brought into focus (intake) and in terms of proficiency in the foreign language; moreover, the pedagogical implications of the use of a VoIP setting for language teaching are also a matter of investigation. The subject was administered 20 Skype sessions (10 oral sessions through videoconferencing and 10 written sessions through Skype written chat) over a 5-week period. The instruction was carried out through tasks aiming at fostering the learner’s spoken and written use of the most problematic forms, which were previously identified through a pre-assessment conversation. After the instructional period, knowledge of the forms emerged as LREs - language-related episodes, according to Williams (2001) – was tested through two post-tests, which were taken as a source for drawing conclusions alongside with other materials such as a teacher’s diary and various field notes. The results showed some differences between the acquisition of grammatical forms and the acquisition of lexical forms, in that lexicon was recovered with more difficulty by the learner in the long run. Some slight improvement in proficiency was also registered. Although some hypotheses on possible ways of improving language teaching on a VoIP

platform are provided, the limited scope of this case study necessarily calls for further research in the field of Skype-based instruction.

1. Introduction

*“[...] just speaking and writing are not enough.
Learners need to be pushed to make use of their resources;
they need to have their linguistic abilities stretched to their fullest.”*
(Swain, 1993)

This research is an attempt to combine one of the most interesting approaches that have been developed in the last years in the field of second language teaching, and especially applied to communicative-oriented classes, with one of the latest technological tools that are nowadays increasingly present in our lives, Skype.

The interest in so-called *focus on form* arises from one of the major issues raised by SLA research: the role of grammar in L2 instruction, and the degree of explicitness to which the learner attention should be directed to linguistic features. The issue has sparked a debate as to whether and how to include grammar in the language curriculum: the history of language teaching shows an alternation of different approaches, from the normative approach, which attached a primary, if not exclusive, role to grammar, to the more recent communicative approach, which based itself on communication as the first goal of language instruction. It is the latter, in particular, that is the object of the present study, with a dominant focus on the research conducted in order to gauge the effectiveness of attention to grammar form in communicative-oriented classes. The study originates from Swain’s (1985) so-called *Output Hypothesis*, which for some respects

represents the counterpart to Krashen's "natural approach" and *Input Hypothesis* (1982), according to which comprehensible input is what enables the learner to acquire a language subconsciously. The study also draws on Long's definition of *focus on form*, i.e. "during an otherwise meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one or more students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (1998). Strictly connected with focus on form is Schmidt's *noticing hypothesis*, according to which he claims that noticing is a prerequisite for converting input to intake (1990). Focus on form is then motivated by Long's *interaction hypothesis* (1981), which claims that interaction between learners and other speakers is a crucial site for developing language. These approaches and contributions, given their deep interest in the communicative nature of language teaching, have been applied by some researchers to modern CALL technologies, such as chat, which foster a collaborative way of learning language through the negotiation of meaning by practising speaking and writing. In fact, the increasing popularity of online, web-based education – which is probably going to represent a big share of language education in the future – calls for a reflection as to which approach best matches the specific requirements and nature of these tools. Focus on form, as a result of negotiation between peers, has been judged a very appropriate approach. The findings of Pellettieri (1999) and others have contributed to the current research on the field by investigating the role of cyberspace and CALL in the development of language competence through interaction between native and nonnative speakers, but also between nonnative speakers. This work is a case study aiming at investigating the application of the focus-on-form approach to Skype, whose usage for distance language learning is becoming increasingly popular. Unlike the majority of the previous studies, this research has been conducted in the field of foreign language learning, and represents an experiment on what impact on language learning the focus-on-

form approach might have, and whether it can be suitable for this particular tool, context and learner.

The work is organized as follows. First an exhaustive review of the existing literature on focus on form that is most relevant to the goals of the research will be provided. Secondly, considerations of the latest advancements in educational technology that allow for a natural implementation of the focus on form approach will be made. Thirdly, the experiment conducted with a Norwegian student of Italian as a foreign language who received a one-month instruction, both oral and written, on a distance basis through the most famous and used VoIP technology, Skype, will be presented. The methodology used, based on noticing, focus on form and tasks, will be described, and the findings of the study will be reported and discussed. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn based on the objectives and questions set at the beginning of the research.

2. State of the art

In this section a review of the theories and findings that are judged as the most relevant for the present research will be provided. The section will start with an introduction on focus on form, and illustrate the theories and concepts related to it – noticing, interaction, negotiation of forms and task-based instruction. Finally, the implementation of focus on form to a selection of technological web-based tools will be discussed.

2.1 Focus on form and communicative language teaching

Long and Robinson define focus on form as “an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one or more students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production” (1998). The concept is a result of increasing

interest in immersion and naturalistic language acquisition studies, which have been carried out by many researchers, especially Swain (1985), who documented the faults of immersion education through a series of studies, and who demonstrated that second language learners cannot achieve target-like competence when learning is exclusively meaning-focused and experiential. It also stems from the necessity of introducing more effective and non-obtrusive grammar instruction during language lessons whose main goal is meaning, and not grammar, thus breaking the tradition of normative approaches and reasserting the importance of grammar.

In order to better understand the context in which the concept of focus on form was developed, the definitions of two other concepts that were formulated in contrast with it, namely *focus on forms* and *focus on meaning*, will be provided.

Focus on forms takes place when teachers focus their attention on analyzing the L2 and breaking it down into fragments of language, i.e. words, collocations, phonemes, intonation, rules, stress patterns, structures, notions or functions (Long & Robinson, 1998), which are then included in what has been termed a *synthetic syllabus*. Synthetic syllabi, which are very popular among teachers, assume however that second language acquisition is a process of accumulating entities. This is not the case of SLA, which, on the contrary, appears to take place according to natural developmental sequences. In fact, learners do not suddenly reach a target-like mastery of a form or of a fragment of language – they rather pass through different stages which allow for a form-function mapping. Language learning, in short, exhibits developmental patterns, which synthetic syllabi do not clearly take into consideration. Strictly connected to a *focus-on-forms* approach are those methods such as Grammar Translation, Audiolingual Method, Audiovisual Method, Total Physical Response and others. One way of tackling the shortcomings of this approach is the so-called *consciousness-raising*, which aims at making the students aware of the new forms in the input and thus respecting their

personal learning patterns; however, this approach still relies heavily on an external synthetic syllabus (Long & Robinson, 1998).

Focus on meaning is a reaction to the inefficiency of the above approach. Advocated by teachers, researchers and course designers, this approach claims that only by being exposed to a comprehensible target language one can successfully learn a second or foreign language, just as children do for a first language. As the name suggests, the main focus is on meaning, whereas language is no longer treated as a goal but as a means for achieving fluency and communication. The main representative of this approach is Krashen (1982), who is known for his *input hypothesis*, aiming to explain how second language acquisition works. According to this hypothesis, learner language competence improves and develops following a “natural order” when he/she is exposed to comprehensible input that is one step beyond his current stage of competence. In order to explain this better, Krashen resorts to its “i + 1” formula, which illustrates the level at which comprehensible input should be, where “i” represents the input and “+1” the next stage of acquisition. He therefore puts a case for naturalistic immersion acquisition as the most appropriate and effective method to achieve linguistic competence. According to him and to the *focus-on-meaning* approach in general, learning therefore occurs incidentally, subconsciously, since adolescent and adult learners are considered capable of inducing rules and access innate knowledge from merely receiving sufficient positive evidence (Long & Robinson, 1998). However, there are several claims to be made against this popular view. Child language acquisition has been demonstrated by many as to be peculiar and different from the way adults and adolescents acquire a second language. One case study supporting this claim is that of Schmidt’s (1983). He investigated the development of English language ability of an adult immersed in the second language context (Honolulu), who acquired the language without formal instruction over a 3-year period merely by interacting to satisfy his communicative need. Although becoming

fluent and confident in the target language, he did not eventually display native-like competence, especially insofar as grammar competence was concerned. Swain (1985) shares the same opinion as Schmidt, by stating that French immersion students in Canada, despite becoming fluent and capable of understanding the target language at a native level, could not develop their accuracy to a target-like level. For instance, she found that, although having been exposed at length to a certain form, the learners did not acquire it. The most straightforward consequence of these studies is therefore that positive evidence and experiential, meaning-focused instruction alone are not enough in order for adult and adolescent learners to acquire a language at a target-like level, which calls for another, more efficient method for language learning.

Focus on form aims at bridging the gap between attention to form and communicative needs of language learning, between non-interventionism and traditional language teaching, and represents therefore a more reasonable approach to tackle the problem of grammar acquisition, without making grammar forms the goal of communication but instead a means to achieve it. Studies have highlighted the importance of a certain degree of grammar instruction for some forms in order for the learner to achieve target-like competence. The goal of a focus-on-form approach is precisely that of occasionally turning the learner's attention to grammar forms (Long, 1981) in an unobtrusive way, so that the communicative aims of language learning are maintained.

Strictly related to this new approach – which appears as a compromise between focus on forms and focus on meaning – is Schmidt's *Noticing Hypothesis* (1990), as will be described in the following section.

2.1.1 The Noticing Hypothesis

The *Noticing Hypothesis* stems from the interest in the role of conscious processes in SLA. The main representative of this theory is Schmidt (1990), according to whom

noticing, that is to say, conscious awareness, represents a necessary condition for learning. In particular, the researcher claims that the part of the input that is noticed by the learner becomes intake. Strong evidence for the close relationship between noticing and target-like use of forms in production comes from one of his most famous studies, conducted with Frota (1986). The study reports Schmidt's personal experience as a learner of Brazilian Portuguese in Brazil, where he spent five months. He had taken a five-week course, and spent the rest of the time interacting with native speakers. He had kept a journal and had decided to be tape recorded in order to keep track of his acquisition of Portuguese. He eventually found that there was a great correspondence between the linguistic forms that emerged from his output and the forms that he had noticed and kept a record of. If a particular form had been taught, it did not automatically show up in the researcher's production; on the contrary, those forms that had never appeared in the input of his interlocutor were absent in his speech, and forms that had been more frequent in the input had shown up with much greater likelihood than those that had appeared only a few times. In short, what had caught Schmidt's attention during his interaction with native speakers was subsequently used in his output. The study therefore puts the case for a strong relationship between noticing a form and the emergence of that form in production.

Nevertheless, noticing is not sufficient for acquiring a form, since some forms, despite having been noticed, had not been retained in the long-term memory because they had not been deeply processed, as Craik and Lockart's research indicates (1972). In fact, as Schmidt points out (1990), not everything that is perceived by our senses is preserved in memory. All information is processed in the short-term memory, but only the material that is selectively attended to and noticed can be processed into long-term memory. The *Noticing Hypothesis* therefore rejects what is referred to as *subliminal learning*, that is to say, learning that occurs without the conscious observation of specific items in the input. Being a certain degree of consciousness necessary for acquiring the

target language, Schmidt's hypothesis may seem to go against the existence of natural orders and developmental sequences in SLA. However, this contrast is only apparent, since, as White (1987) suggests, intake, therefore what is noticed according to Schmidt, is defined by the learner's internal grammar, which is precisely organized following natural sequences. A positive correlation between noticing and stages of L2 development is thus possible.

Noticing depends upon a series of factors and constraints. One such factor is identified by Schmidt in the learner's expectations. Whenever events are "either uninterpretable in the current contexts or so stable as to be part of the context", they remain unconscious (Baars, as cited in Schmidt, 1990: 143). Noticing can also be fostered through instruction: teachers can adopt a number of strategies which, through the manipulation of the input, aim at directing the learner's attention to specific forms. Input can be enhanced by strategies related to:

(1) the *frequency* of occurrence: for instance, if the form to which the teacher wishes to draw attention is the Present Simple 3rd person singular –s morpheme in English (he eatS), this specific form will repeatedly occur in the written and oral input;

(2) the *salience*, that is to say, the extent to which the specific form stands out, which can be achieved through, for instance, typographical enhancement, namely the strategic use of italics, bolding, enlargement and underlining (White, 1998) or by visual enhancement, such as highlighting and color-coding (Doughty & Williams, 1998b). These strategies are particularly useful when it comes to highlighting grammatical morphemes that are bound, contracted, asyllabic, unstressed or that vary in form (Slobin, as cited in Schmidt, 1990), which may result ambiguous and troublesome for the learner;

(3) the *emphasis* with which the linguistic form is uttered by the teacher.

As for factors influencing noticeability, Schmidt mentions also *skill level*, which also includes the automaticity of processing ability.

Also *tasks* and *task demands* can have a great, powerful influence on noticeability. In the following paragraph current literature on task-based instruction in relation to noticing will be briefly reviewed.

2.1.1.1 Noticing and task-based instruction

Ericsson and Simon (1984:13-14) were the first to put forward the theory that the information committed to memory coincides with the information that must be attended to in order to carry out a cognitive task. Ellis (2003) recently gave an extensive account on the characteristics of task-based instruction. First of all, he defines a *task* as an activity which “requires the participants to function primarily as *language users*” (2003:3), differently from exercises, which instead require the participants to be *language learners*. A task is therefore oriented towards communication and language use, since it seeks to develop proficiency in the target language by means of communication. Seen in this way, a task will necessarily incorporate some sort of “gap”, missing information that requires learners to resort to language in order to complete it. A task therefore engages cognitive processes, and can focus on any of the four language skills. Although a task is primarily meaning-focused, when performing a task the learners’ attention may also switch to form.

Another important distinction Ellis makes is between *unfocused* and *focused* tasks. The former are not designed with a specific form in mind, whereas focused tasks “aim to induce learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, for example, a grammatical structure” (2003:16). These are the kind of tasks that the present study will privilege, in that they can easily foster noticing while at the same time keeping to their traditional communicative goals. As a matter of fact, teachers often find focused tasks useful when it comes to giving the learners the opportunity to use a specific form in their output. Such tasks are not easy to design, however, since learners can always

avoid producing a task by resorting to a series of communicative strategies, e.g. using circumlocutions instead of the targeted word. Another type of focused task is one that makes the learner infer a certain rule by operating on the input, thus making language itself the content of a task. These are also called *consciousness raising* (CR) tasks (Ellis, as cited in Ellis, 2003).

As anticipated above, when talking about focused tasks, it is fundamental to highlight the difference between these and the so-called *situational grammar exercises*. Whereas focus on form is incidental in tasks, it is planned in situational grammar exercises, since the form in focus is pre-taught to the students.

There are two important psycholinguistic bases for focused tasks. The first basis is identified by Ellis (2003) in *skill-building theories* and *automatic processing*, the second one in *implicit learning*. *Automatic processing* contrasts with *controlled processing* in that the former attends to message content whereas the latter attends to form content. Automatization involves *restructuring* (McLaughlin, as cited in Ellis, 2003), that is to say the reorganization of knowledge. It also involves a proceduralization of *declarative knowledge* (Anderson, as cited in Ellis, 2003), i.e. learners use linguistic features without having to think about them. Automatic processes are argued to develop out of controlled processes – these would in fact regulate the transfer from short-term to long-term memory. In order for this to happen, learners need to practice the skill, albeit not in a mechanical way such as audiolingual and oral-situational methods advocate, but in an attempt to communicate. Communicative practice is therefore useful in order to proceduralize knowledge of linguistic features that were made available to the learners through declarative knowledge. Figure 1 summarizes how task-based language teaching works:

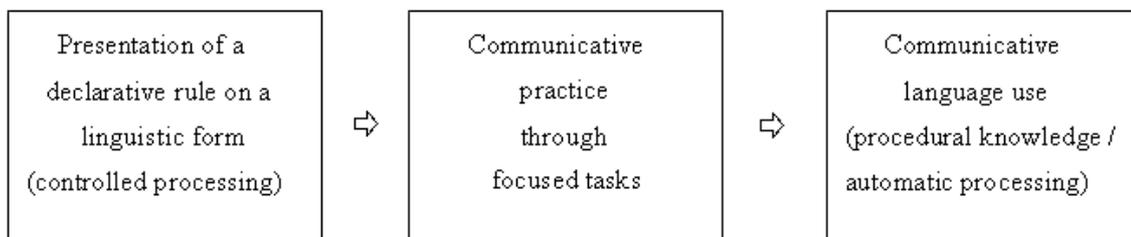


Figure 1. Phases of task-supported language teaching (Ellis, 2003:147)

Declarative knowledge appears to be useful in that it promotes noticing, since it helps to make a form salient to the learners and therefore noticeable. As consequence of this, it can be said that declarative knowledge promotes *implicit learning*, i.e. what characterizes L1 acquisition and, to some degree, L2 acquisition. It also helps *noticing the gap*, i.e. making the learners notice the difference between what they are saying and the actual use of that feature in the input. The role of explicit knowledge is illustrated in Fig. 2.

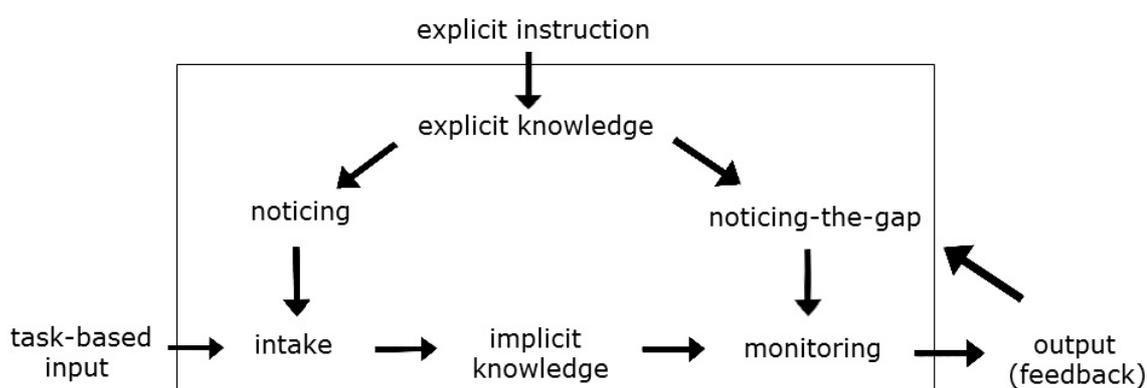


Figure 2. The role of explicit knowledge in implicit learning (Ellis, 2003:149)

According to this model, there are two stages in implicit learning: the intake, that is to say, the incorporation of forms in the short-term memory, and the acquisition of implicit knowledge, that makes forms enter long-term memory. In this process, explicit knowledge – which occurs through self-study or instruction, helps the intake by fostering noticing and monitoring by promoting noticing-the-gap during output.

To summarize, declarative knowledge is needed in order to activate implicit learning, whereas communicative practice, by involving real operating conditions, is a decisive element for turning declarative knowledge into proceduralized knowledge.

Ellis' account of task-based instruction in relation with noticing has been dealt with extensively in that it is one of the most important theories on which the present research has drawn. Another important point Ellis makes – which is particularly relevant for the present case study (§ 3) – is the close connection between tasks and language production, since the “gap” that tasks require learners to complete necessarily involves their speaking and writing. Related to this is Swain's *Output Hypothesis*, which will be explained in the following section.

2.1.2 Production, language acquisition and the Output Hypothesis

The role of production in promoting language acquisition is a matter of debate. A number of studies agree on the fact that output brings benefits for developing fluency, accuracy and pragmatic effectiveness. Improving one's production entails being able to speak without breaks or hesitations – by resorting to communicative strategies if necessary – limiting the number of errors and respecting certain pragmatic rules. In order to understand how language production fosters acquisition, a brief overview of the nature of linguistic knowledge will be provided.

2.1.2.1 The nature of linguistic knowledge

An extensive review of the different theories on the nature of linguistic ability is beyond the scope of this work. However, in this section some of the most relevant contributions will be briefly discussed, which will help later define how the relationship between

production and language acquisition can be accounted for.

Some advocate that explicit knowledge can convert into implicit knowledge (Sharwood Smith and DeKeyser, as cited in Ellis, 2003). Some, on the contrary, claim that explicit knowledge cannot convert into implicit knowledge as they represent two separate entities. One such view is Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis (1981), according to which explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge are two separate entities. Section § 2.111 reported Ellis' trade-off (2003): in his view, the function of explicit knowledge is to prime attention to form in the input so as to activate the acquisition of implicit knowledge.

When it comes to defining implicit knowledge, a major distinction has been drawn between *rule-based linguistic knowledge* and *exemplar-based linguistic knowledge*. The former, which stems from a generative theory of language, claims that implicit knowledge is a system of rules enabling the learner to build sentences productively. The latter, instead, is indebted to cognitive psychology in that it views linguistic knowledge as a series of formulaic chunks. Both modes of representing implicit knowledge are recognized to operate in the learner's mind. In fact, whereas a rule-based system emphasizes form, an exemplar-based system privileges meaning at the expense of grammar rules. The way in which they are connected with each other is well explained by Skehan's *dual-mode system* (1998). Drawing a comparison with first language acquisition, Skehan states that knowledge is first acquired lexically, then it is syntacticalized by the rule-based system, and finally undergoes a process of *relexicalization*, which makes lexical items appear in a number of different exemplars. In this way, the user can avail himself of a dual mode of processing, according to the different communicative contexts and goals. However, the device in charge of the automatic syntacticalization process – the LAD (Language Acquisition Device), first proposed by Chomsky (1965) – is only present in first language acquisition, and

especially during the so-called *critical period*, namely the first years of life. Therefore learners of a second language, not being able to avail themselves of this device, will have greater disposition towards a memory-, exemplar-based system. A way to foster a rule-based processing of language will be then to make the learner notice a form, in order for him/her to both analyze and synthesize language (Skehan, 1998). This entails that L2 speakers need to have a system that is open to noticing but at the same time capable of improving fluency and real-time language processing, according to a cyclic process. It appears therefore that accuracy – ensured by a rule-based system – and fluency – based on the fast retrieval of exemplars – must be traded off. However, it is possible to foster both components by, for instance, varying the type of tasks that the learners are required to perform (Ellis, 2003). Moreover, L2 learners’ problems in achieving both fluency and accuracy in language production can be facilitated, according to Ellis (2003), if time is allocated before the learners produce language. Another solution is identified by Krashen (1985) in the monitoring function, a sort of corrective planning which can occur subconsciously through implicit knowledge (“by feel”) or consciously through explicit knowledge.

2.1.2.2 The roles of output

Krashen (1985) claims that comprehensible input generates language development. By being exposed to input, the learner is able to learn from the material in a receptive modality, and turn it into efficient output. However, research on immersion programs has shown that exposure to comprehensible input is not enough in order to develop accuracy, despite other language aspects, for instance, those concerning discourse and sociolinguistic competence, may be performed well by the learner. The most comprehensive study of this nature is from Swain (1985), who investigated different traits

of language performance by studying learners of French as a second language in a French immersion program in Canada. These types of learners, she reports, do not make frequent use of French outside school – their main source of input comes from their native-speaker teacher talk, from nonnative peer talk, and also from activities that they carry out at school aimed to develop literacy. She analyzed the students' output and she found out that, despite being good from a sociolinguistic and pragmatic point of view, it lacked in accuracy. Starting from Krashen's assumption that comprehensible input is the only cause for second language acquisition (1985), she eventually questions this hypothesis by identifying another, equally important source for it – language exchanges, that is to say interaction. In fact, she observes that considering comprehensible input as the only cause for second language acquisition is a disputable fact. The reason why immersion students do not achieve native-like competence is due to the lack of attention to form that characterizes comprehension, which is only focused on meaning. In order to be understood, input does not need syntactic analysis. Output is different in that it requires a focus on form in order to be performed – production necessitates syntactic processing, which “pushes” the learners to make use of their linguistic resources to produce messages. Hence the relevance of what Swain terms *comprehensible output*.

Reporting Swain's view (1985), Skehan (1998) claims that production has six roles. The first role is to generate better input: in fact, by speaking to another person, one receives a more finely tuned input thanks to corrective feedback (for the nature and the role of feedback see § 2.1.4.2) (Long, 1985). In this view, output serves to negotiate better input, which could not be achieved by simply listening or reading. It is on these premises that the theory of negotiation of meaning is built (see § 2.1.3), which sees interaction – in the forms of clarification requests, confirmation checks and others – the opportunity for the learner's interlanguage to develop by being constantly restructured. In this way, the learner produces what is called *modified output*, i.e. output that has been

modified through reformulations of utterances after the provision of feedback by a native speaker of the target language.

The second role of output is to force syntactic processing. In fact, as Swain (1985) points out, when the learner is engaged in a conversation, he cannot simply extract meaning from input, since it would not be enough. He will have to pay attention to the mechanisms used by his interlocutor to produce speech, in order to make use of the same mechanisms when he will have to produce output – that is to say, he will have to attend to the syntax that rules output.

The third function assigned to output is to test out hypotheses. Schachter (1984) extensively reports the benefits to what is defined as *negative input*, to which he attaches a primary importance for second language development. In his view, negative input “can be roughly characterized as information provided to the learner that her utterance was in some way deviant or unacceptable to the native speaker, i.e. that it wasn’t understandable, wasn’t grammatically correct, wasn’t situationally appropriate, etc.” (Schachter, 1984: 168). Negative input includes, for instance, corrections, confirmation checks and clarification checks. As Swain correctly points out (1985), negative input doesn’t necessarily include new linguistic elements - its most important role is that of providing the learner with feedback, in order to push them to revise their utterances. Testing out hypotheses, that is to say, trying out different ways of expressing oneself to see if they are effective for communication, is therefore another role assigned to output, and one that is intimately bound up with the provision of negative input by the interlocutor.

The fourth role of output is identified by Swain (1985) - and reported by Skehan (1998) - in its developing learner automaticity, i.e. the ability to retrieve in real time one’s language resources and therefore achieve natural speed and rhythm. Output allows the learner to reach this since the only way to become fluent in a language is by frequently using it and producing the different components of utterances rather

effortlessly. In this view, speaking can help automatizing language production.

Extensive speaking practice is what allows the learner to develop discourse skills. Always according to Skehan (1998), this is the fifth role of output. Only by participating in discourse will the learner practise the ability to build conversations and, also, to negotiate meaning, which is a primary characteristic of interaction (more on this in § 2.1.3).

The last role assigned to output is that of developing a personal voice. The more a person speaks, the more opportunities he/she is given to develop a personal manner of speaking, that is to say, of not being dependent on what other people say. For this reason, Skehan (1998) argues that it is important for teachers to provide conversations whose topics are ones that the learner enjoys or is passionate about.

Another point has to be made here regarding production and output. Skehan (1998) suggests that production is characterized by three different aspects: (1) fluency, that is to say the ability to mobilize one's system in order to communicate a message in real time, which draws on the learner memory-based system, (2) accuracy, which is the ability to produce complex messages according to one's interlanguage and (3) complexity, i.e. the use of elaborate structures. Both accuracy and complexity require syntactic processing and draw on the learner rule-based system. This is why output has to be "pushed" for the learner to make use of his/her syntactical knowledge.

The theories that try to give an account of the role of output in second language acquisition are various. In this study, Widdowson's view (1989) will be taken as the most satisfactory one: he proposes that learners pack and unpack their pre-assembled, lexicalized units that make up the memory-based system. Production can be seen as a way to connect the two systems – the rule-based system and the memory-based system (see § 2.1.2.1) – by having the learner try out the formulaic chunks stored in the latter and process them.

Hence the relevance of output in second language acquisition. However, what can be observed from the way traditional language classes are held in the majority of cases is that learners have very few chances to engage in two-way exchanges that contemplate the negotiation of meaning and form. The most common practice involves the teacher talking to the students and the students listening to him/her. Skype learning, language tandems and other similar opportunities could therefore make the difference in supporting and complementing second language acquisition.

2.1.3 Interaction and second language acquisition

Swain points out that “negotiating meaning is a necessary first step to grammatical acquisition. It paves the way for future exchanges, where, because the message is understood, the learner is free to pay attention to form” (1985: 248). The relationship between output and negotiation, as stated by Swain, is clear. The most important contribution to research on negotiation, however, comes from the so-called *Interaction Hypothesis*. Usually credited to Long (1980, 1996), this theory has been extensively dealt with since. Before Long, Hatch (1978) suggested that learners can acquire a second language by carrying out conversations and not simply by using in conversations what they have learnt in interaction.

Krashen (1985) contrasted the idea that learners necessarily have to speak in order to learn a language. To support this idea, he resorts to two case studies (Fourcin, 1975; Lenneberg, 1962, as cited in Long, 1986) of learners who learnt a language despite their limited opportunity to speak it. After having reviewed a series of classroom studies, Ellis (1992, as cited in Long, 1996) concluded that the beneficial effects of “controlled” production practice cannot be demonstrated. However, he acknowledges the importance of practice to raise one’s consciousness.

Research on “pushed” output indicates that task-based interaction produces more

effects than free conversation, since the latter lacks specific outcomes. The *Interaction Hypothesis* bases itself upon what Long calls interactional modifications (1980, as cited in Ellis, 1999), which contrast with input modifications which characterize instead foreigner talk. Always according to Long, “negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the native speaker or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (1996: 451-452). A focus is therefore put on the negotiation of meaning. Alongside the negotiation of meaning there is also the *negotiation of form*. This includes the following actions: elicitation, clarification requests, repetition of errors, and metalinguistic clues (Lyster, 1998), through which the learner is engaged in the process of filling the gaps in his interlanguage by temporarily attend to a specific form that is problematic, or which has raised questions or doubts. Both types of negotiation can occur in a conversation, although the negotiation of form is particularly involved in the present case study (§ 3).

Varonis and Gass (1985) gave their contribution on the subject by identifying negotiation of meaning with a breakdown in communication that needs to be resolved by the participants through conversational exchanges. They divide the negotiation act into a trigger – the result of non-understanding by one of the two speakers - and a resolution – which consists of two parts: an indicator (I), with which one of the two participants let his/her interlocutor know that something has not been understood, a response (R), and an optional reaction to response (RR). Confirmation and comprehension checks, as well as clarification requests, usually assist participants in carrying out their exchanges and therefore in negotiating meaning. According to the *Interaction Hypothesis*, interaction promotes incidental acquisition. However, there has been a number of criticisms since the initial version of the *Interaction Hypothesis* appeared. For instance, some, like Sato (1986, as cited in Ellis, 1999), stated that some parts of the L2 cannot be the object of

negotiation. In order to respond to these issues, Long (1996) developed a later version of the *Interaction Hypothesis*, in which he stated that negotiation helps learning a language in that it promotes noticing: by negotiating meaning, in fact, the learner has time to attend to form. This is especially true of beginner learners, who find it particularly difficult to attend to meaning and form simultaneously, as VanPatten correctly points out (1989).

The *Interaction Hypothesis* also acknowledges that *modified output* and *negative evidence* are important factors that contribute to language acquisition when interacting. The notion of *modified output* has already been discussed in § 2.1.2.2 and refers to the correct reformulation of utterances by the learner following the provision of feedback by a native speaker during a conversational exchange. *Negative evidence* can be seen as the feedback given by the learner's interlocutor to the learner as evidence of what is grammatical (Long, 1996). *Recasts* and *explicit corrections* are examples of negative evidence, which fall into the more general category of what is called *reactive focus on form*, which will be dealt with in the following section. In a nutshell, a *recast* is a correct reformulation of the learner's incorrect utterance that does not interrupt the communicative flow, and therefore is less obtrusive than explicit corrections. An example of recast given by a native speaker is represented by the following:

- (1) NS: and right next to her a phone rings?
NNS: forring?
NS: a phone? Telephone? Is there a telephone next to her?
NNS: yeah...I don't have a telephones picture.
NS: you don't have a picture of a telephone?
(Pica 1996, as reported in Ellis, 1999)

Research indicates that recasts are effective in child L1 acquisition, since children are more likely to repeat those utterances. Recast therefore appear to work better than *models*

that aim at showing the same grammatical aspects (Long and Robinson, 1998). The effectiveness of recasts in fostering noticing has also been proven for adult second language acquisition. However, these results were produced by studies that were still in their infancy. Ellis (1999) highlights some of the most evident problems one must face when dealing with recasts. First of all, the form focused by the recast should be processed and attended to by the learner, in order for the recast to be effective. Second, sometimes it is not easy for the learner to distinguish between a confirmation check – which can be seen as a negotiation move – and a recast, if intonation is not used as a differentiating trait.

In the following section a review of the different types of focus on form that can be provided during an interactional exchange or a communicative class in general will be given.

2.1.4 Types of focus on form

The previous sections aimed at exploring the relationship between focus on form, interaction and noticing. These are central concepts for the present research, in that they represent its theoretical basis. This first part will be now concluded by reviewing the nature of focus on form and the different focus-on-form techniques that can be adopted during a communicative language class, especially during a class that is centered around the notion of interaction.

2.1.4.1 Proactive and reactive focus on form

A first categorization must be made between *proactive focus on form* and *reactive focus on form*. Focus on form is *proactive* when it is planned in advance by teachers, who will

therefore design tasks or adopt strategies in order to achieve this goal (Doughty and Williams, 1998b). It seems that this type of approach is more feasible in classroom settings. In these cases, the teacher may want to utilize tasks that lead the students to focus on a specific learning problem. One such example is what Tomasello and Herron (1988) describe as *garden path*. A *garden path* is a method for teaching grammatical exceptions, which consists of having the students induce a rule out of overgeneralization and subsequently focus on their error. As for other learning problems that do not stem from overgeneralization, one way to tackle these through a proactive focus on form could be that of designing tasks which have the students practise a specific form in focus. As will be more thoroughly explained in § 3.5, this approach has been adopted for the present study. The role of tasks in promoting noticing has already been discussed in § 2.1.1.1. Nevertheless, as Doughty and Williams correctly point out, a proactive focus on form involving task design would necessarily require what Loschky and Bley Vroman termed *task essentialness* (1993: 132). This principle implies that the use of a specific target form is necessary in order to successfully complete a task, that is to say, that specific form represents the essence of the task itself, of what will be attended to.

Not always is a specific form essential for completing a task: sometimes the task can be performed easily without it – what is defined as *task naturalness*. *Task naturalness* prescribes that a certain form is likely to occur naturally in a task, but is not necessary for completing the task. What is called *task utility* (Loschky and Bley-Vroman, 1993), instead, implies that a particular structure makes task completion easy, although it is not necessary in order to perform it. It is also important to note that *task essentialness* is easier to implement in comprehension, whereas it is more rarely achievable in production, where task naturalness and task utility prevail.

Reactive focus on form, instead, occurs when the teacher draws the learner attention to a form “on the spot”, as a reaction to an error. This approach seems to be a

fitting one for the original definition of focus on form by Long and Robinson (1998), which has been given in § 2.1. Being focus on form defined as “an occasional shift of attention”, its incidental, responsive nature makes a reactive type of focus as the most natural approach to adopt during a communicative language lesson, where interaction prevails, such as the language lessons carried out online for the present research. Whether the form in focus should belong to the learner’s next developmental stage or not is a matter of debate (Doughty and Williams, 1998b). Nevertheless, it has been observed that a reactive stance is more effective if the learners share all the same L1 background (Doughty and Williams, 1998b).

In the following section the different types of focus on form will be explored and analyzed in terms of their level of obtrusiveness.

2.1.4.2 Types of focus on form and degree of obtrusiveness

There are many ways a form can be focused on during a communicative language lesson. Table 1, from Doughty and Williams (1998: 258) but edited with the inclusion of an item (“explicit corrective feedback”), shows the different tasks and techniques that can be defined as *focus on form* ranged according to their degree of obtrusiveness, i.e. the degree to which they interrupt the flow of communication.

	Unobtrusive ←					→ Obtrusive
Input flood	X					
Task-essential language	X					
Input enhancement ^a		X				
Negotiation		X				
Recast ^b			X			
Output enhancement			X			
Interaction enhancement				X		
Dictogloss ^c					X	
Consciousness-raising tasks ^d					X	
Input processing						X
Garden path						X
Explicit corrective feedback						X

^a For example, typographical or intonational.

^b As implemented by Doughty and Varela (1998)

^c As implemented by Swain (1998).

^d The tasks refer to those used by Fotos (1993, 1994, as cited in Doughty and Williams, 1998: 258)

Table 1. Degree of obtrusiveness of focus on form (Doughty and Williams, 1998: 258)

As the table suggests, input flood represents the less obtrusive focus on form technique: by simply providing learners with input, no focus on form can occur. Task-essential language focuses on forms that are, as the word suggests, essential in order for the task to be successfully completed (§ 2.1.4.1). *Input enhancement* (typographical or intonational enhancement) has already been discussed in § 2.1.1 and refers to the possibility for the teacher to put some forms in focus so that the learner may notice them. Negotiation, recasts, output enhancement – by which the learner’s output is enhanced and made better through conversational exchanges – and interaction enhancement are all peculiar features of interaction (§ 2.1.3). The *dictogloss* is a technique devised by Swain (1998), in which the teacher reads out a text, and subsequently has the students reconstruct it together by looking at their notes. The technique has been proven effective for noticing specific

grammatical forms. *Consciousness-raising tasks* are grammar problem-solving tasks that have the learner notice a grammatical structure without being taught explicitly its rule. *Input processing* refers to a type of instruction developed by VanPatten (1996), according to which input is manipulated and made richer for intake. Its purpose is to alter how learners process input in order for them to develop more efficient strategies for language acquisition. Finally, the garden path technique has already been mentioned in § 2.1.4.1 and refers to a task specifically designed in order for the learners to make overgeneralization errors and therefore to be corrected.

Corrective feedback is another type of focus on form, which can be distinguished between *explicit corrective feedback* and *implicit corrective feedback*. Recasts are an example of implicit corrective feedback, whereas *explicit corrective feedback* (which has been added in Table 1) refers to an overt indication of a problem in the learner's utterance by providing a model form. Explicit corrective feedback could be ranked as rather intrusive, since it overtly corrects a learner's utterance. Sometimes we talk about *metalinguistic feedback* when it provides students with comments or relevant information about their utterances (Rezaei, 2001). Research indicates that corrective feedback leads the learner to modify his/her output, which not only causes a consolidation of previous linguistic knowledge (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993), but also a subsequent incorporation and internalization of the target language forms (Gass & Varonis, 1989). The role of feedback is particularly important in synchronous computer-mediated language instruction, which will be discussed in § 2.2.1.1 .

This first part of the introduction, devoted to focus on form and its relationship with noticing, interaction and output, aimed at exploring the theoretical basis upon which the present study is built. In the second part of the introduction the world of ICT and CMC (Computer-mediated interaction) will be explored from an educational perspective. The

revolutionary changes brought about by Web 2.0 will be focused on and the most interesting studies in the field of interaction on the web, with a particular emphasis on Skype and chat technologies, will be reviewed.

2.2 Computer-mediated communication and second language acquisition

*“The computer is a machine, not a method.
The world of online communication is a vast new medium,
comparable in some ways to books, print, or libraries.
To our knowledge, no one has ever attempted to conduct research on
whether the book or the library is beneficial for language learning.
Seeking similar sweeping conclusions on the effects of the computer
or the Internet is equally futile.”*

(Warschauer & Meskill, 2000)

Research on computer-mediated communication applied to second language acquisition has been proliferating in the last decades. Exploring all the different perspectives on the relationship between new web-based technologies and language learning is beyond the scope of this paper, therefore only those studies that are considered more relevant for the present research will be focused on. In this section, first some considerations will be drawn as to the nature of so-called *Web 2.0* and the extremely important relationship it has with the provision of opportunities for output practice and interaction will be explained (§ 2.2.1). Subsequently, the most interesting studies in the field of computer-mediated communication will be reported, with a focus on those interactive tools such as Skype and online chats (§ 2.2.1.1). Finally, the notion of *e-tandem* will be introduced and a distinction between this type of conversational exchange and actual Skype language

lessons between a teacher and a student, which are the object of investigation of the present study, will be made (§ 2.2.1.1.2.1).

2.2.1 Language learning and Web 2.0

When talking about the Internet, an important premise must be made about the peculiar Internet era we entered in 2004, when the term was first used – the so-called *Web 2.0*. The word “Web 2.0” was created by Dale Dougherty, the vice president of the company O’Reilly Media, in 2003, during a brainstorming session. The basic difference between Web 2.0 and Web 1.0 is straightforward and lies in the way the user is conceived. From a computer-centered perspective which attached very little importance to the user, and saw the Internet as a mere collection of static web pages to be accessed in a non-obtrusive way, and in which concepts and ideas were simply showcased with almost zero opportunities for the individual to manipulate these contents and have his say, to the present user-centered perspective which sees in sharing and exchanging knowledge its founding principle: such was the change that Web 2.0 brought about. In a nutshell, Web 2.0 represents a type of web that is more socially connected (Anderson, 2007). This is made possible by a series of new applications characterized by interactivity and user-generated content: blogs, wikis, tagging and social bookmarking, audio blogging and podcasting and RSS and syndication, to name a few. Social media (Facebook and Twitter), language communities (such as Livemocha and Busuu) and forums are other interesting and more recent developments of Web 2.0. The possibilities that this new Internet era has brought are truly boundless. Equally boundless are the opportunities for language teachers and tutors, who can leverage these resources to make second language acquisition more interactive and learner-centered. In fact, language learners will not find it difficult to get used to this change in learning processes, since they grew up with these

very technologies and can be reasonably called “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). Web 2.0 provides learners with more power and opportunities to express themselves and communicate/cooperate instantly with other users located all over the world, which has extremely relevant and meaningful consequences for language learning and teaching.

2.2.1.1. Synchronous Computer-mediated communication through VoIP technology

Of all the web-based technologies that are a product of Web 2.0 the ones concerned with CMC (Computer-mediated communication) will be focused on, whose features appear to be more akin to the theoretical basis of interaction, focus on form and output practice that have already been discussed in § 2.1. CMC is claimed by many to represent a revolution in CALL (Computer-assisted language learning) in that it involves human-to-human exchanges instead of human-to-machine exchanges (Warschauer, 1996). The first studies on computer-mediated communication date back to the early ‘90s, when the use of a software called Daedalus Interchange and local networked computers was investigated in order to gauge the learners’ interactions between each other (Beauvois, 1992 and others, as cited in Yanguas, 2010: 1). These studies found that using the Daedalus Interchange software led to more sophisticated language production, which was also favoured by a communicative setting that was considered informal and not as stressing as that of face-to-face communication. Later, the appearance of Yahoo and MSN Messenger led researchers to conduct studies on these emerging tools. CMC has been investigated from a variety of perspectives. However, the most fruitful object of study appears to have been online interaction. In fact, when language learners interact with peers in the target language, the same modification devices used in face-to-face interactions are employed (clarification, comprehension and confirmation checks, self-corrections) which serve the

purpose to make input and output more comprehensible (Lee, 2002).

The concept of VoIP, which represents a form of synchronous CMC, a technological application of online interaction, and which can be effectively employed in language learning, will be now illustrated. The acronym *VoIP* stands for *Voice Over Internet Protocol* and is also called *Internet Telephony*. It refers to a type of hardware and software that enables people to make telephone calls using the Internet as a transmission medium. Thanks to it, packets of voice data are sent using IP (*Internet Protocol*) rather than PSTN (*Public Switched Telephone Network*) circuit transmissions, used by traditional phones. The advantage for users is that no extra cost is added to the Internet access fee (Webopedia, n.d.). The most famous and used VoIP provider is *Skype*, which is also the object of the present research. Skype is an online software that uses both VoIP and chat via IM (*Instant Messaging*) (Watrous, 2010). It was founded in 2003 and it can be used for calling or videocalling other Skype users all over the world. Skype is mainly used for personal reasons, for instance, to talk with distant friends or relatives, but also for business (online meetings, job interviews, etc.). Recently, a major focus on Skype was also given by SLA researchers and language educators, who have claimed the benefits of this tool for improving the learner's skills in a target language. More specifically, some attention was paid to the use of Skype for the so-called *e-tandem* (§ 2.2.1.1.1).

In the next paragraph, *e-tandem* will be briefly discussed and compared with *distance language teaching on Skype*, by making informed connections with the recent studies in SLA applied to online interaction.

2.2.1.1.1 E-tandem

According to Brammerts, *e-tandem* takes place "when two learners of different native language work together in order to learn their partner's language and also to learn more

about his or her background" (1996:21). The goals of such an activity are to improve one's ability to communicate in the partner's target language, get to know the partner and his/her cultural background and take advantage of the partner's experiences and knowledge (Guglielmi, 2012). The term refers to the digital version of the traditional *tandem* and, being computer-mediated, can be carried out through e-mails, chat or video calling. In e-tandem, reciprocity and autonomy are equally important principles that intertwine and rule the language exchange between two peers: reciprocity, since both learners need to make use of their knowledge and resources to help each other, autonomy, because each of them must manage the contents and times of his/her own language learning process (Brammerts, 2003, as cited in Guglielmi, 2012: 208). Despite appearing as a simple, easily adoptable method, *e-tandem* should follow some rules in order to effectively promote language learning. For instance, both learners can negotiate in advance the duration of the session, the font colors, and should be sensible enough to respect each other's turn. *E-tandem* is connected with a series of concepts such as *autonomy, motivation, collaboration, peer tutoring, role of the teacher, affective filter* and *scaffolding*. As Guglielmi (2012) points out, *e-tandem* can be interpreted as a constructivist method in that it stimulates the learner to become an active creator of his/her own learning environment, and to control it by collaborating with a partner. Moreover, this method is characterized by a series of peculiar features such as seeing learning as an active process, where people learn to learn whilst learning, and where each learner is forced to revise his/her own knowledge during the interlinguistic and intercultural exchange *e-tandem* promotes. In addition to this, learning is seen as a social activity, knowledge is obtained through both mind and other senses, and motivation is an essential part of language acquisition (for an exhaustive account of *e-tandem* as a constructivist activity see Dolci, 2004, as cited in Guglielmi, 2012: 205). All these aspects make *e-tandem* a complex tool to use for complementing traditional language instruction;

if both learners are willing to follow a series of rules aiming at formalizing their online conversation – whether it takes place through chat or video calling (e-mail is another possibility, which however belongs to the domain of asynchronous computer-mediated communication and therefore is beyond the scope of the present study) – and turn it into an effective method for improving accuracy and cultural awareness. How this can be implemented has produced a number of different opinions in the researchers community, which will not be discussed here. A claim made by Warschauer and Meskill expresses clearly the heart of the matter : “The computer is a machine, not a method” (2000), which entails that being Internet users does not automatically imply being able to autonomously manage one’s own learning process.

These problems do not seem to appear when, instead of simple conversational exchanges, a more structured, organized and informed type of computer-mediated instruction takes place. In the following section a *rationale* for *distance language learning on Skype*, which is the object of the present investigation, will be provided.

2.2.1.1.2 Distance education and language learning on Skype

Many researches have attempted to provide a suitable definition to the term “distance learning”. According to Williams, Paprock and Covington: “The term *distance learning* and/or *distance education* refers to the teaching-learning arrangement in which the learner and the teacher are separated by geography and time” (1999:2). The last decades have witnessed increasing demand for global, distributed learning which could be accessible by a larger number of people anywhere, anytime. Among the most interesting instances of distance language learning are *The Open University*, a distance learning and research university founded in the United Kingdom, and *Coursera*, an online education provider offering distance courses from 33 top universities in the world. The reasons for the

growing popularity of this new way of conceiving education is due to a series of advantages that it offers: distance education is, in fact, convenient, time- and cost-effective, and enables the student to manage his/her own learning process in a very flexible way.

Distance learning can be conducted in a number of ways. One major difference is between *synchronous* and *asynchronous* distance learning. *Asynchronous* distance learning is carried out through the use of tools and activities, such as e-mails, computer-mediated grammar practice, forums and so on, which do not require immediate interaction and do not take place in a real-time manner. However, since asynchronous learning is not the focus of the present research, the features and pedagogical implications of *synchronous* learning, that is to say, real-time learning that makes use of such tools as chat, audio conferencing, and video conferencing, will now be discussed. More specifically, as anticipated, a major focus will be given on language learning that takes place in a VoIP setting (Skype), which has the advantage of integrating two types of real-time communication, namely chat and video calling.

Technological changes and developments have shaped new contexts in which learning takes place. For this reason, it is fundamental to start a discussion on synchronous distance language learning with an important consideration on the nature of this new pedagogical trend: what the attention of the researchers should be focused on is not technology *per se*, but other aspects that can be identified, for instance, in learner motivation, the roles of the teacher and the participants, the effectiveness insofar as language skills are involved (White, 2003). This is a premise we cannot do away with, and one that has informed also the present work. When investigating computer-mediated language instruction a series of factors, which will be now dealt with, affect and shape the whole learning process. As White (2003) correctly points out, the impact of the sites where learning takes place has only been recognized recently, this is why technology – in

our specific case, Skype – cannot simply be seen as a tool to investigate in itself, but as something whose role in determining the effectiveness of instruction is primary. Some of the advantages that distance language learning in a VoIP setting can provide will be now illustrated, and the most relevant implications for teaching and learning will be highlighted. Finally, a comparison will be drawn between synchronous language learning and Skype e-tandem (§ 2.2.1.1.2.1).

The advantages of learning “*anytime, anywhere*” (Caburlotto, 2012) – flexibility, reduced costs, accessibility and convenience - have already been anticipated at the beginning of this section. However, synchronous online language learning has been argued to bring great benefits in improving language skills. More specifically, such a type of instruction promotes a number of aspects that have been extensively discussed in (§ 2.2.1.1), namely:

- The opportunity to receive a large amount of *comprehensible input* (§ 2.1.2.2), either by the tutor’s speaking or by reading texts;
- The possibility of negotiating meaning and form (§ 2.1.3) through interaction with a native speaker;
- Output practice (Kern, 1995) (§ 2.1.2), which is perhaps the most important beneficial aspect of Skype-based language instruction, largely centered around speaking;
- Noticing and focus on form (§ 2.1.1). Through oral (video calling) and written (chat) conversational exchanges, the learner is encouraged to notice particular forms in the input and in the output, without disrupting the communicative flow (Long, 1981). Moreover, as Schmidt (1990) argues, noticing is the prerequisite for language intake, and therefore, acquisition;
- The development of interactive competence (§ 2.1.3);

- The opportunity to receive immediate feedback from the teacher (§ 2.1.4.2). This is another extremely relevant point characterizing Skype-based language instruction. Whether the language session is conducted through chat or video calling, feedback plays a fundamental role. Feedback can be explicit or implicit. When it is explicit, the tutor overtly highlights a problem arisen in the learner's utterance and provides at the same time a model for it; when feedback is implicit (in the form of *recasts*), the tutor reformulates the learner's incorrect utterance without overtly highlighting a problem (§ 2.1.3). The benefits of corrective feedback for consolidating existing linguistic knowledge and internalizing new forms has already been discussed in § 2.1.2 .
- Increase in grammatical competence, which results from the negotiation occurring during conversational exchanges (Pellettieri, 1999), which adds up to the improvement of the learner writing skills, as demonstrated by Beauvois (1998). Moreover, thanks to increased practice the learner gains more confidence in his/her speaking skills: more specifically, distance language learning leads the learner to routinize and internalize expression, thus automatizing new structures (Beauvois, 1994, as cited in Stepp-Greany, 2002). In addition to this, research indicates that the learner ability to monitor the use of grammar, vocabulary, as well as the capability of expressing his/her thoughts orally, increase (Stepp-Greany, 2002).
- Learning is seen as an active process. Through the use of *tasks* in communicative language teaching, learners are pushed to progress, notice forms and incorporate them only if the input belongs to the successive stage of their ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), which is defined by Vygotsky (1978) as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem

solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

As will be discussed in § 2.2.1.1.2.1, task design plays a fundamental role in distance synchronous language learning, and therefore also in the present work.

Other advantages of distance language learning are represented by the positive benefits on the students from an affective point of view. Since there are not many studies in literature investigating students' perceptions on Skype language learning, some of the most interesting results in the field of technology-enhanced education will be now reported. It has been found that through computer-mediated language learning students feel to have achieved greater confidence, increased motivation, greater engagement and involvement in the learning process, since learners are required to be more active precisely thanks to technology (Stepp-Greany, 2002). Moreover, students have been demonstrated to enjoy a web-based type of instruction, since they feel more familiar with a technological environment, which results in greater empowerment (Warschauer, 1996). Finally, the possible objection that could be made against distance education as to its lacking human contact and/or body language is not grounded in Skype language learning, since this VoIP technology combines visual, face-to-face interaction with written chat.

It seems therefore that synchronous computer-mediated communication, a domain to which language learning on Skype belongs, fosters greater, enhanced opportunities between the teacher and the learners, to the extent of shaping a completely new kind of relationship between the two participants of the learning process.

In fact, another distinctive feature of Skype language instruction – which differentiates it from conversational exchanges between native speakers learning each other's languages (§ 2.2.1.1.1) is given by the presence of a teacher, a tutor who manages the learning process together with the student. Many researchers investigating distance language learning have claimed that, instead of teachers, we should talk about *facilitators*,

since they play a fundamental role in technology-enhanced education which is one of providing opportunities for interaction, negotiation and active participation, a role that represents an essential variable for the computer-mediated instruction to be successful (Glisan, Dudt & Howe, as cited in Stepp-Greany, 2002). The view of teachers as facilitators is supported also by Kern's idea that teachers, even when they are not involved in communication with the learner, "provide a scaffold for their students' learning with their own knowledge and experience" (1996: 108). To quote Hauck & Haezewindt, the role of the tutor in distance language learning include that of "confidant, nervous parent, trouble-shooter, student, and human being" (1999, as cited in Hampel & Hauck, 2004: 69). It appears therefore that the presence of the teacher – here considered as a facilitator rather than what Balboni calls a *magister* (2008), typical of fronted lessons where there is no opportunity for negotiation – is a fundamental asset that characterizes online language education and makes it successful.

In the following section the main advantages of distance language education over e-tandem will be synthesized. In this way, an attempt will be made to ground the purpose and motivations behind the present research, which sees Skype as an ideal tool in which communicative language instruction can take place and benefit from the positive effects of focus on form, interaction, noticing and negotiation that have been illustrated in the first part of this introduction (§ 2.1).

2.2.1.1.2.1 The benefits of language learning on Skype over e-tandem

As McGrath correctly points out, the introduction of technology into the learning process does not guarantee improvement (1998). This statement has extremely important implications when choosing the most appropriate online language approach for improving and developing one's language skills – fluency, accuracy, interactive competence, written

production and comprehension, and so on. In § 2.2.1.1.1 we have discussed the main features of e-tandem, a type of conversational exchange between two native speakers of different languages taking place through synchronous computer-mediated communication, of which Skype is an instance. E-tandem can be a feasible way of practising one's speaking skill in an online setting. Having said that, it is also true that the presence of the teacher characterizing distance language education, which in this study is represented by Skype language teaching, has its advantages. Teachers, or rather, facilitators, play a fundamental role in adapting technology to the learner's needs, make it approachable, accessible and above all effective for the purposes of the learning process. Moreover, there is also another important role that teachers are called to play, which is also an essential part of distance language learning: *task design*. Thanks to their classroom knowledge and experience, coupled with their technological skills, teachers/facilitators are able to make informed decisions on the learning process at hand, in order for it to effectively meet the educational goals. One way to achieve this is precisely by designing tasks whose features and structure meet the learner communicative needs by fostering focus on form, noticing, negotiation of meaning and interaction (§ 2.1.1.1). This approach is at the core of the present experimental proposal (§ 3.5). A series of appropriate tasks will therefore have to be designed and implemented in Skype language education (§ 2.2.1.1.2). The relevance of tasks in communicative language teaching has already been highlighted in § 2.1.1.1. In addition to this, research has indicated that it is precisely the use of tasks that promotes the negotiation of meaning, which prevails in goal-oriented instruction rather than in casual conversation (Pellettieri, 1999). For this reason, distance language learning – in our specific case, language instruction on Skype – is much more effective than simple conversational exchanges between native speakers that occur when resorting to e-tandem in its simplest, most unstructured version (we have seen, however, that a way to improve e-tandem and make

it achieve the same benefits as those of distance language learning, albeit without the presence of a tutor, is to have the two learners practise through tasks). Finally, it has been demonstrated that task design is particularly needed for beginner foreign language learners, or learners with little knowledge of the target language (as is the case of the present study), so that, through activities, it is possible to “extract the little language they can produce” (Rosell-Aguilar, 2005:8).

To conclude, this second part of the introduction aimed at supporting the view that distance language learning on Skype can be an ideal way to transfer onto a technological domain – in line with the latest trends in language education, which increasingly require it to be accessible anywhere, anytime – the theoretical framework outlined in the first part of the introduction, namely focus on form and the range of concepts related to it: interaction, negotiation of meaning and noticing (§ 2.1).

3. The study

3.1 Purpose and value of the study

Verbalplanet (www.verbalplanet.com) is a website where teachers from all over the world can register as native tutors for their language and offer lessons online through the Skype technology. It is an easy, accessible platform where people who are already accustomed to this technology – or are completely new to it - decide to pick up a tutor and start learning a foreign language. The present study originates from here and from the need to investigate the implications of this new way of conceiving education that is distance

language learning in a VoIP setting (§ 2.2.1.1).

The research is a case study consisting of a 5-week period of instruction conducted on Skype between a native Italian speaker (who is also the researcher) and a native Norwegian student living in Norway, who had already been taught Italian by the same teacher, albeit discontinuously, in the previous year. Therefore, the student already knew the teacher to the extent of establishing a friendly relationship with her. The approach that had been used prior to this 5-week instruction was mainly a grammar-based one, with lessons centered around explicitly taught rules and consisting of exercises, grammar comprehension and listening comprehension activities. Little opportunity had been given to practising output (writing and, most of all, speaking), which should come spontaneously when using Skype (§ 2.2.1.1.2). Therefore, a new methodology was adopted that revolutionized the way the student had experienced Italian lessons until then. A communicative approach incorporating focus on form, noticing and interaction was the object of investigation of a study that saw the learner involved in ten written sessions and ten oral sessions on Skype, each of them lasting approximately 30-40 minutes, for a total of twenty sessions over 5 weeks. Each language session was characterized to some degree by task design, i.e. the teacher had prepared the session beforehand and planned some activities that could primarily foster output and try to elicit specific forms from the learner. A focus-on-form approach was implemented in both oral and written communicative sessions to consolidate pre-existing grammar knowledge, following what has already been discussed in § 2.1.1.1 as to the role of declarative knowledge, acquired through formal instruction, in promoting noticing and implicit learning. Such a model was considered particularly fitting for the study at hand in that the learner had already received a one-year period of grammar-based Italian language tutoring; all these notions had to be put into practice and implicitly learnt.

The case study partially takes as model a study by Williams (2001), which

explored the role of unplanned attention to form in classroom interaction. The present study aims at investigating a number of factors, ranging from linguistic skills (improvement in complexity, lexical and grammatical competence) to psychological aspects (the impact of technology on the learning process). The theoretical framework outlined in the introduction (§ 2) is the basis upon which the data gathering and analysis were conducted. The investigation has also some limitations connected with the nature of a case study, which limits the scope of the research to the specific features of the learner. Another important theoretical contribution playing a fundamental role in the delivering of instruction comes from task design, which has been dealt with in § 2.1.1.1 . Task design, as will be thoroughly explained in the following sections, provides a fundamental approach promoting noticing and focus on form when performing oral or written communicative activities, which was precisely the goal of the instructional period.

3.1.1. Research questions

The implementation of focus on form in Skype-based instruction sets as its main objective that of ascertaining not only the effectiveness of such an approach, but also the pedagogical implications of the use of technology in language education. Through a research methodology that draws from both the quantitative and qualitative tradition, data were collected and analyzed in order to answer the following research questions:

1) Is focus on form effective in Skype-based instruction not only for *uptake*, but also for *intake*? According to Swain's *output hypothesis* (1985), when the learner is engaged in a conversation and therefore has to produce output, he/she will have to pay attention to forms produced by his/her interlocutors, and to the forms he/she is attempting to produce, which are likely to be retained in subsequent output. In short, output leads to noticing forms and internalizing them. This notion is also at the core of Williams's study (2001),

which aimed to ascertain the effectiveness of spontaneous attention to form for *intake*, not only for *uptake*, i.e. she investigated the subsequent use in production of those forms that had appeared during LREs (Language-related episodes) in communicative classes. Similarly, this first question seeks to find out whether the learner remembers and uses, after the instructional period, those forms that have been focused on during both written and oral sessions through language-related episodes originated either by the student or the teacher, involving negotiation of form, recasts, corrective feedbacks and other types of focus on form.

2) How does practice on Skype affect the learner's proficiency?

3) What are the implications for the learner of the use of Skype in communicative, focus-on-form type of instruction?

The way the above have been operationalized in terms of methodological approach, data collection tools, data analysis and interpretation, will be thoroughly dealt with in the following sections.

3.2 Subject

The instructional period during which focus on form was implemented in Skype-based teaching was designed for a Norwegian native learner living and working in Norway. The student, aged 25 at the time of the experimental study, is not in any education although he completed a series of studies in the field of Media and Communications, with a focus on Graphical Design. The only language he had learnt, and in which he is fluent at, is English. He had also undertaken the study of the Spanish language through Skype lessons, but the way such lessons were conducted is unknown. The learner is affected by spastic diplegia, a form of cerebral palsy, a chronic neuromuscular condition of

hypertonia and spasticity that manifests itself through constant “stiffness” of the muscles (Wikipedia, 2012) and which also has consequences in terms of brain functions. An investigation on the relationship between cerebral palsy spastic diplegia and language learning is beyond the scope of this study, however some fundamental remarks on the specific disease affecting the learner may have to be considered as a possible variable. Although speech and language disorders affect more than a third of the people having cerebral palsy, this was not a major problem of this learner, since he manifests good control of the muscles of his mouth. Language production therefore is not a problematic issue in the case study. However, the great movement limitations experienced since childbirth caused a much greater development of the part of the brain where language is processed, which resulted in extremely developed language capabilities in order to compensate the lack of mobility. In fact, the learner has a native command of English, a language to which he has been exposed since childhood through television films, videos and reading, and which has been learnt mostly in an autonomous way. Whether these peculiar characteristics of the learner had an impact on the results of this study is not certain, and was not a matter of preoccupation at the time when the instructional proposal was undertaken. The present research will only investigate the relationship between focus on form and improvement in the learner Italian language skills, as well as in his motivation and confidence when producing language.

At the time of the research the learner had already taken Italian lessons on Skype with the same teacher. The methodology adopted, however, was completely different from the one employed during the instructional period under investigation. The lessons which had been delivered were mainly grammar-centered, each lesson dealing with a set a rules and including relevant exercises on them, almost exclusively pattern drills. A major focus had been on reading comprehension and, although to a lesser extent, listening comprehension. After having chosen his Italian tutor on website Verbalplanet.com, the

learner had taken Italian lessons for almost a year, albeit discontinuously, whilst learning Spanish at the same time, always on Skype. The results of these former lessons reflected the type of approach adopted until then: at the time when the present study was undertaken, the learner had decent comprehension skills but rather poor production skills, especially insofar as speaking was concerned. Before he undertook a new type of lessons – which are under investigation in the present work – his language skills could be synthesized as follows:

- Reading comprehension: he could “understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.”, a B1 level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (2001);
- Listening comprehension: he could “understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment)”, an A2 level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (2001);
- Written production: he could “communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters”, an A2 level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (2001);
- Oral production: he could “introduce himself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he lives, people he knows and things he has” and “interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help”, an A1 level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (2001);

The learner's motivation in learning Italian on Skype was already great at the time of instruction. As a matter of fact, during casual conversation with the teacher he had often claimed that he loved the sound of the language, and most of all the Italian culture (art, food and mindset). The motivation towards the language was therefore intimately bound with the passion for the Italian culture and people. Moreover, he had spontaneously decided to learn Italian on Skype as a result of this passion, and because he was already used to distance language learning, a reasonable solution for learning a foreign language due to the lack of Italian teachers in his area. He was therefore accustomed to this technology.

The other participant involved in the research is the teacher, who at the moment of the study had one-year experience teaching Italian to foreigners on Skype through Verbalplanet.com and had never experimented a marked communicative approach in her lessons. With the present study she instead opted for an integration of focus on form, noticing and task methodology with a completely different organization and planning of both oral and written sessions.

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 The nature of case studies

Prior to explaining the procedure and the methodology used for the present research, a premise as to the nature and role of case studies is fundamental. According to Nunan, a case study is “a ‘hybrid’, in that it generally utilizes a range of methods for collecting and analyzing data, rather than being restricted to a single procedure” (1992: 74). The same holds for the case under investigation, for which various approaches drawing on both the ethnographic and psychometric tradition have been used (§ 3.3.2). The subject of a case

study can be a single individual, like in our case, but also an entire classroom or school district, as Nunan (1992) points out. The nature of case studies has been an object of discussion for many researchers. According to some, they can be seen as a type of ethnography, but more limited in scope. Others consider it as an “instance in action” (Adelman et al, as cited in Nunan, 1992). As anticipated, case studies can employ both qualitative and quantitative methods. A very fitting definition of case study is that by Larsen-Freeman & Long, according to whom a case study is “a longitudinal approach that typically involves observing the development of linguistic performance, usually the spontaneous speech of one subject, when the speech data are collected at periodical intervals over a span of time” (1991: 11-12). What a case study researcher usually observes is not representative samples of individuals, but single individuals; variables are not manipulated and no experimental or control groups are used.

Yin (1984, as cited in Nunan, 1992) outlines a series of characteristics a case study researcher must have, namely *construct validity*, which entails the establishment of correct operational measures, *internal validity*, aiming at displaying clausal relationships between concepts, *external validity* and *reliability*. From Yin’s and other studies a clear preoccupation emerges as to the extent to which the results and conclusion drawn by the case study can be generalized to a wider domain or population, which seems to represent a major threat to the validity of case studies. However, the present research does not aim at generalizing its findings, it rather seeks to explore a new area for distance language teaching and learning, Skype education, and attempts at making its strengths – but also weaknesses – stand out and in order to do so it has chosen an individual who decided to learn Italian as a foreign language through this innovative tool.

This research shares many of the features of what is called a “single case research”: in this particular type of case study, the researcher performs some actions on the subject under investigation and measures the results of what has been done (Nunan,

1992). Some of the stages that a single case research involves were followed also in the present study, namely an initial phase when observations are carried out, a second phase where the researcher intervenes, and a third phase when the treatment/intervention is withdrawn, which in our case corresponds to the suspension of the instructional period and the measurement of the effects of such suspension one month later.

The following section will explain how this case study draws from both the psychometric-quantitative research tradition and the ethnographic-qualitative one, by briefly introducing the methods used.

3.3.2 Research methods

As already anticipated, the present research employs a variety of methods from both the psychometric and the quantitative traditions, so that it belongs neither exclusively to the former nor to the latter. The difference between the two approaches is straightforward: whereas psychometric research makes use of the so-called *experimental method*, and relies heavily on hard data analyzed according to quantitative methods, the ethnographic research seeks to obtain results and findings from naturalistic observation and description, which is not subject to any control, by interpreting soft data with a qualitative approach. Literature in the field of research methods has pointed out that an integration of the two approaches is far from being uncommon, and has given birth to a series of different paradigms that represent mixed forms, such as the experimental-qualitative-interpretative paradigm and the exploratory-qualitative-statistical paradigm (for a complete review of mixed research design paradigms see Grotjahn, 1987, as cited in Nunan, 1992:6). The research methodology used for this case study is precisely a mixed form in that it combines the psychometric and ethnographic approaches, that were adopted for operational procedures, data collection and analysis. The contributions from those

different traditions which have been employed in the present research are listed in detail below:

Contributions from the psychometric-quantitative paradigm

- Pre-tests and post-tests
- Research questions + hypotheses creation
- Control on variables
- Replicability
- Attempts to seek truth and knowledge (although it lays no claims to generalizing, being a case study)
- Hard, quantifiable data (which, however, are not the only data subject of analysis)

Contributions from the ethnographic-qualitative-interpretive paradigm

- The goal is not that of comparing
- Absence of experimental-control groups
- Some degree of scrupulousness
- Flexibility
- Non-generalizable findings
- No selection of a representative sample
- Observation methods and tools (interviews, field notes, teacher's diary)
- Focus on the process, not only on the outcome
- Soft, non-quantifiable data (which, however, are not the only data subject of analysis)

It is interesting to point out that this case study could be seen as an instance of *action research* operating in a setting that is no more that of traditional classrooms, since it is

conducted by a practitioner with an experience in the field of Skype-based language instruction. Most of the features of action research characterize also the present work, namely the need to confront a real problem (the learner's poor productive skills), the subsequent preliminary investigation, the creation of hypotheses after reviewing the data coming from the first step, the intervention, which here coincides with the instructional period based on focus on form, the evaluation of the intervention and so on. Like the tradition of action research, this study is arguably situational as it identifies problems in a specific context and attempts at tackling them (Cohen and Manion, 1985, as cited in Nunan, 1992: 18).

3.4 Data collection and analysis

In order for the data collection and analysis to be effectively planned and organized, the three research questions listed in § 3.1.1 necessarily needed to be operationalized so as to give research a concrete direction. The way each question was operationalized will be explained in the following sections, after a premise as to the ways quantitative and qualitative data were treated.

3.4.1 Types of data and tools

3.4.1.1 Quantitative data analysis

In order to collect and analyze quantitative data, such as linguistic data and LREs, specific tools and methods were resorted to, as will be described later. In particular, numeric indicators were used and applied to data collected in Excel worksheets. Data were worked on using formulae and expressed visually by means of charts (§ 4). The way quantitative data were collected and analyzed will be dealt with separately for question n° 1 and question n° 2.

3.4.1.2 Qualitative data analysis

A major part of the information needed to answer research questions n° 1 and n°2, and above all, n°3, was also provided by other sources of soft, non-quantifiable data. These data come from both direct and indirect observation tools, namely the *teacher's diary*, which in our case represents a sort of mix between a diary written by the teacher-researcher registering her impressions, feelings and perceptions on the learning process at hand, and field notes, that is to say notes that the researcher wrote down whilst actively teaching or shortly after the sessions. Such observation was in some cases supported by the audio and video recording of the sessions. The *teacher's diary* represents one of the three sources of qualitative data that were employed during research in order to integrate or support quantitative data coming from psychometric analysis (such as that used for research n°1 and for operationalizing question n°2 so far) or to shed light on aspects that are addressed by research question n°3, which investigates the implications for the learner of the use of Skype in communicative, focus-on-form type of instruction (§ 4.3). The two other sources of interpretable data are casual conversations which took place after some lessons during the 5-week instructional period: these conversations, precisely because of their spontaneous nature and since they were fostered by a friendly relationship between the teacher and the student, offered a valuable mine of qualitative information about a range of topics, from the learner's perception of his improvement to deep and detailed metacognitive insights (more on this in § 3.4.4). These conversations were not recorded, however there are rather accurate notes that were taken by the researcher simultaneously during the interaction. On these occasions, intervention by the teacher-researcher was limited, in that a goal of such an activity was to let the learner's inner feelings and thoughts emerge without them being forced or influenced by specific questions. For this reason, we might well define these "casual" conversations as instances of *unstructured interview*, namely a type of interview that "is guided by the responses of the interviewee

rather than the agenda of the researcher. The researcher exercises little or no control, and the direction of the interview is relatively unpredictable” (Nunan, 1992: 149).

The third source of non-quantifiable data is given by an interview that took place after the end of the instructional period; such an interview was much needed to discuss more openly and freely, once the experiment had finished, about the nature and effectiveness of Skype-based focus-on-form instruction compared to other forms of instruction and learning, both web-based and classroom-based. A lot of interesting data emerged from this interview, which could be classified as a *semi-structured interview*, i.e. an interview where “the interviewer has a general idea of where he or she wants the interview to go, and what should come out of it, but does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions. Topics and issues rather than questions determine the course of the interview” (Nunan, 1992: 149). This type of interview was preferred because, unlike the previous conversations with the learner, it had a more defined direction, but no specific questions were designed. Rather, the interviewer wanted to address specific topics and it is from these that the conversation naturally stemmed. This semi-structured interview, just as what had been done with the aforementioned unstructured interviews, was recorded through note-taking in order to capture the central issues emerged during the dialogue between the researcher and the learner.

These three sources of qualitative data, put together, offered an extremely precious amount of information on the learning process seen from both the student and the teacher-researcher’s perspective. However, all this information was not easily retrievable at a first glance – it rather presented itself as mixed up and in need of a strong analysis that could reduce it to manageable, observable data relevant for specific research questions. Although this type of analysis was resorted to to a much greater extent for answering question n° 3, it is also true that, as anticipated above, it provided precious insights also on the other two research questions. Therefore, this section will introduce the method

used to analyze such information, namely *content analysis*, which was carried out in order to identify patterns, common topics in the notes produced. In this way, by providing a brief overview of such methodology, we will also introduce the section dedicated to data analysis, or rather, content analysis for research question n° 3 (§ 3.4.4).

Content analysis is a systematic technique which can be used to interpret a text by turning its content into a series of categories through an activity called *coding*. For the present research such methodology was taken as an important guide to give the analysis a concrete direction, given that the amount of data to “code” were rather limited in comparison with the amount of written material that is often the object of this type of investigation. The type of content analysis conducted in this work consisted of the following steps: 1) reading, 2) coding 3) identification of common topics, 4) interpretation of the topics in relation to the research questions.

Reading was first carried out on all the written notes that had been taken, no matter their source of belonging. The data coming from interviews and field notes were all treated equally in this respect: all of them went through the same stages of analysis. In fact, a strategy used to make this first step even more effective and less biased was to copy all the written material on the same Word document and read it as if it was a unique document. Only afterwards the real sources were identified and reported for the sake of scientific clarity. A first careful reading was therefore carried out before the next stage, namely *coding*, was undertaken.

In content analysis, *coding* is an effective method used to “label” fragments of texts in order to come up with topics that characterize the written discourse under investigation. If, during our reading, certain keywords or patterns would come out more than once, even in different forms or as reported by different voices (in our case, the teacher’s and the student’s perspective), they would be coded by highlighting them in different colors and by writing down some brief, explanatory references as to their

contents. Coding of the teacher's diary/ field notes, unstructured and semi-structured interviews gave birth to the following codes:

SKYPE-BASED TEACHING

Example: "I would not rely solely on Skype for the next language. A matter of quantity: one hour every day could work. But you also need more than that. 3-4 hours a day. Expensive on Skype."

[from Semi-structured interview]

OUTPUT

Example: "During the written sessions, he produces more output, because he has more time to process it."

[from The Teacher's Diary]

FORMS, ACCURACY

Example: "[the learner] says prepositions are difficult, since in Norwegian they have very few of them"

[From Unstructured Interviews]

PROCEDURE

Example: "I noticed he enjoyed the task of drawing"

[from The Teacher's Diary]

After all the notes had been coded, a more interpretation-oriented step followed, namely that of grouping all the different codes into bigger categories or patterns of discourse. In doing this, the three research questions outlined in § 3.1.1 were kept in mind as important points to help guiding the creation of such categories. Five different patterns were identified. The single patterns will be described in the following sections, with specific reference to each research question. Each pattern will be first reported as follows:

- (1) description of the pattern;
- (2) records belonging to the pattern;

(2) source of each record (teacher's diary, unstructured interviews, semi-structured interview);

(3) date when the record was typed (whenever possible)

Finally, each single record will be numbered (1.1, 1.2 and so on).

In the following sections, the single research questions will be addressed to by reporting and explaining in depth the methodological choices adopted for the collection and analysis of the data.

3.4.2 Data collection and analysis for research question n°1

Question n°1 (§ 3.1.1) demanded to investigate the effectiveness of Skype-based communicative instruction based on focus-on-form in terms of uptake and intake, namely whether the learner has acquired those grammatical and lexical forms that have been attended to during the instructional period or not. In order to answer this question, it was necessary to operationalize the term “effectiveness” so that it could be measured. A way to do this was through customized assessment, and in order for this to be performed, it was necessary to turn the forms attended to into collectible units. Following Williams's (2001) model, it was first decided to collect the various instances of focus on forms appearing throughout the oral and written sessions as LREs. The term LRE (“Language-related episode”) is used here with reference to Williams' study (2001), which represents a primary model for this case study. In her research, Williams collected and analyzed language-related episodes, which she defines as “a discourse in which (1) learners talk or ask about the language, or question, implicitly or explicitly, their own language use, or (2) the teacher or another learner talks or asks about language, or questions, implicitly or explicitly the language of the learner, *in response to a learner problem or error*” (2001: 328). She collected the LREs produced during classroom communicative lessons in

English and used them to administer post-tests aiming at ascertaining the effectiveness of unplanned focus on form. Since a preference for certain types of LREs is not stated in the research question, in this study both reactive and pre-emptive focus on form instances have been taken into account (for a definition of reactive and pre-emptive focus on form see § 2.1.4.1), unlike Williams' study, which only considered reactive LREs. Both lexical and grammatical LREs were collected and analyzed, as Williams did. Another major difference between the present case study and William's research is that, whereas Williams analyzed the LREs involving the teacher, the learner and another learner, here only two participants will be involved, namely the teacher and the learner, since what the study analyses is one-to-one instruction. As a consequence, the LREs collected in this study are exclusively produced by the learner and by the teacher. Research question n°1 was therefore operationalized as follows.

First of all, the oral sessions were transcribed and the written sessions were copied onto different Word files. Second, all the forms that had been focused on were first singled out, collected and analyzed according to the following criteria:

- *content of the LRE*: grammar or lexical LRE. In other words, whether the object of the LRE was a grammar problem, i.e. a form involving the knowledge and application of grammar rules previously learnt or, in some cases, never encountered, or lexicon, that is to say the meaning of a word;
- *initiator of the LRE*: the teacher (T) or the learner (L);
- *nature of the LRE*: whether the LRE is preemptive or reactive. For a definition of preemptive (or proactive) and reactive focus on forms, see § 2.1.4.1;
- *type of focus on form*: *negotiation*, explicit correction, elicitation, confirmation check, clarification request, recast;

A brief description of the content of the LRE was also provided.

The model used for collecting LREs is displayed below:

n°	LRE CONTENT	LEXICAL or GRAMMATICAL?	INITIATOR	SUPPLIER
1	LA differenza (use of definite articles)	Grammatical	T	T
2	TRA	Lexical	L	T

PRE-EMPTIVE OR REACTIVE?	TYPE OF FOCUS
Reactive	Overt correction
Preemptive	Negotiation

Table 2. Example of how the collection of LREs was organized.

The LREs were in this way numbered, so that it was possible eventually to count them. Once all LREs were collected, the hard data needed for the subsequent post-assessment planning were ready to be worked on. In fact, as anticipated above, a test needed to be created in order to ascertain the retention of those forms that had been focused on over the 5-week period of instruction conducted on Skype. In her study, Williams (2001) operationalized this issue by collecting all the LREs produced by each single student and creating a tailor-made test for each of them. She then administered a different test to each participant in order to test him/her on specific items. Given the great number of LREs produced over the 5-week period, a similar solution was not feasible, in that it would have entailed that a test containing all the items in focus would have to be produced. Therefore, it was decided to opt for another, more systematic approach based on the notion of *sampling*. Instead of taking all the single LREs produced, only a small representative of them was chosen. The methodological procedure and criteria through which this selection was carried out will be explained in the following section.

3.4.2.1 Assessment measures

The most relevant criterion by which the assessment measures were performed was the *frequency* with which the single LREs had appeared during the instructional period. Such a criterion was considered particularly fitting in the present case study, which had registered a substantial amount of items in focus, above the expectations.

First of all, it was necessary to reduce the huge number of LREs into more structured, manageable macro categories. As to lexical LREs, namely LREs with lexical issues at their focus, the operation simply consisted in grouping the items by counting how many times a certain word had been focused on either by the learner or the teacher. In this way, a list of lexical items was created reporting the number of times that lexical form had been produced. The data were then sorted in descending order, i.e. from the items that had been focused on more often to the ones that occurred the least, as displayed below:

LEXICAL LRE	OCCURENCE (n° of times)
c'è / ci sono	7
FARE + profession (use of the verb)	6
Lezione (feminine gender)	6
vicino a	6
dipinto	4
come? (how)	4
DA = from (a place)	4
QUALE medicina = which....?	4
chimica	3
correre	3
dietro	3
incontrare	3
parrucchiere	3
quaderno	3
qualche	3
uscire di casa	3
[...] [...] [...]	

Table 3. How lexical LREs were counted using Excel.

As can be observed by going through the list of LREs, not only words were collected, but also structures that required to be memorized by the learner, as some sort of exemplars, such as fixed expressions and collocations (e.g. “*fare* + name of the profession” to say what one does). Therefore, the notion of lexical item/LRE is flexible here, and encompasses all those forms which are not ruled by grammar but are simply stored in the long term memory. Appendix A reports all the lexical LREs collected. As for grammar LREs, the operations to be performed required a more thorough content analysis in order to sift data in a scientifically acceptable manner. For these reasons, each single LRE having a grammar issue as its focus was carefully examined as to what specific language rule it was related to. As was often the case, two or more LREs that seemed to present different forms actually turned out to belong to the same grammar issue. After a thorough examination of all grammar LREs, the following macro categories of grammar aspects were identified. Below is a sample of the total set of categories identified (for the whole range see Appendix B). The figures on the right refer to the number of times that specific grammar issue had appeared over the 5-week instructional period:

GRAMMAR LRE CATEGORIES	OCCURENCE (n° of times)
ARTICLES	
definite articles: use	19
articles: necessity of its presence in the sentence	15
indefinite articles: use	2
articolo partitivo: necessity of its presence in the sentence	2
TENSES	
use of imperfetto (continuous actions in the past, etc)	18
conjugation presente of verbs PRIMA CONIUGAZIONE	10
use of aux. Essere in passato prossimo of verbs of movement	6
imperfetto of ESSERE	4
present of ESSERE	3
futuro semplice of ESSERE	1
[...] [...] [...]	

Table 4. How grammar LREs were sorted and counted using Excel.

Once all the grammar LREs had been grouped into the respective macro categories and the number of times each single LRE group had appeared during instruction had been counted, the materials and data needed to develop the post-test were ready to be worked on. As already anticipated, it was not feasible for the test to contain all the forms that had been brought into focus over the 5 weeks, at least not for the lexical forms, which totaled 433, a much greater amount than the one represented by grammatical LREs, totaling 69 grammatical LREs. For this reason, a sample selection was carried out aiming at picking some representative LREs out of the database collected. The way such operation was performed was not guided by any specific principle but that of covering the entire range of frequencies, i.e. for each frequency band a number of LREs were taken, so that eventually a full range of representatives of all bands were included in the test. Below is a recapitulatory chart displaying the forms selected for the first post-test, which was administered one week after the end of experimental instruction:

<u>LREs used for first post-test planning: recapitulatory chart</u>		
	n° of LREs produced	n° of LREs chosen for the test
LEXICAL LREs		
frequency: 7 times	1	1
frequency: 6 times	3	3
frequency: 4 times	5	5
frequency: 3 times	13	5
frequency: 2 times	49	12
frequency: 1 time	362	16
total	433	40
GRAMMAR LREs		
frequency: 19 times	1	1
frequency: 18 times	1	1
frequency: 15 times	1	1
frequency: 13 times	1	1
frequency: 12 times	1	1
frequency: 10 times	1	1
frequency: 9 times	1	1
frequency: 8 times	2	1
frequency: 7 times	1	1
frequency: 6 times	3	2

frequency: 5 times	1	1
frequency: 4 times	3	2
frequency: 3 times	11	4
frequency: 2 times	10	4
frequency: 1 time	31	9
total	69	31

Table 5. A chart showing how the LREs were selected to plan the first post-test.

The test was compiled having in mind the model offered by Williams (2001): the test, in fact, presented a variety of forms according to the specific word or grammar rule which it required to elicit and therefore assess. A total of 41 items made up the test, and a large amount of pictures was used to support the different items visually. The following types of activities were included in the test:

- *Completion.* The learner was required to complete some short texts with either 1) missing words that were not provided but which were represented or hinted at visually through the use of photos and pictures, 2) verbs provided in brackets which had to be conjugated in the correct tense (*presente, passato prossimo, imperfetto* and *future semplice*), or 3) missing articles (*articoli determinativi* and *indeterminativi*).

Ex) *Oggi a lezione c'era nuovo ragazzo. Forse è studente. suo nome è Alberto Rossi.*

Ex) – *Dov'è il gatto?*



– *E'* [answer: *nel cassetto*]

- *Translation.* A couple of very short sentences or phrases had to be translated from English (which was the *lingua franca* used as a medium to convey most of the metalinguistic information during instruction) into Italian. The translation aimed to elicit certain grammar and lexical LREs.

Ex) *The girls' books* =

As can be seen from the types of activities listed, the goal of the test was to elicit from the learner a representative sample of both lexical and grammar LREs that had been produced over the 5-week period of instruction (the test is reported in full in Appendix C).

Once the test was administered to the learner one week after the end of the experimental cycle of lessons, the test was corrected and the LREs correctly remembered were taken note of. Results are reported in § 4.1.1. Particular attention was paid when it came to interpreting the results. For instance, if a verb had not been spelt correctly but the researcher could see that the learner meant to insert a specific tense he had in mind, of which he did not remember the precise form, the answer was taken into consideration as a sign of the learner's attempt to retrieve the form noticed during instruction. More on this in § 4.1.1.

Two months after the end of instruction a second post-test was administered, this time to test whether *intake* had taken place, namely the subsequent active use of the forms focused on during the experiment. A similar test was therefore planned. However, it was decided to take different LREs as representative samples. Below is a recapitulatory chart for the second post-test:

LREs used for second post-test planning		
	n° of LREs produced	n° of LREs chosen for the test
LEXICAL LREs		
frequency: 7 times	1	1

frequency: 6 times	3	2
frequency: 4 times	5	1
frequency: 3 times	13	5
frequency: 2 times	49	10
frequency: 1 time	362	7
total	433	26
GRAMMAR LREs		
frequency: 19 times	1	1
frequency: 18 times	1	1
frequency: 15 times	1	1
frequency: 13 times	1	1
frequency: 12 times	1	1
frequency: 10 times	1	1
frequency: 9 times	1	1
frequency: 8 times	2	2
frequency: 7 times	1	1
frequency: 6 times	3	3
frequency: 5 times	1	1
frequency: 4 times	3	2
frequency: 3 times	11	7
frequency: 2 times	10	4
frequency: 1 time	31	6
total	69	33

Table 6. A chart showing how the LREs were selected to plan the second post-test.

As can be noted by looking at the chart, a substantial difference from the first post-test lies in the inclusion of lexical LREs: whereas the first post-test counted 40 lexical LREs, the second post-test was implemented with only 26 lexical LREs. The reason behind this choice is purely due to assessment constraints, in that the researcher wanted to reduce the cognitive load in the second test in order for the learner not to overly stress during the assessment.

The second post-test was administered two months after the instructional period (the test is reported in Appendix D). The approach by which the answers produced were analyzed and interpreted was the same as the one adopted for the analysis of the first post-test. Therefore, instead of a strictly quantitative analysis that left out all incorrect answers,

a more interpretive analysis was chosen so as to grant the case study its full significance.

The results for both post-tests and their discussion are extensively reported in § 4.1.

3.4.2.2 Data from qualitative sources: question n° 1

As anticipated in § 3.4.1, another great source of information for all the three research questions was provided by soft data. Such data were reduced to manageable sets of records belonging to specific *patterns* which would help address an aspect emerged by a research question. The following pattern (n°1) was identified and deemed relevant for shedding some light on question n° 1:

PATTERN N° 1

1) Discourse about the acquisition of forms (grammar and lexicon) i.e. about the specific content learnt. It refers either to a) the learner commenting (or rather, being reported commenting) on the reasons why he cannot acquire some forms or (b) the teacher observing that some forms have been acquired.

(a)

[1.1] *However, at the end of oral session 8_11_12 and written session 9_11_12 he justified the incorrect use of the **passato prossimo** and **imperfetto** form by stating that he **rarely uses these forms** [...]*

First lessons [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[1.2] *FORMS: articles are not always used, because of the **transfer** with the L1. **Preposizioni articolate** still very hard to understand, probably because of a **transfer** with Spanish (the other language he is learning).*

First lessons [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[1.3] [...] but says **prepositions** are difficult, since in **Norwegian** they have very few of them.

20.11.12 [UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEW]

(b)

[1.4] The learner shows an **incorporation** of previously noticed/focused on forms: “il padre **DI** Marco” and “bambino” (from the first oral session).

Oral session 10.11.12 [TEACHER’S DIARY]

[1.5] He cannot turn the verbs into **3rd person singular**. I made him rewrite the text several times until he managed to write a 100% correct text.

Written session 19.11.12 [TEACHER’S DIARY]

[1.6] During the lesson he **used spontaneously** “Dovrei” in questions, a form which he had **noticed** in yesterday’s lesson.

He used **prepositions** correctly most of the times. Still struggling a little with **preposizioni articolate**

Oral session 20.11.12 [TEACHER’S DIARY]

[1.7] He says he thinks he is **improving**. I think he is.

20.11.12 [LEARNER’S FEEDBACK]

[1.8] He uses **SUL** correctly

Oral session 23.11.12 [TEACHER’S DIARY]

[1.9] He still **confuses nouns ending in “e”** thinking they are masculine.

He has a good understanding, he uses **imperfetto** and **passato prossimo** correctly, but has problems making the correct form (**choice of auxiliary**).

Written session 28.11.12 [TEACHER’S DIARY]

[1.10] *He uses **DEL** correctly*

*Dove **ERA**: used correctly.*

*He guesses correctly the **difference between formal and informal**.*

*[...] made **less mistakes** than usual.*

Oral session 29.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[1.11] *He fails at conjugating verb **avere in the imperfetto**, he fails at using **preposizione articolata "degli"**.*

Written session 3.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

In the fragments of texts reported above, the words in bold are keywords that have been highlighted in that they represent the essence of what is written, which is useful to sift out the core issue of this first category. This set of records seems to well suit research question n° 1, which investigates the acquisition of those forms that had been brought into focus during the 5-week instructional period. It appears that powerful insights could be gained from the analysis of the above discourse; those insights could help shed additional light on the results of the tests administered to the student, since, although the data obtained through assessment could be good indicators of the learner's intake, it is also true that the learner's performance might have been affected by other factors such as stress and tiredness. For these reasons, coupled with the intention to make data analysis more complete, the discourse reported above was also taken into account. More specifically, from the analysis of the keywords identified above, a series of statements will be made to synthesize and make clear the data collected. Because of the nature of this section, which purely deals with data collection and analysis, such statements are reported in § 4.3.

3.4.3 Data collection and analysis for research question n°2

Question n° 2 (§ 3.1.1) demanded to investigate the effects of Skype-based focus-on-form instruction on the learner output in terms of proficiency. Such question therefore required the researcher to work on purely linguistic data collected during the oral and written sessions in order to identify possible changes in the learner's proficiency. For this purpose, proficiency was interpreted as a combination of complexity and accuracy, therefore both of these components were taken into account. However, not all sessions were looked at: in fact, since the question required a diachronic study of the effects of Skype-based focus on form on proficiency, it was decided to carefully analyze only the first and the last sessions. A speech analysis was needed. The transcription of the first and the last oral and written sessions were retrieved and worked on. One of the most acknowledged ways referred to by the literature of conducting a speech analysis is the use of what is defined as *AS unit* ("*Analysis of speech unit*"), namely "a single speaker's utterance consisting of an independent clause or subclausal unit, together with any subordinate clause(s) associated with it" (Foster et al., 2000: 365). An independent clause will minimally consist of a clause including a finite verb, whereas a subclausal unit is either represented by one or more phrases which can be elaborated to a full clause, or by minor utterances or *nonsentences*. AS units are therefore resorted to whenever a need arises to dissect spoken interaction in order to assess such aspects as fluency, accuracy, complexity and so on. However, in our case, given the interactional, fragmented nature of written chat characterizing the written sessions, it was decided to use AS-units also to dissect this type of output.

In order to answer question n°2, first all the AS-units present in the learner's speech in both transcriptions of the first and last oral and written sessions were identified and marked in two different colors, in order to distinguish between error-free AS-units, i.e. units that do not contain any mistakes, and incorrect AS-units, i.e. units containing

mistakes. Performing a dissection of the learner's speech was a challenging operation, namely due to the fact that, especially insofar as oral speech was concerned, it was not always easy to identify clearly the boundaries of such units. During the activity, the following points were kept in mind:

- false starts, namely utterances that are begun and then abandoned or reformulated in some way, were not counted as AS units;
- words or phrases that undergo self-correction were not counted as AS units;
- utterances and units in English were not counted;
- Italian utterances containing English words or phrases employed for metalinguistic clarification (such as "Come si dice *house*?") were counted as incorrect AS units;
- discourse fillers such as *uh*, *ah*, *eh*, *ok* and *okay* (in written discourse) were not counted as either words or AS units;
- utterances interrupted by the learner to ask the teacher a clarification or feedback and recovered shortly after were counted as making up a unique AS unit.

Once these conventions had been established and the dissection performed, the following data were produced for each session: number of error-free AS-units, number of incorrect AS-units, total number of AS-units, number of words making up AS-units, number of words uttered but not belonging to any AS-unit (because either a false start or a word/phrase that has been self-corrected), total number of words making up error-free AS-units and overall number of words. Subsequently, a series of analyses and calculations were carried out on these results based on similar operations that are usually performed on written and oral non-interactional production, where T-unit (minimal terminable unit) is employed, it being defined as "a main clause plus whatever subordinate clauses and non-clausal structures attached to or embedded in it" (Hunt,

1966). Just as the mean length of each T-unit is worked out by dividing the number of words by the overall number of T-units, the mean length of each AS-unit will result from dividing the number of words actually making up the AS-units (since, as seen above, not all words are counted as belonging to units) by the overall number of AS-units (2):

$$(2) \text{ Mean length of AS-unit} = \frac{\text{n}^\circ \text{ of words making up AS-units}}{\text{overall n}^\circ \text{ of AS-units}}$$

The mean length of the AS-unit is an important indicator to measure the complexity of spoken and written production in interaction. In our case, it was chosen to measure the effects of Skype-based focus-on-form instruction on the learner's spoken and written output, i.e. whether it resulted in more complex and developed language or not. For this reason, the mean length was calculated for both written and oral sessions under investigation, namely the first and the last sessions. The goal was to assess whether the mean length increased after the 5-week period of instruction, in which case it could be possible to claim that a certain influence had occurred.

Question n° 2 also hinted at investigating some sort of effectiveness in language accuracy. The question was operationalized as follows: given that accuracy is commonly referred to as the absence of mistakes and inaccuracies in language production, a way to assess this was to look at the presence of error-free AS-units, namely AS-units that did not display any spelling, grammar or lexical mistakes. As anticipated above, for each transcription the relative error-free AS-units had already been identified. These were eventually counted and reported in an Excel worksheet, together with the other data collected. In order to gauge a possible progress in accuracy, it was necessary to compare the percentage of error-free AS-units in both the first and the last sessions, according to the following formula:

$$(3) \text{ Percentage of error-free AS-units} = \frac{\text{n}^\circ \text{ of error-free AS-units}}{\text{overall n}^\circ \text{ of AS-units}} * 100$$

The figures were then compared to ascertain whether the percentage of error-free AS-units was greater in the last sessions than in the first sessions. For consistency reasons, diachronic comparisons were only made between sessions sharing the same type of output, namely between the first and the last oral session and between the first and the last written session.

Finally, once the progress in complexity and accuracy had been measured through the above calculations, a way to effectively predict the learner's proficiency in Italian was to combine these two important aspects by working out the mean length of error-free AS-units, that is to say by resorting to the following formula:

$$(4) \text{ mean length of error-free AS-units} = \frac{\text{n}^\circ \text{ of words making up error-free AS-units}}{\text{overall n}^\circ \text{ of error-free AS-units}}$$

By comparing the mean length of error-free AS-units in the first and last sessions, a good estimate of the improvement in the learner's proficiency would therefore correspond to greater figures.

The results, the comparisons and the discussion of the data thus obtained will be thoroughly illustrated in § 4.2.

3.4.3.1 Data from qualitative sources: question n° 2

When the content analysis of the sources of qualitative data (teacher's diary, unstructured and semi-structured interviews) was performed, a pattern was identified whose main topic

was precisely the learner's output. This pattern – which we will call “pattern n° 2” - is described below.

PATTERN N° 2

2) Discourse about the learner's output: his perceptions (and the teacher's perceptions) on output and the way language is produced. Aspects such as fluency, accuracy and proficiency are involved.

*[2.1] During the written sessions, he produces more **output**, because he has more time to process it.*

*Occasionally he shows **frustration** at his not being able to express fully and proficiently what he wants to say, as he is not happy at the idea of having to produce **simplistic output**.*

First sessions [TEACHER'S DIARY]

*[2.2] The learner is still using **English** to comment or to ask questions, but this happens because we are in an **EFL**.*

Oral session 10.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

*[2.3] It is more of a free conversation, the learner is more **fluent** and **self-confident***

Oral session 23.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

*[2.4] [...]but he has **correctly written** the emails, but this is due to his having written Italian emails in the past when booking a trip to Italy.*

Written session 3.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

This second set of records seems to address the issue brought up by research question n°2, namely the effects of Skype-based focus-on-form instruction on learner proficiency. Here output and the way it is perceived by both the teacher and the learner emerge from the records. The same method used to synthesize the previous discourse, namely that of

summarizing the records into one or more statements, was used also for this set of notes. Put together, such statements will help shape a more accurate conclusion on the data emerged from the speech analysis § 3.4.3 of the learner's output before and at the end of the instructional period. The statements and their discussion is outlined in § 4.2.1.

3.4.4 Data collection and analysis for research question n°3

Like the two other questions, research question n°3 (“What are the implications for the learner of the use of Skype in communicative, focus-on-form type of instruction?”) needed to be operationalized prior to defining how data collection and analysis would be carried out. More specifically, the word “implications” needed to be interpreted and explained. For the present case study, the following aspects were therefore considered as making up the rather general concept of “implications”:

- (1) the learner's attitude towards Skype-based focus-on-form instruction;
- (2) the suitability of the focus-on-form technique, and of its implementation through task-based teaching, for Skype-based instruction;
- (3) possible ways of improving such an approach in order for it to become more effective for the particular subject under investigation.

The researcher decided to address the above questions through a qualitative analysis, in that such a question could only be addressed by interpreting, rather than quantifying data. Because of this, observations carried out through field notes and interviews, and content analysis of the material thus collected seemed to be a reasonable choice in order to provide a satisfactory answer to the question. Three different patterns were identified from the content analysis of soft data, which we will call pattern n°3, pattern n° 4 and pattern n° 5. These were considered particularly fitting for the issue at hand, in that they

explored the suitability of such an approach for teaching a language on Skype (pattern n°3), the learner's attitude (pattern n°3) and perceptions (pattern n°5) towards the methodology adopted and Skype-based instruction, in general, possible ways of improving such methodology (pattern n° 5) on the basis of the learner's personal learning style and needs (pattern n° 4).

PATTERN N° 3

Discourse about the task-based, focus-on-form oriented procedure adopted for instruction: comments and notes on its implementation and effectiveness.

[3.1] *The learner has a tendency to **make guesses** and to **ask many questions** to the teacher, which is a positive fact. Clarification requests, confirmation checks, open questions are a signal that the learner is **actively involved** in the lesson. However, many examples of corrective feedback are also found.*

[...] *The student appears to **enjoy** the teaching method [...]*

First sessions [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.2] *The learner wonders what form he could use to fulfill a specific task (talk about a past event). Here **meaning + form in focus are combined**. **Communication** is the goal here, and form is a means to achieve this.*

Oral session 10.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.3] *Task: Guess who? Game. He **really enjoyed** the activity.*

But maybe now I will incorporate more explanation. I will still devise tasks as he enjoys them.

Written session 13.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.4] *Oral session based on a task "telephone interviews". The learner **enjoys** the activity and **laughs** many times.*

Oral session 15.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.5] *Questions and LREs about the use of imperfetto vs passato prossimo **arose**, as expected.*

Written session 19.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.6] *I asked him his opinion about whether he is improving or not. He says he thinks he has **improved** in that he has to **think less** before producing language which is very closely to being target-like.*

19.11.12 [UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS]

[3.7] *I noticed he **enjoyed** the task of drawing*

Oral session 20.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.8] *He had **fun** [...]*

20.11.12 [UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS]

[3.9] *He uses **more Italian** during the lesson.*

*He makes **guesses**, **plays** more with the language, he is **less afraid**.*

*An **opportunity** has arisen to discuss the use of IMPERFETTO.*

Written session 22.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.10] *vado DAL dottore → this preposition has **emerged***

*He **asks** about a form: what is the Italian for "I'm going to"? → use of present*

Oral session 23.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.11] *During the lesson, he finds it difficult to ask questions. Maybe the **task** is too **complex**?*

He knows he has to use imperfetto for this task. However, he tends to use the same questions. Maybe the task should have been planned in a different way.

Written session 25.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.12] *I am going to make a detective game as I know he **likes** it.*

*The lesson lasted a lot and he really **enjoyed** it. He was also more **confident** [...]*

Oral session 29.11.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

[3.13] *I have tried not to **interrupt** him too much this time.*

Oral session 5.12.12 [TEACHER'S DIARY]

Pattern n° 3 contains important information as to the implementation of Skype-based focus-on-form instruction and, more specifically, about the procedure adopted to achieve this, namely task-based instruction (§ 3.4.3). Not only relevant considerations regarding the use of tasks and their role in fostering noticing emerge – the notes often mention a form that *emerges* and *opportunities* that arise – but also the learner's *attitude* towards it (enjoyment, fun, confidence). Therefore it seems that the interpretation of the data contained in it could contribute to giving a fitting answer to research question n° 3 (“What are the implications for the learner of the use of Skype in communicative, focus-on-form type of instruction?). The attitude of the learner towards the particular type of procedure adopted emerges from the notes belonging to pattern n°3.

PATTERN N° 4

3) Discourse about metacognition: the learner expresses his thoughts, both explicitly and implicitly, about the way he thinks is more effective to learn a language.

[4.1] *The learner has pointed out to me that he **struggles** very much to learn Italian in that it is a very different language from its own (Norwegian). He finds it **difficult to remember new vocabulary** that he has learnt during a lesson. He is perhaps more confident in **Spanish**, since he has been studying it longer than Italian and with a higher frequency (3 lessons a week on average).*

Vocabulary** is what he has problems at acquiring. He has pointed out that the reason why he can speak English so well is because he has been **flooded** with it and been **exposed to

*it on a daily basis since he was young. He also needs time to make this **knowledge subconscious and automatic.***

16.11.12 [UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS]

[4.2] *I have asked him if he usually things about something else during the lesson. He answers that usually he can focus on what he is doing. He says it is almost impossible to **retain** many things in the **short memory** when he is learning a language, also when he is learning another subject. He says he learns more by **listening** and **seeing**. Maybe it would be useful to incorporate more visual materials in the lesson, more input.*

*He says he learns a lot from **videos**.*

18_11_12 [UNSTRUCTURES INTERVIEWS]

[4.3] *He says that “it’s all about **familiarity**, you need to get used to what you read”.*

19_11_12 [UNSTRUCTURES INTERVIEWS]

[4.4] *After the lesson he told me his mind was **tired** so maybe this influenced the performance*

Written session 25.11.12 [TEACHER’S DIARY]

[4.5] *[...]He also told me he needs to **interiorize patterns** in order to be able to speak the language confidently.*

Written session 25.11.12 [TEACHER’S DIARY]

[4.6] *He says that his brain does not work like others when it comes to learning language. He forgets all the language forms if they are not **exemplairs**. He needs **patterns**. It does not remember the name of the tenses. He needs to see **language in use**.*

26.11.12 [UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS]

[4.7] *Written session. He says he wrote this kind of emails in the past when he had to book his trip to Italy, and he remembered it. At that time, he had learnt how to write an email by looking at lessons notes and other samples of emails he had found on the **Internet** (therefore **INPUT**).*

3.12.12 [UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS]

[4.8] *If his mind feels that it is not **mastering** something, he will have a hard time learning a language.*

He was told by doctors that his part of the brain learning Maths and Logics would not work properly. Until one day at school, he got a A (fail) on the half-term. He asked for one-to-one teaching. He got better later.

He learnt that his brain is weird. But he is given confidence, he can learn.

*He learns “**situationally**”: linking certain things with situations. When he was in Italy he did that.*

Oral session 5.12.12 [TEACHER’S DIARY]

Pattern n° 4 seeks to explore a fundamental issue in the present case study, namely the learner’s method for learning a language. Such pattern is fundamental, in that it may help shed some light on the results of the tests and of the analysis of quantifiable, hard data such as those collected for research questions n° 1 and 2, as well as providing useful insights as to possible ways of improving the specific methodology adopted for instruction. What emerges from unstructured interviews, namely rather free conversations that took place after the lessons, and from the teacher’s diary, is the learner’s strong awareness of how he believes he could learn a language better. The records display quite developed metacognitive skills: in fact, it was often possible to discuss about the learning process with the student, thus gaining extremely valuable insights into how the learner acquires a foreign language by making interesting comparisons with his linguistic background and biography: what are the differences between the methodology he has just experienced during the 5-week Skype-based instruction and the way he managed to master English at such as proficient level? What does he consider as good practice to learn a foreign language and what could be improved on the basis of his personal learning style? All these issues are tackled by the above notes belonging to this fourth pattern.

5) Discourse about the use of Skype for language instruction.

N.B. All records are taken from the semi-structured interview with the learner.

[5.1] (*Teacher*) *What would you choose to learn another language, Skype lessons or e-tandem?*

(*Learner*) *Conversation is good if you are not a beginner. But **language exchanges** are not efficient if the two learners are **not proficient**. If you need to take a test, the technical, normative approach is best. If you just need for **communicative purposes**, for pleasure etc the second approach is preferable. Just like a car: you need to study to learn to drive, but if you want to be a good driver you need to drive. You need first little technical training and then **speaking speaking speaking**. That's how I learnt English.*

[...] *If I were to learn a language again, I would learn **technicalities** for two months. After that, I would have **conversations** with a native. It also depends on how much **access** you have to the language. If you only have the Internet, it might be good to hire a native speaker for conversation.*

[5.2] (*Teacher*) *Why did you decide to learn a language on Skype?*

(*Learner*) *Learning a language on Skype is more **efficient** than in a classroom: you have the **direct attention** of the teacher (when I was at school I was not **attended to properly** by the teacher, since I was the best student in English and was well above the others. I would easily get bored since I would finish all the exercises earlier than the others), you can have **access** to native speakers in remote areas, such as here, where I live, a remote village in Norway, you have **less distraction**, you are more **focused** on what you are doing.*

[5.3] (*Learner*) *It is important to speak to **native speakers**, in my opinion. However, I would not rely solely on Skype for the next language I am going to learn. It is more of a matter of **quantity** than quality to me: one hour every day could work. But you also need more than that. 3-4 hours a day. But of course this would be expensive on Skype since you need to hire a tutor.*

[5.4] (*Learner*) *Skype should replace all **classroom learning**. Yes, the social factor is important....but you don't have to travel to school this way. For **adults** it's ok...but for **children** it may be difficult.*

[...] *School is badly organized. I learnt most things **by myself**. At school I felt that **access to knowledge** was limited, which is why I had to figure out by myself.*

Pattern n° 5 is the result of a semi-structured interview which took place right after the experimental instructional period. As can be noticed by reading the notes taken during the conversational exchanges, the goal of the interview was to investigate in depth the learner's own perceptions of Skype language teaching, and more precisely, Skype focus-on-form language teaching, to which he has been subject. The interview had not been planned having specific questions in mind – only the direction and orientation of the topics remained stable, without running the risk of digressing and thus broadening the scope of the data collection – as is the case of semi-structured interviews (§ 3.4.1.2). The interview aimed at exploring possible implications of the role of Skype for the learner, namely how this type of technology can affect the learning process and if it is perceived as a useful, viable way of implementing language teaching in an unconventional setting as VoIP can be, as was requested by research question n° 3.

Clearly, all the learner's responses, as well as the teacher's notes, were not taken *per se* as answers to question n° 3, but needed to be interpreted. For this reason, a series of statements synthesizing what had emerged in this third, fourth and fifth patterns were written for the sake of clarity and are reported in § 4.3, in order to provide a more satisfactory and structured answer to such question.

To sum up, by relying on the conclusions that can be made through an interpretive analysis, which has been defined as a *content analysis*, of patterns n° 3, n° 4 and n° 5, a series of considerations can be made as to the implications of the use of Skype for communicative, focus-on-form language instruction in relation to this particular case study, in an attempt to build a satisfactory answer to research question n°3.

In the following section the procedure followed to implement the present research and create the source from which data were collected and analyzed will be described in depth.

3.5 Procedure

The goals of the present case research, which are outlined in § 3.1 and framed through the three research questions, required the researcher to reproduce in a rather unconventional setting - Skype - a type of communicative language instruction incorporating focus on form that could be measured in terms of acquisition, proficiency and pedagogical implications. First of all, the following points needed to be defined:

1) a methodology had to be chosen which could foster noticing in a communicative type of language instruction as VoIP-based teaching can be;

2) the methodological implications of Skype-based teaching needed to be taken into consideration: for this reason, the teaching approach defined in the previous point had to present certain features that made it implementable in audio-conferencing online synchronous communication, namely a type of communication integrating visual and audio aspects. One such decision had to include not only the teaching approach, but also the type of materials used, the syllabus, the plan of the lesson;

3) the methodology chosen also needed to have another important role: helping the learner produce more output and, as Swain puts it, to be pushed to make use of his own resources and linguistic abilities to his fullest (1993). In this way, a possible increase in the level of proficiency could be measured, which is precisely the object of research question n°2 (§ 3.1.1).

4) another important consideration regarded the participants involved. The experimental study hereby presented contemplates the participation of only two people, namely the teacher and the student. One-to-one instruction is the object of the research. Therefore, the procedure adopted to provide the fundamental sources of data needed to take into account this aspect also. For instance, the absence of other participants, which instead is a characteristic of traditional classroom instruction, necessarily entailed leaving

out certain activities and materials and privileging others which are more suitable for this type of teaching.

Once all these aspects had been taken into consideration, it was decided that the most suitable approach was a task-based one. As already discussed extensively in the introductory part of this study (§ 2.1.1.1), noticing and task-based instruction are intimately bound. In fact, a task is an activity whose primary goal is communication, in that it “requires the participants to function primarily as *language users*” (Ellis, 2003:3). Tasks allow learners to practice language in action and to focus mainly on meaning: language, in this view, is seen as a means to achieve successful communication. The main feature of tasks is the presence of a *gap*, namely some sort of missing information, which is precisely what fosters noticing of certain forms in the learner’s output and motivates written or spoken language production. This essential characteristic of task-based instruction is what makes it a good candidate for the first point listed above, namely the need to choose a methodological approach that fosters noticing and therefore the production of LREs (*language-related episodes*) (§ 3.4.2), which makes focus on form collectible and thus measurable.

Task-based instruction was also considered as a good approach to satisfy the aforementioned second requirement, namely the role of this approach in helping the learner produce more output. It is precisely a major concern of tasks that of making the learner speak or write, which is seen as the only means to achieve task completion, in that tasks are characterized by a gap in the communication, as already mentioned. Although the teacher may decide to elicit certain forms - which can be achieved through the principle of *task essentialness* (§ 2.1.4.1) - or to simply have the learner speak and attempt to complete the task using other forms – as the principles of *task naturalness* and *task utility* state (§ 2.1.4.1) – the learner will have to produce output, and his/her linguistic abilities will have to be pushed for the sake of communication. The goal of the task-based

procedure adopted for this case study was therefore that of having the student produce a large amount of output, so that eventually his proficiency levels could be measured and the necessary conclusions could be drawn.

Finally, task-based teaching was seen as a good candidate for being implemented in a Skype, one-to-one type of instruction. Skype presents the invaluable advantage of integrating audio and visual communication, and the reason why it was developed was that of helping people communicate thanks to the Internet by reproducing a situation that, though virtual and “digital”, nevertheless resembles that of face-to-face communication. This software was therefore mainly conceived for one-to-one conversations, although exchanges with more than one person at the same time are possible and not uncommon. As already reported in § 2.2.1.1.2, synchronous online communication, of which Skype is a good representative, constitutes a good setting where language instruction can be carried out. Through oral (video calling) and written (chat) conversational exchanges, the learner is encouraged to notice particular forms in the input and in the output, without disrupting the communicative flow (Long, 1981). Moreover, the possibility of negotiating meaning and form (§ 2.1.3) easily arises when interacting with a native speaker; in addition to this, if the native speaker with whom the student interacts is also a language teacher, opportunities for corrective feedback, which is provided both implicitly (through recasts) and explicitly (through overt corrections), are naturally offered by Skype instruction, in which everything takes place in real-time conditions.

Therefore, task-based instruction was considered as a suitable approach to implement a type of teaching that could foster noticing and focus on form, which is the primary objective of the present study. It also seemed to be a good methodology to help the learner produce more output and therefore push his linguistic ability, as well as test out hypothesis and all the other functions that it has been claimed to perform by Skehan (1998) (who draws on Swain, 1985) (§ 2.1.2.2). Once fostered through task-based

instruction, noticing and focus on form find a suitable setting in Skype, which, being endowed with all the characteristics of synchronous computer-mediated communication, allows for real-time focus on form and feedback.

There is, however, another reason why a task-based approach was privileged. As already mentioned in § 3.2, the subject of the study had already studied the Italian language during the previous twelve months, albeit in a completely different way, namely through the acquisition of declarative knowledge. The type of instruction he had been subject to was mainly grammar-based, with grammar being the core of each lesson and taking the form of detailed rules explanation, as well as grammar exercises of which a great percentage was represented by *pattern drills*. In short, the foreign language was not new to the learner, in that he could comprehend certain types of more articulated input beyond his level, but, insofar as production was concerned, the language was only known at a declarative level. Procedural knowledge was not there, because chances of fostering it had never arisen before. Declarative knowledge of Italian being there, it only needed to be turned into procedural knowledge (see fig. 1 in § 2.1.1.1 for a clear representation of such process). A way to achieve this, as stated by Ellis (2003), is through task-based communicative practice. It is communicative practice that helps the learner proceduralize knowledge of linguistic features that were made available to him through declarative knowledge, that is to say, have him use those linguistic features without having to think about them. Hence the importance of tasks in order to achieve this. The learner's linguistic biography proved itself very fitting for this purpose, in that the prerequisites for putting declarative knowledge into practice were there.

The procedure that had to be implemented demanded the researcher to perform a series of actions. How these actions were implemented in the present research will be described in detail in the following sections, which will report the whole procedure

adopted by dividing it into steps or phases. Each step will be thoroughly dealt with and will incorporate more information as to the reasons behind specific operational choices.

3.5.1 Phase 1: observation and pre-assessment

Following the pattern of action research (§ 3.3.2), the procedure started with some form of observation. Although not extensively and thoroughly, it was considered necessary to assess the learner's skills and competence in the foreign language (Italian) insofar as writing and speaking were concerned. For this reason, the learner, after being made aware of the experimental study of which he was going to be the subject of investigation, was asked to perform a very simple, informal conversation with the teacher, lasting approximately 30 minutes. No focus-on-form approach was incorporated in the chat, as it was a purely free conversation. No extensive feedback was provided but for some recasts, which were limited to those forms that had been misspelt by the learner. The conversation did not focus on any specific topic. From an analysis of the transcribed output, the most problematic forms that emerged were the following:

FORM	EXAMPLES
Prepositions (use)	<p>1. (T) Cosa hai fatto oggi? (S) Ho vado <i>in</i> lezioni...uhm...<i>in</i> lezioni...di università. [the correct preposition would be <i>alle</i>]</p> <p>2. (T) Tutto il giorno? (S) Uhm...<i>come si dice "from...to"</i>? [the answer is "<i>da...a</i>"]</p> <p>3. (T) Dove? (S) Mmh non lo so, forse, un'altra casa <i>in</i> Portsmouth.</p>

	[the correct preposition would be <i>a</i> , which is used with names of towns and cities]
Prepositions (formation of <i>preposizioni articolate</i>)	1. (T) In Italia dove? In quale città? (S) Mm, non lo so, <i>in el</i> norde ¹ . [the correct <i>preposizione articolata</i> is <i>nel</i>] 2. (S) <i>In il</i> videoggioco..[...] [the correct <i>preposizione articolata</i> is <i>nel</i>]
Articles (formation and use)	1. (S) Forse, completare \emptyset^2 università di primo..sì?...primo anno. [...] [the definite article “ <i>l’</i> ” is missing here] 2. (S) Distruggere <i>i</i> particelle. [the correct definite article here is <i>le</i> , which is feminine and plural like <i>particelle</i> , whereas <i>i</i> is the definite article used for masculine, plural nouns beginning with a consonant]
<i>Passato prossimo</i> (formation and choice of auxiliary)	1. (T) Cosa hai fatto oggi? (S) <i>Ho vado</i> in lezioni...uhm...in lezioni... di università. [the correct form of the verb would be <i>sono andato</i> , as <i>andare</i> is a verb of movement and requires auxiliary <i>essere</i>]
Tense conjugation	1. (S) Il giocatore <i>deva</i> ..should? [the correct ending for the 3 rd person singular of verb <i>dovere</i> is <i>-e</i> , therefore <i>deve</i>] 2. (S) [...] il giocatore <i>aggiungere</i> ..[...] [the verb must be conjugated into the 3 rd person singular of the present tense: <i>aggiunge</i>]
Gender	1.

(T) = Teacher (S) = Student

¹ It is interesting to note how the learner in this case displays some influence from Spanish, the other romance language he is learning.

² \emptyset = something is missing (in this case, the Italian definite article “*l’*”)

	<p>(S) Anche, ho <i>un</i> lezione di spagnolo.</p> <p>[Italian nouns ending in <i>-e</i> can be either feminine or masculine. <i>Lezione</i> is feminine: the learner, believing it to be masculine, chooses the indefinite article <i>un</i> accordingly, whereas the correct form should be <i>una lezione</i>]</p> <p>2.</p> <p>(S) Armi <i>nuovi</i>.</p> <p>[the learner does not acknowledge that <i>armi</i> might be the plural for <i>arma</i>, a feminine noun, which therefore requires the adjective to be feminine plural: <i>nuove</i>]</p>
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From a careful observation of the data collected through this pre-assessment conversation, aiming at establishing the most problematic forms for the learner, which would represent the basis upon which the instruction could focus, the following considerations were made:

- At the time of the assessment, the learner`s input processing abilities were more developed than his output processing abilities. A demonstration of this was his being able to comprehend almost all questions that were asked him.
- The most evident problems regarded verb endings and conjugation, articles, gender agreement, prepositions and *passato prossimo*. In particular, it seems that a great role in this is played by the learner`s L1. In fact, Norwegian does not have verb endings marking the different persons. For instance, the verb *å gå* (= “to walk”) is conjugated in the following way:

jeg går = I walk

du går = you walk

Hun/han går = she/he walks

Vi går = we walk

Dere går = you walk

De går = they walk

- Moreover, the problems displayed with the use of *passato prossimo* are not surprising given that this tense in Norwegian requires the use of auxiliary *å ha* (= “to have”) only, even with verbs of movement: *jeg har gått til skolen* (= “I have walked to school”). This is different in Italian, where, as already mentioned before, verbs of movements require auxiliary *essere* for compound tenses. The same applies to the use of articles in Norwegian compared to Italian. The difference between definite and indefinite articles still holds; however, Norwegian Bokmål has a smaller number of article forms. Articles vary according to gender (masculine, feminine and neuter). The definite articles are enclitic forms: *huset* (= “the house”, neuter gender), *gutten* (= “the boy”, masculine gender), *jenta* (= “the girl”, feminine gender), *husene*, *guttene*, *jentene* (= “the houses”, “the boys”, “the girls”). As for indefinite articles, they are placed before the noun: *et hus* (= “a house”, neuter gender), *en gutt* (= “a boy”, masculine gender), *ei jente* (= “a girl”, feminine gender). In Norwegian Bokmål, therefore, articles vary only by the gender of the noun they go with. There are no phonetic allomorphs of the same article, as is the case of Italian, which resorts to many different forms: *il cane / un cane* (= “the dog” / “a dog”, used before singular masculine nouns beginning with a consonant), *l'albero / un albero* (= “the tree” / “a tree”, used before singular masculine nouns beginning with a vowel), *la casa / una casa* (= “the house” / “a house”, used before singular feminine nouns beginning with a consonant), *l'università / un'università* (= “the university” / “a university”, used before singular feminine nouns beginning with a vowel), *i cani* (= “the dogs”, used before plural masculine nouns beginning with a consonant), *gli alberi* (= “the trees”, used before plural masculine nouns beginning with a vowel), *le case* (=

“the houses”, used before plural feminine nouns). A variety of forms are used in Italian, which might be the cause of the learner’s mistakes.

- Although the conversation was by no means characterized by focus on form, many LREs arose spontaneously from the learner during the interactional exchanges. In addition to this, the learner often displayed uptake of the forms occasionally focused on, such as in (5):

(5) (S) “I am working”, yes, Sto lavorando “on”, do you say “in” or “a”?

(T) “A”.

(S) A.

- As for the psychological aspects emerged from the learner’s attitude towards conversation with a native teacher, the researcher noted that he enjoys testing out hypotheses and making guesses. Moreover, the learner is not afraid of making mistakes. This makes him a good candidate for the application of Swain’s output theory (1985), by which accuracy and fluency are reached through practice and interaction.

Once all the necessary considerations had been drawn that could provide some useful insights on the most problematic forms in the foreign language, on the learner’s attitude towards oral production and interaction and on the chances that a form-focused type of instruction could be implemented, the premises for the execution of the operational phases were there. In the following section the second phase of the procedure will be thoroughly described.

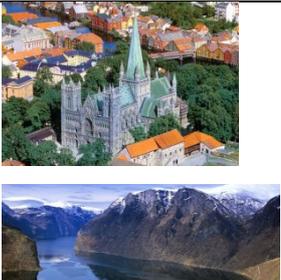
3.5.2 Phase 2: warm-up stage and lesson planning

Before starting to implement the procedure chosen for the instructional period, the time-frame, as well as the frequency with which the sessions would be carried out, needed to be established. Given the student's timetable, daily sessions would not have been a good option. The same could be said for sessions that would take place only once a week, given the limited opportunities for the learner to practice. For these reasons, in cooperation with the student it was agreed that 4 sessions a week would have to be arranged (each of them lasting approximately 30-40 minutes), namely two oral sessions (conducted via Skype video-conferences) and two written sessions (conducted via Skype written chat only). The researcher then opted for a total number of 20 lessons (10 oral sessions and 10 written sessions), so that the time-frame of the experimental instruction would have been of 5 weeks. The instructional period started 22 days after the pre-assessment conversation (§ 3.4.1).

Not all 20 sessions followed the same procedure. As the title of this section suggests, first the researcher chose to administer a number of sessions, namely 4 (2 oral session and 2 written session), that would make up a kind of "warm-up", where the learner would start to get accustomed to a communicative type of instruction privileging the use of tasks to foster the production of written and spoken language. As a consequence of this, the first four sessions are characterized by a different interpretation of the task-based teaching model through what has been defined as *open tasks* (Ellis, 2003). Such a decision is motivated by the need, insofar as the first sessions are concerned, to generate as many LREs as possible so that a broader range of forms are offered to the researcher to plan future tasks in a more targeted way. In practice, this choice implied selecting different topics of conversation - one for each session - and to have the learner talk about them, following the model of *focused open conversations*,

which can be considered as *open tasks*. Sometimes, pictures were provided as a trigger for conversation, or in order to have the student use certain forms (e.g. during the second oral session, centered around “geography”, several pictures were shown to the student displaying places in Norway he knew). The aim of such activities was to let communication flow through focused open conversation and have the student freely produce as many LREs as possible.

Thus it was possible to spot in a more precise way the forms which would represent the basis of the following session, whilst at the same time having the student “warm up” for the future sessions. Below the contents of these first 4 sessions are listed, as well as the materials used for carrying them out.

Session (#)	Type	Content	Additional materials used
#1	Oral	Focused open conversation on the topic of family (“ <i>la famiglia</i> ”). The learner is asked to talk about his family, describe a picture containing the image of a family and talk about his ideal family.	
#2	Written	Focused open conversation on the topic of work (“ <i>lavoro</i> ”). The learner is asked questions about his job/occupation (in his case, university, since he is a student).	
#3	Oral	Focused open conversation on the topic of geography (“ <i>geografia</i> ”). The learner is asked to interact with the teacher and talk about the geography of Italy, the geography of Norway, places he has been / not been to;	

		in addition to this, he is asked to describe the map of the city he is living in.	 
#4	Written	Focused open conversation on the topic of school (“ <i>scuola</i> ”). The learner is asked to talk about his past education (high school).	

After the fourth lesson, as anticipated above, the teacher-researcher decided to change the procedure used. As will be explained in the following section, this second part of the instructional period saw the application of the traditional principles of task-based language learning and teaching.

3.5.3 Phase 3: instruction based on closed tasks

Once the orientation, warm-up phase was completed, i.e. the researcher considered this first stage satisfactory both in terms of data collected on the most problematic forms for the learner and in terms of the learner’s comfortable attitude towards the sessions administered, the procedure adopted changed towards a more specific, closed task-oriented type of instruction. In particular, this new type of procedure was built and planned on the basis provided by the focused open conversations that had characterized the previous stage: since the focus of instruction needed to be narrowed down to some forms, given the limited number of sessions left (16) and the necessity for the researcher to better gauge the effectiveness of focus on form, the tasks focused only on some forms

and left out others as “control” forms. In this way, it would have been possible to test both forms that have been focused on throughout the whole instructional period – through focused open conversations and tasks – and forms that have been partially or limitedly focused on – through focused open conversations only.

In this section, the contents and purposes of sessions from #5 to #20 will be described in detail.

Session #5 (Oral)	
Task	<p>In this task, the learner is asked to reconstruct a story by interacting with the teacher and looking at the pictures submitted to him. The pictures suggest the story of a child that woke up, had breakfast, brushed his teeth, sat in the car to be driven to school by his mother; later on, the car had an accident, so while his mother was talking to the driver of the other car involved in the accident, he escaped into the wood, met a dog, with whom he went back home.</p> <p>The teacher points out that the story happened the day before (see <i>Goals</i> below) and, to conclude the session, asks the student what <i>he</i> did the day before.</p>
Goals	<p>The goal of the task is that of having the student wonder what tense can be used in Italian for recounting events that happened the day before the interlocutor is speaking. Such tense in Italian is the <i>passato prossimo</i>, a compound tense consisting of an auxiliary (<i>avere</i> or <i>essere</i>) and a past participle, such as <i>sono andato</i> (“I went”) and <i>ho mangiato</i> (“I ate”). In this way, the learner actively reflects about language in use and therefore notices this particular form³, which we have seen is a problematic one for him (§ 3.4.1).</p>

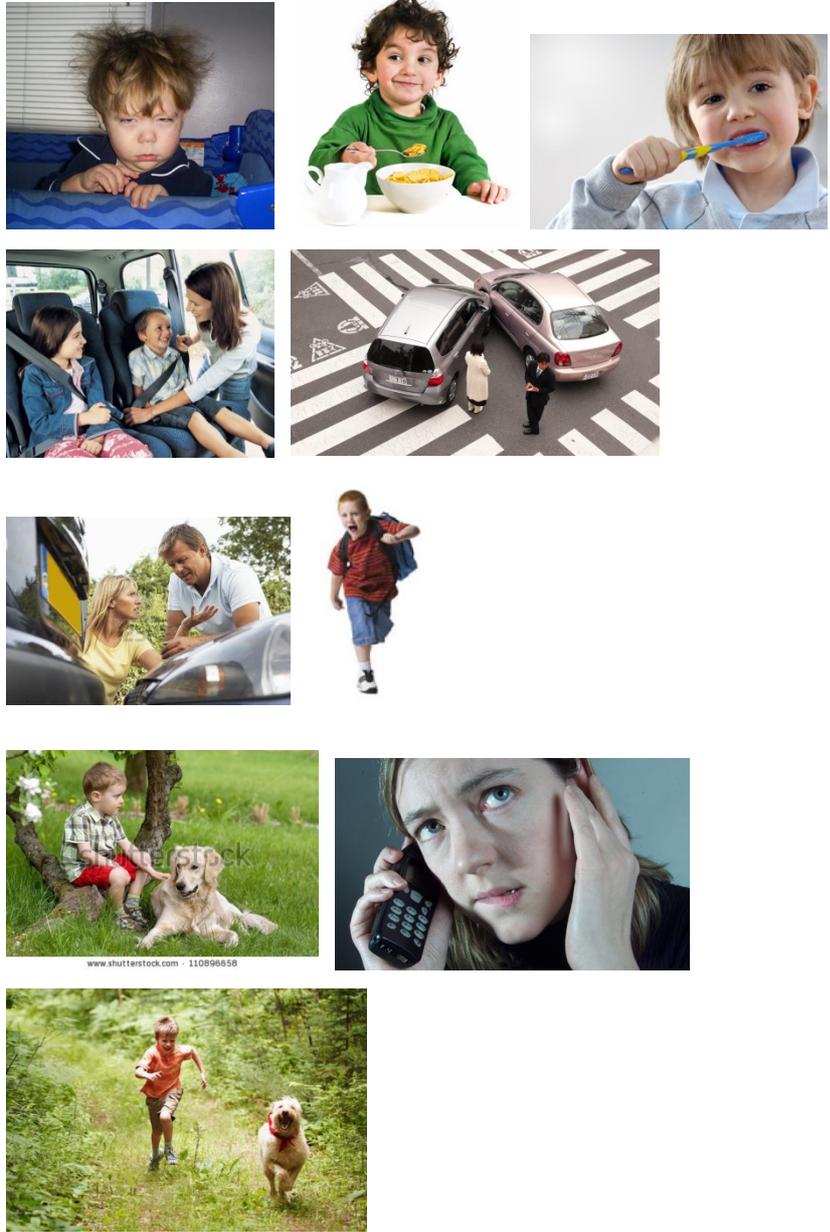
³ Although results are not a matter of description in this section, it is interesting to report that the learner did wonder what form should be used in Italian. This is an excerpt of the transcription of the session:

T. – Allora, devi raccontare che cosa è successo ieri a Marco, ok?

L. – Sì. Marco...*which tense should I use?*

T. – Secondo te?

L. – The “ha guardato” type of thing?

<p>Materials used</p>	<p>The following pictures were used to support the task (here they are displayed in the same order as they were shown to the learner):</p> 
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<p align="center">Session #6 (Written)</p>	
<p>Task</p>	<p>Two-way task of the “Guess who?” type. The learner and the teacher, in turn, have to think about a famous character that both of them know. The other person has to guess who that character is by asking questions. The two participants ask questions in turn to their partners about the respective characters. Questions can be open or</p>

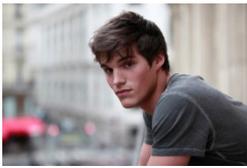
	closed.
Goals	The main goal is having the student practice verbs in the present tense (which is the tense primarily used for asking questions about living people), as well as other forms such as adjectives and simple structures used in basic conversations (such as structures used to ask and tell about the age of a person, his/her nationality, profession and origin).
Materials used	No materials were used to support this task.

Session #7 (Oral)	
Task	The activity consists of a series of phone conversations (namely 5) that are carried out by the student and the teacher collaboratively. The student is shown a series of pictures suggesting different situations, both formal and informal. Some instances of these are: the student calling the doctor to ask for a consultancy (formal situation), the student calling a girl to ask her out for dinner (informal situation), the student arranging an appointment with the hairdresser (formal situation).
Goals	The goal of such activity is to foster noticing and use of the formal vs. informal way of addressing someone in Italian, i.e. the use of the <i>Lei</i> subject in polite contexts in opposition with 2 nd person singular subject <i>tu</i> (“you”).
Materials used	The following pictures were used as hints for conversations: <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center; gap: 20px;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>(1)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> </div>

	<p>(2)   </p> <p>(3)   </p> <p>(4)  </p>
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Session #8 (Written)

<p>Task</p>	<p>In the task, the learner is given a series of pictures representing different kinds of people (see <i>Materials used</i>). The people chosen by the teacher for this task represent different ages, genders and nationalities. The student has to write a description of each of them and the teacher has to guess what person it is from this description.</p> <p>The description should ideally follow the following example:</p> <p><i>Si chiama Anna, ha 20 anni, abita a Roma e viene da Torino. Fa la cameriera.</i></p> <p>(“Her name is Anna, she is 20 years old, she lives in Rome and comes from Torino. She is a waitress”)</p> <p>Additional information may be included if the learner wishes so.</p>
<p>Goals</p>	<p>The goal of this task is to foster noticing and use of the following Italian forms and structures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>si chiama</i> (3rd person singular of present tense of verb

	<p><i>chiamarsi</i>, “to be called”);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>abita A</i> (“he/she lives IN”); • <i>viene DA</i> (“he/she comes FROM”) • <i>ha anni</i> (“he/she is years old”) • <i>fa....+ profession</i> (“he/she is + profession”)
<p>Materials used</p>	<p>The following pictures were used:</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>(A)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>(B)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>(C)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>(D)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>(E)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>(F)</p> </div> </div>

Session #9 (Oral)	
<p>Task</p>	<p>This activity is a one-way task by which the learner is given the picture of a messy bedroom with a lot of different objects in it, as well as a list of words referring to some of those objects (see <i>Materials used</i>). He then has to pick one of the objects in the list (an explanation of the words listed can be given to him) without letting the teacher know, and say where in the room the object is. The teacher has to guess what object it is. The activity goes on until all objects of the list are guessed.</p>
<p>Goals</p>	<p>Such an activity is centered around the use of the prepositions of place. More specifically, it aims at fostering noticing and use of the following forms:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Preposizioni articolate (sull/sulla/sullo/sull', nell/nello/nella/nell' and so on);</i> • Prepositions such as <i>sotto</i> (“under”), <i>sopra</i> (“on”), <i>dietro</i> (“behind”), etc • Definite articles (<i>il, lo, la, gli, le</i>) <p>Moreover, it aims at noticing lexicon related to objects that can be found in a room.</p>
<p>Materials used</p>	<p>The picture representing the room is reported below, as well as the list of words submitted to the learner before undertaking the task:</p>  <p><i>stampante – lampada – sedia - borsa del computer – pallone – tappeto – libro – disegno – tende – quaderno – ciabatta - presa</i></p>

Session #10 (Written)	
<p>Task</p>	<p>The task incorporates more input than the previous tasks. It is an interview to the famous Italian football player Francesco Totti that the learner has to read. The interview is displayed visually by means of a presentation made in PowerPoint (see <i>Materials used</i>). In it, some crucial forms are highlighted in bold: these are usually verbs that the learner frequently has trouble remembering/ conjugating. The learner has to go through the whole interview. The real task, however, consists in writing a little text about the interviewee, after all the information about him has been read and gathered. After the written text has been typed on Skype, the</p>

	learner receives feedback on it.												
Goals	<p>The task has the following goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to help the learner practise conjugations by turning the verbs into the 3rd person singular; • to make the learner notice, or at least be aware, of the use of <i>passato prossimo</i> and <i>imperfetto</i> in the relative contexts when asking a person questions about his/her experience (ex <i>Quanto guadagnavi dieci anni fa?</i> = “How much did you earn ten years ago?” vs. <i>Quanti scudetti hai vinto?</i> = “How many championships have you won?”); 												
Materials used	<p>Here are the slides of the presentation created to show the interview:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="533 954 1345 1890"> <tr> <td data-bbox="533 954 796 1149"> <p>Intervista a Francesco Totti</p>  </td> <td data-bbox="810 954 1066 1149">  <p>Quando sei nato?</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1080 954 1345 1149">  <p>Sono nato il 26 settembre 1976.</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="533 1205 796 1400"> <p>Che lavoro fai?</p> </td> <td data-bbox="810 1205 1066 1400">  <p>Faccio il calciatore.</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1080 1205 1345 1400"> <p>Dove abiti?</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="533 1451 796 1646">  <p>Abito a Roma.</p> </td> <td data-bbox="810 1451 1066 1646"> <p>Quanti anni hai?</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1080 1451 1345 1646">  <p>Ho 36 anni.</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="533 1697 796 1890"> <p>Da quanto tempo fai il calciatore?</p> </td> <td data-bbox="810 1697 1066 1890">  <p>Faccio il calciatore da vent'anni.</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1080 1697 1345 1890">  <p>Cosa facevi da piccolo?</p> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Intervista a Francesco Totti</p> 	 <p>Quando sei nato?</p>	 <p>Sono nato il 26 settembre 1976.</p>	<p>Che lavoro fai?</p>	 <p>Faccio il calciatore.</p>	<p>Dove abiti?</p>	 <p>Abito a Roma.</p>	<p>Quanti anni hai?</p>	 <p>Ho 36 anni.</p>	<p>Da quanto tempo fai il calciatore?</p>	 <p>Faccio il calciatore da vent'anni.</p>	 <p>Cosa facevi da piccolo?</p>
<p>Intervista a Francesco Totti</p> 	 <p>Quando sei nato?</p>	 <p>Sono nato il 26 settembre 1976.</p>											
<p>Che lavoro fai?</p>	 <p>Faccio il calciatore.</p>	<p>Dove abiti?</p>											
 <p>Abito a Roma.</p>	<p>Quanti anni hai?</p>	 <p>Ho 36 anni.</p>											
<p>Da quanto tempo fai il calciatore?</p>	 <p>Faccio il calciatore da vent'anni.</p>	 <p>Cosa facevi da piccolo?</p>											

 <p>Studiavo (poco) e giocavo a pallone con gli amici.</p>	<p>Hai fratelli o sorelle?</p>	 <p>Sì, ho un fratello che si chiama Riccardo.</p>
<p>Quando hai iniziato a giocare a calcio?</p>	 <p>A sette anni, con la squadra «Fortitudo».</p>	<p>Quando ti sei sposato?</p>
 <p>Mi sono sposato nel 2005.</p>	 <p>Quanto guadagnavi dieci anni fa?</p>	 <p>Guadagnavo molti milioni di lire.</p>
 <p>Quanti scudetti hai vinto?</p>	 <p>Ho vinto tanti scudetti.</p>	<p>Completa!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Francesco Totti è nato il 26 settembre 1976 e <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>

<h3 style="text-align: center;">Session #11 (Oral)</h3>	
<p>Task</p>	<p>The task is a drawing activity⁴, a one-way task requiring the learner to draw (on the computer, using the tablet he has) the picture of a room. He has to do so by asking the teacher questions about objects that are located in the room (the teacher, without the learner knowing it, will base her answers on a famous painting by Van Gogh [see <i>Materials used</i>]). The learner can only ask yes/no questions. The list of the objects' names is given to the student before the drawing activity begins. The task is successfully completed if the learner manages to draw the room correctly.</p>
<p>Goals</p>	<p>The goal of the activity is to focus on prepositions, especially prepositions and phrases of place (<i>a destra di, a sinistra di, vicino</i></p>

⁴ This activity has been chosen because the learner likes drawing.

	<i>a, sopra, and so on), including preposizioni articolate.</i>
Materials used	<p>The picture taken as a reference is a famous painting by Van Gogh:</p>  <p>The list of objects submitted to the student is the following:</p> <p><i>letto – sedie – comodino - quadro / dipinto – vestiti - finestra – porta – bicchiere - caraffa - cuscini - porta</i></p>

Session #12 (Written)	
Task	<p>The task is a continuation of session #10 (Written), more specifically an interview to Italian singer Laura Pausini. This time, the learner is asked to actively recall the questions and the forms he has encountered in the previous task to make questions to ask the teacher, playing the role of the singer. Some words and phrases are given to him at the beginning (see <i>Materials used</i>), but greater part of the task is left to the learner.</p>
Goals	<p>The activity has several goals, namely to have the learner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ask questions in Italian correctly; • notice, or at least be aware, of the use of <i>passato prossimo</i> and <i>imperfetto</i> in the relative contexts when asking a person questions about his/her experience; • practice forms he has already encountered in a previous task.

Materials used	<p>Only two slides of a Power Point presentation were shown to the learner, one of which containing useful words or phrases:</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div data-bbox="528 293 930 573" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <p>Intervista a LAURA PAUSINI</p>  </div> <div data-bbox="943 293 1342 573" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>Parole:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vincere un premio (= to win a prize) • Fare beneficenza (= to do charity) • Vendere dischi (= to sell albums) </div> </div>
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Session #13 (Oral)	
Task	<p>The learner is given a week planner with timetables and pictures of people and/or activities for every day of the week. The teacher has to arrange appointments with the student and find suitable times to plan activities together. In order to foster more output from the learner, the teacher – without the learner knowing it – will always find an excuse to motivate her unavailability at the times proposed by the learner, so that he will go on asking about other days and times. At the end of the task, the student will be asked to tell the teacher what <i>he</i> is going to do next week.</p>
Goals	<p>The task aims to making the learner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use the present tense to refer to future events (<i>Cosa fai lunedì?</i> = “What are you doing on Monday?”); • remember words referring to everyday life activities ; • practice the structures used to tell the time (<i>Alle 9</i> = “At 9 o’clock”).
Materials used	<p>The following slides were used making up the <i>Agenda</i> (“Weekly planner):</p>

La mia agenda



Lunedì 26 novembre

Ore 11



Ore 14



Martedì 27 novembre

Ore 08



Ore 13



Mercoledì 28 novembre

Ore 12



Ore 16.30



Giovedì 29 novembre

Ore 15.30



Ore 21.15



	<p>Venerdì 30 novembre</p> <p>Ore 9,15 </p> <p>Ore 22 </p>	
	<p>Sabato 1 dicembre</p> <p>Ore 10 </p> <p>Ore 14 </p>	
	<p>Domenica 2 dicembre</p> <p>Ore 12,30 </p> <p>Ore 18 </p>	

Session #14 (Written)	
Task	The student is given a series of photos depicting six different people that represent different types of professions (see <i>Materials used</i>). The teacher has to pick one character at the time without letting the learner know who it is. The learner has to guess by asking the teacher questions about the character's childhood (his/her activities and interests as a child). Finally, he has to decide which of the six people the teacher has in mind. The learner is given some hints, but he has to ask questions he makes up.
Goals	The task aims to focus on the use of <i>imperfetto</i> for past activities (to talk about one's childhood: <i>Quando ero piccolo giocavo a</i>

	<i>calcio</i> = “When I was little I used to play football”) and to foster noticing and use of lexicon related to everyday life activities.
Materials used	<p>The pictures of the six characters are the following:</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Fotografo</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Biologo</p> </div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center; margin-top: 20px;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Giornalista</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Modella</p> </div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center; margin-top: 20px;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Dottore</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Musicista</p> </div> </div> <p>The following hints were given to the students as well:</p> <p><i>guardare i documentari – leggere riviste di moda – andare in montagna – fare lunghe passeggiate – fare fotografie - leggere libri – studiare matematica</i></p>

Session #15 (Written)

Task	<p>The task is less focused than the previous ones, since the teacher wanted to give the learner more freedom to talk about personal facts. The topic of this task is “How did you meet your girlfriend?”. The student has to read three small texts⁵ about people telling about how</p>
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⁵ The texts are taken from Mazzetti, Falcinelli, Servadio and Santeusano (2011)

	they met their girlfriends/ boyfriends. The student is then asked to write about how he met his girlfriend and/or best friend, in a rather free, non-constrained way.
Goals	The task sets as its main goal that of fostering noticing and use of <i>imperfetto</i> and <i>passato prossimo</i> , used to talk about past events.
Materials used	

Session #16 (Oral)	
Task	The activity is called <i>Chi è il colpevole?</i> (“Who is the criminal?”). A crime has been committed – an old lady (La signora Pina) cannot find her wallet as somebody has stolen it. The learner has to investigate who the criminal is by interrogating different suspects. All the characters are played by the teacher. The learner can ask as many questions as he wants to whatever character he wishes. At the end, he has to state who in his opinion the thief is.
Goals	This task has the student notice in his output and practise a number of forms and structures, namely: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Imperfetto</i> (<i>Dov’era ieri alle 9 di mattina?</i> = “Where were you yesterday at 9 a.m.?);

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions (using wh- adverbs such as <i>Dove? Come? Perché? Cosa?</i>); • The formal vs. informal way of addressing a person (respectively with 3rd person singular <i>Lei</i> and 2nd person singular <i>tu</i>). <p>Moreover, the learner is encouraged to use language creatively and freely.</p>
<p>Materials used</p>	<p>The following presentation was used to support the task:</p> <div data-bbox="528 707 995 1032" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: center;">Chi è il colpevole?</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;">   </div> </div> <div data-bbox="528 1059 995 1384" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: center;">La signora Pina non trova più il suo portafoglio. Qualcuno lo ha rubato?</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;">   </div> </div> <div data-bbox="528 1435 995 1760" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: center;">Aiuta la signora Pina a ritrovare il suo portafoglio!</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> </div>

Signora Pina...posso farle alcune domande?



I SOSPETTI



SOSPETTO N°1: L'IDRAULICO



SOSPETTO N°2: IL NIPOTINO



SOSPETTO N°3: LA BADANTE



	<p>SOSPETTO N°4: IL VENDITORE</p> 
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Session #17 (Written)	
Task	<p>The topic of this task is <i>Vacanze</i> (“Holidays”). First the student is asked to read a little cloze text (which he has to fill in with the correct items) taken from a textbook (Bettinelli, Della Putta & Visigalli, 2011: 95) and then he has to talk about one of the best holidays he had in his life. First there is a casual written chat about it, then the student is asked to plan a holiday. He has to choose his destination, how he will get there and with whom, where he will be staying and how long. Then he has to write an email to the hotel he has chosen on the internet (by looking on the Internet) to book his room.</p>
Goals	<p>The task aims to have the student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • practise the use of <i>passato prossimo</i> to talk about past events; • notice and use lexical and grammar forms used in emails; • notice and use lexicon related to the field of tourism, such as <i>vacanza, albergo, camera</i> and so on.
Materials used	<p>The following cloze (from Bettinelli, Della Putta & Visigalli, 2011: 95) is given at the beginning of the task:</p> <p>LE NOSTRE VACANZE</p> <p>ho parlato – ha spiegato – è andata – siamo tornati – ho letto – abbiamo visitato – abbiamo assaggiato – siamo andati</p>

	<p>Io e Laura, la mia fidanzata, dalla Sicilia qualche giorno fa: abbiamo fatto una settimana di vacanza ed è stato un viaggio bellissimo. Il primo giorno la Valle Dei Templi di Agrigento. La guida locale la storia dei templi: è stato molto interessante. Poi siamo andati a Palermo, una città meravigliosa: io ho visitato molti musei e con molte persone, Lauradue volte al mercato, ha comprato tantissime cose! E poi, gli ultimi quattro giorni, a Siracusa, Catania e Taormina, una bellissima città di mare. Qui abbiamo preso il sole, io molti libri e Laura ha fatto tanti bagni. Ed infine, il cibo! Tutte le sere siamo andati in un ristorante differente e tanti piatti tipici.</p> <p>Consiglio questa vacanza a tutte le persone amanti dell'arte, del buon cibo e del relax!</p>
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Session #18 (Oral)	
Task	<p>This activity focuses on a topic which is of great interest to the learner – Art. The teacher chooses a famous painting (see <i>Materials used</i>), and the learner has to guess what it is. He can browse the Internet to ask more detailed questions about it by using a specific Italian website (http://www.atlantedellarteitaliana.it) as well as on Google. The learner has to ask only yes/no questions, which will probably be about the historical period, place and context related to the painting, as well as the objects/theme portrayed in it.</p>
Goals	<p>The aims of this task is to have the learner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practise asking yes/no questions in Italian; • Notice and use relevant lexis and structures used to describe a painting.

Materials used	<p>The painting chosen by the teacher (a famous one) is <i>La primavera</i> by Botticelli (1477-1478):</p> 
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Session #19 (Written)	
Task	<p>This task, called <i>Episodi della vita del Signor Rossi</i> (“Episodes from the life of Signor Rossi”), has the student describe through written chat past actions using the appropriate tenses by looking at pictures representing activities completed by Signor Rossi. To further support the visual side of the materials, a legend is included (see <i>Materials used</i>) showing whether the action depicted happens all of a sudden (!), right after another action (+) or at the same time as another action (=). In this way, the learner can reflect upon the difference between <i>imperfetto</i> and <i>passato prossimo</i> in Italian – the former being used for continuous actions (=), the latter for sudden and consecutive actions (!) (+).</p>
Goals	<p>The goal of this activity is to have the learner actively reflect upon the use of <i>imperfetto</i> and <i>passato prossimo</i> in Italian, by recalling what he has already noticed in other tasks.</p>
Materials used	<p>The following slides were used:</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div data-bbox="528 1738 938 2022" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <p>Episodi della vita del signor Rossi</p>  </div> <div data-bbox="954 1738 1358 2022" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;"> <p>Legenda:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li style="margin-bottom: 10px;">! All'improvviso <li style="margin-bottom: 10px;">+ Azione consecutiva = Azione contemporanea </div> </div>

Ieri:



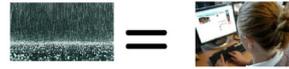
Stamattina:



Sabato scorso:



Ieri mattina:



A 7 anni:



Due giorni fa:



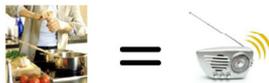
Ieri sera:



Nel 1989:



Questo pomeriggio:

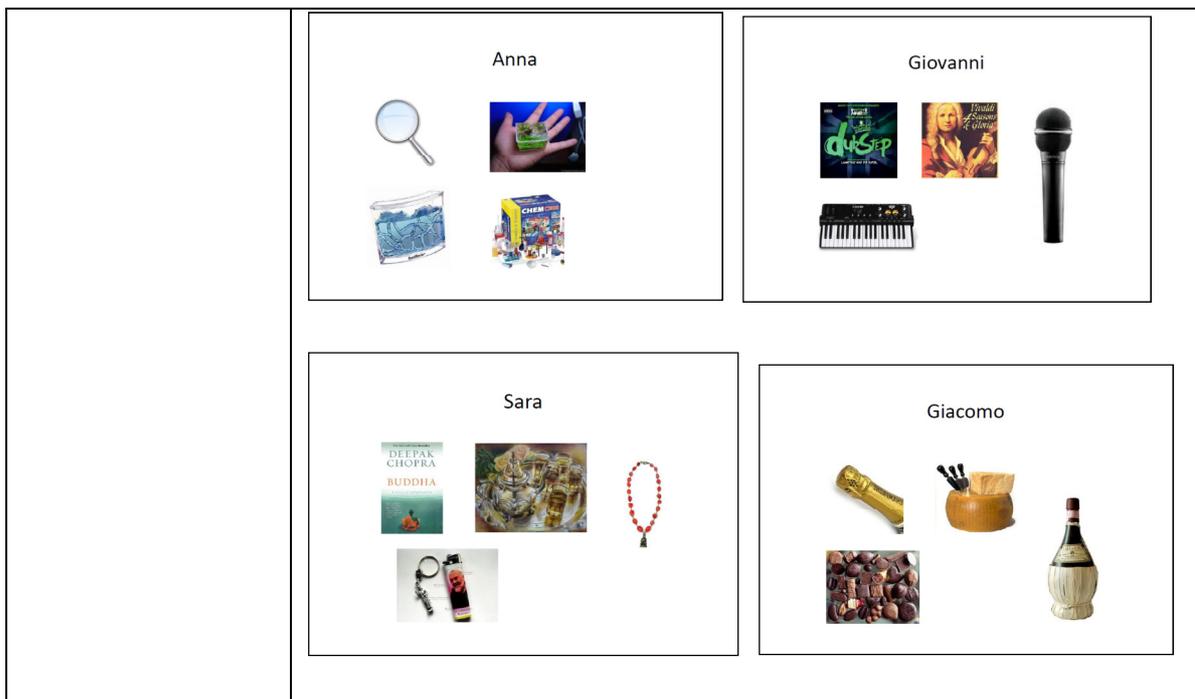


La settimana scorsa:



	<p>Quando era piccolo:</p> 	<p>Lunedì in ufficio:</p> 
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Session #20 (Oral)	
Task	This task is called <i>Regali di Natale</i> (“Christmas presents”). The learner is shown a series of people’s names with a number of possible gifts he could give to them for Christmas. He has to find out, by asking questions to the teacher (playing each of the characters), what gift best suits each person. The learner can ask all kinds of questions, but the questions must not mention directly any of the gifts displayed. For instance, to find out whether cheese could be a good gift, the learner may ask <i>Ti piace mangiare?</i> (“Do you like eating?”).
Goals	The main goal of this activity is to practise questions in Italian but, most of all, make use of his resources in terms of synonyms and periphrases, thus using language creatively.
Materials used	The following presentation was used: <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <p>Regali di Natale</p>  </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <p>Alberto</p>  </div> </div>



As can be seen from the aforementioned descriptions of the task, the activities chosen are various and focus on different forms. However, the researcher decided purposefully to focus more on some forms than on others (such as the difference between *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto*, and the prepositions of space), in that, as already anticipated at the beginning of this section, some forms were focused only little on, and therefore kept as “control” forms. Instruction ended on the fifth week. The following steps are represented by the first and the second post-test.

3.5.4 Phase 4: immediate post-assessment

One week after the 20th session, a written test was administered to the learner. The way the test was compiled, the methodology and the format have already been discussed in § 3.4.2.1. Here we will simply recall that both forms that had often been brought into focus and forms that had been rarely a subject for LREs were included (or, at least,

representative samples of them) in the test, in order to gauge the effectiveness of focus on form. The test is reported in Appendix C, whereas results are discussed in § 4.1.1.

3.5.5 Phase 5: second post-test

One month after the immediate post-assessment, a second assessment, much similar to the first, was carried out. Once again, the methodology used and the format are thoroughly reported in § 3.4.2.1, and results is discussed in § 4.1.2.

In the following section, the results of the procedure adopted will be reported, and relevant conclusions will be drawn.

4. Results

In this section the results of the data analysis will be reported. For the sake of clarity, the information will be delivered in relation to each of the three research questions outlined in § 3.1.1.

4.1 Results for research question n°1

The data used to answer question n° 1 (“Is focus on form effective in Skype-based instruction not only for *uptake*, but also for *intake*?”) were collected and analyzed according to the procedure which has already been described in § 3.4.2. Before looking at the results of the two tests (which, as anticipated, will represent important indicators of

the learner's uptake and intake on the forms brought into focus during instruction), it may be interesting to look at the types of LREs that were counted over the 5-week period. The following chart shows the percentages of lexical LREs and grammar LREs counted, no matter if the same form appeared in more than one session.

788 LREs were counted, of which 590 lexical LREs and 288 grammar LREs.

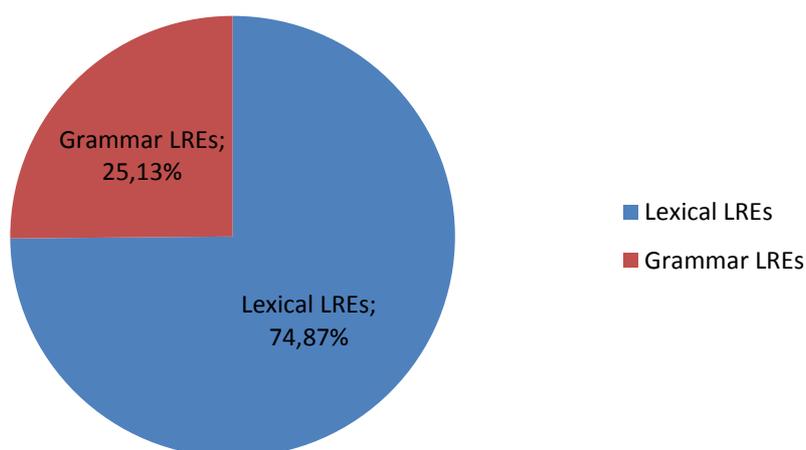


Figure 3. Percentage of lexical LREs and grammar LREs counted during the 5-week period.

From the chart it is possible to see that Lexical LREs outnumber Grammar LREs. Therefore it is possible to establish that the learner's lexical knowledge is poorer than his grammar knowledge. At this stage of the research, plausible motivations behind this fact cannot be found.

4.1.1 First post-test: results

We will now look at the results of the first post-test, which was administered one week after the end of the experimental sessions in order to gauge *uptake*. We will start reporting

the results related to lexical LREs, that is to say the LREs that had the meaning of a word as their issue. The following chart reports the percentages of:

A) Lexical LREs correctly recovered during the first assessment, i.e. those forms that are 100% accurate, without any spelling mistakes nor inaccuracies.

B) Lexical LREs that are not 100% correct, but in which the learner's attempt to retrieve the correct form is clear, although it resulted in minor inaccuracies and spelling mistakes. Moreover, it is often the case that what can be labeled as a "mistake" is in fact a sign of the learner's interlanguage being restructured when acquiring new input. An instance of this is *io favo* (instead of *io facevo* = "I used to do/ I did"): here the learner could not remember the status of *fare* as an irregular verb and applied the ending *-avo* as *fare* was a regular verb, like in *mangiavo*, *cantavo* and so on.

C) Lexical LREs that could not be remembered by the learner or which are completely wrong.

Lexical LREs: results of the first post-test

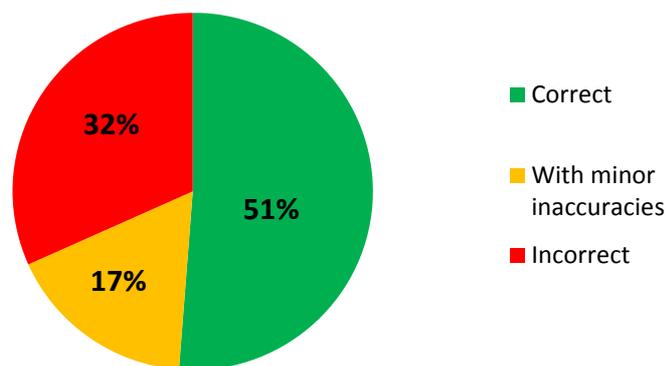


Figure 4. A chart showing the results of the first post-test in relation to lexical LREs.

As the chart suggests, half of the LREs (51%) that have been included in the first post-test were guessed correctly by the learner, and typed without any mistakes. A smaller percentage (17%) is represented by forms that present some minor inaccuracies, or which

might be an indicator of the learner's interlanguage being restructured (see category B above). As for incorrect answers, they are represented by a good percentage (32%).

An interpretation based solely on these data, however, is not sufficient. A more in-depth insight on this matter can be gained also by looking at the relationship between the *frequency* with which the forms selected for the test have appeared during the 5-week instruction, and the test results. The following charts show the outcome in terms of test results in relation to three frequency bands: 1) LREs that appeared between 7 and 4 times during instruction; 2) LREs that appeared either 3 or 2 times; 3) LREs that appeared only once.

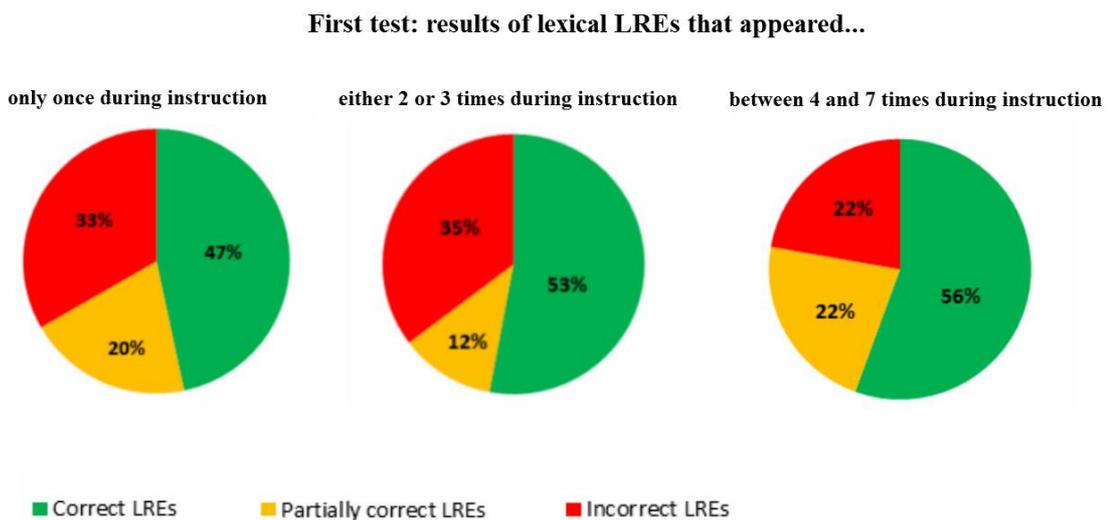


Figure 5. Charts showing the results of the first post-test for lexical LREs in relation to their frequency of appearance during instruction.

From the charts it appears that for all frequency bands, the majority of LREs were guessed correctly by the learner. There are no outstanding differences across the three charts. However, it is possible to notice that LREs that appeared the most during instruction resulted in fewer mistakes (the percentage of incorrect LREs decreases from 35% to 22% in the passage from a frequency of 2-3 times to a frequency of up to 7 times).

Conversely, there is a positive trend in the percentage of correct LREs (in green in the charts) as the frequency of appearance of the LREs increases.

Finally, it is equally relevant to look at an important indicator, namely the mean, which might provide useful insights into the relationship between frequency of appearance and test scores. Below are the figures for the three frequency bands. The way such a figure is worked out is explained in (6).

(6)

Mean frequency:
$$\frac{\text{sum of all the numbers representing the frequencies of appearance}}{\text{total number of LREs}}$$

Lexical LREs: results of the first post-test	Mean (Average frequency)
Correct LREs	2,48
Partially correct LREs	2,71
Incorrect LREs	2,15

Table 7. The mean frequency of appearance of lexical LREs during instruction in relation to their results in the first post-test.

The data in the table confirm what is reported above, namely that LREs in which the learner performed the worst are, generally speaking, those that appeared less in the input, i.e. their mean frequency is 2,15 times. In contrast, the mean frequency of the other LREs is slightly higher (2,48 and 2,71).

Let us now take a look at grammar LREs. Similarly to what has been done with lexical LREs, also the grammar LREs present in the first post-test were divided into three categories: correct LREs, LREs with minor inaccuracies (or partially correct) and incorrect LREs. However, given the fact that the same grammar LRE can easily occur

more than once in the test, an LRE was considered correct when more than 60% of its instances were correct; if roughly 50% of them were correct, it was labeled as partially incorrect; if below that percentage, it was classified as incorrect. Below is the recapitulatory chart:

Grammar LREs: results of the first post-test

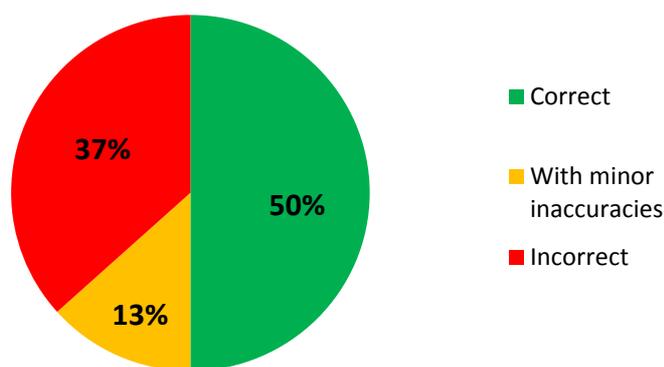


Figure 6. A chart showing the results of the first post-test in relation to grammar LREs.

These figures can be compared to Figure 4 referring to lexical LREs: the percentages are almost equal, with a slightly bigger amount of incorrect LREs for the grammar ones. In the following page (Figure 7) the results of the first post-test in relation with frequency bands are reported.

First test: results of grammar LREs that appeared...

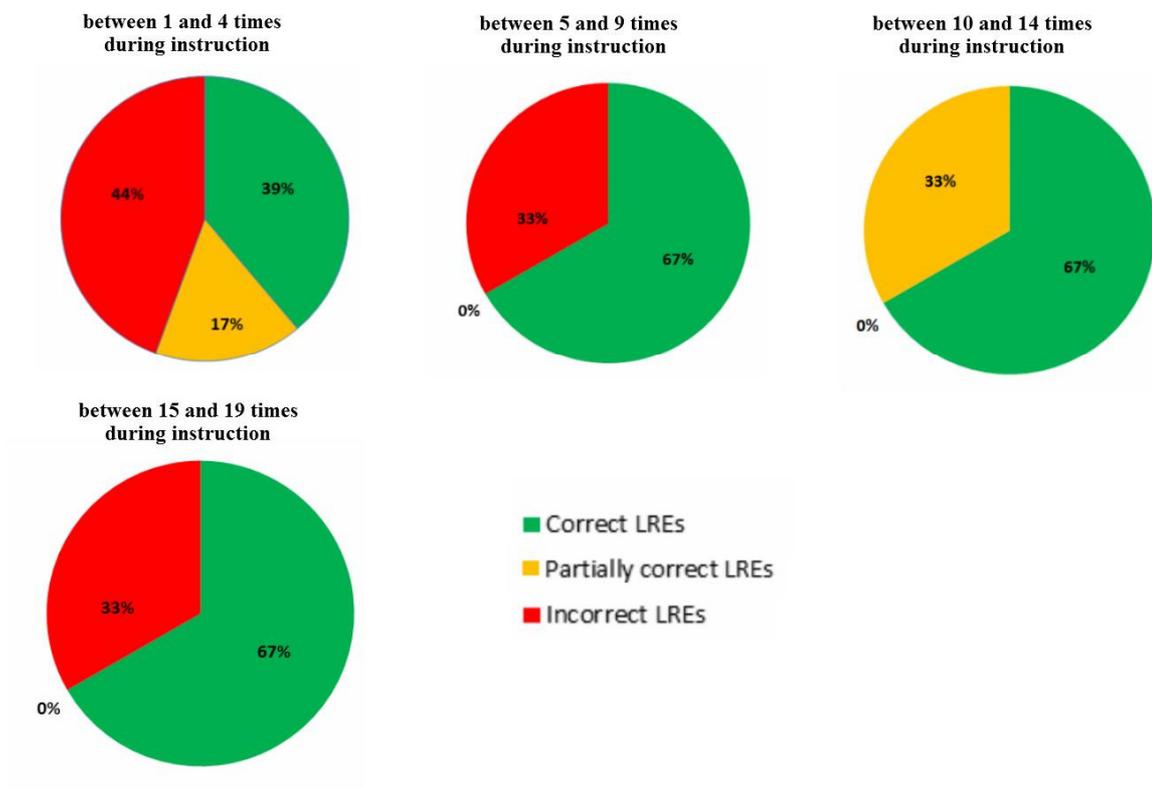


Figure 7. Charts showing the results of the first post-test for grammar LREs in relation to their frequency of appearance during instruction.

From the charts it is possible to notice that the percentage of incorrect LREs slightly decreases with the increase of frequency, whereas the percentage of correct LREs rises.

Let us now take a look at the mean frequency of the grammar LREs:

Grammar LREs: results of the first post-test	Mean (Average frequency)
Correct LREs	6,9
Partially correct LREs	3,75
Incorrect LREs	4,09

Table 8. The mean frequency of appearance of grammar LREs during instruction in relation to their results in the first post-test.

Unlike lexical LREs, for grammar LREs there seems to be a more marked relationship between the frequency of appearance and the test results: in fact, we see that those grammar LREs guessed correctly in the first post-test are also those which appeared more frequently during instruction, having an average frequency of 6,9 times. Conversely, LREs that scored worse results in the test appeared the least during instruction, as can be seen from their mean frequency.

To sum up:

- Uptake has been partially successful for both grammar and lexical forms. The learner was able to recall and use the majority of LREs that had been attended to. A smaller amount of LREs was recalled and produced with some inaccuracies (see Figures 4 and 6).
- By analyzing data coming from the first post-test and relating them to the frequency of appearance of the LREs that were selected for the test, there seems to be some sort of correlation between frequency of appearance and test outcomes. In regards to both grammar and lexical LREs, it could be said that there has been uptake of those forms that have been focused on the most during instruction, and to a lesser degree of the remaining forms. Uptake has been registered for approximately 50% of the LREs selected for the first test.

4.1.2 Second post-test: results

The second post-test was administered to the learner approximately one month after the first test. Whereas the first test aimed to measure uptake, the goal of the second test was to ascertain *intake* of those forms that had been focused on during instruction. The format

of the test was similar to the previous one (for a description of it see § 3.4.2.1). The results will be now reported (for the criteria used to interpret the results, see § 4.1.1).

Lexical LREs: results of the second post-test

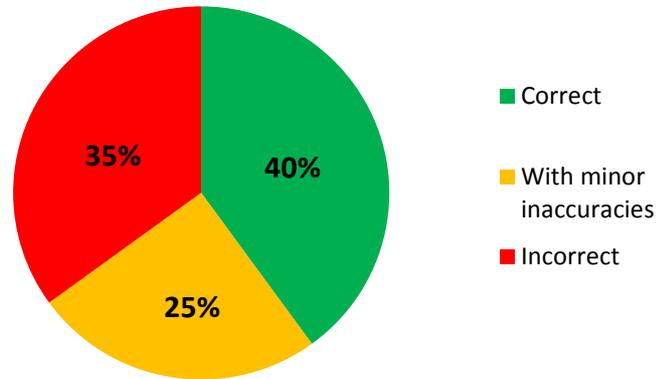


Figure 8. A chart showing the results of the second post-test in relation to lexical LREs.

Compared to the first post-test, here the percentage of lexical LREs guessed correctly is smaller, whereas there is an increase in the number of incorrect and partially correct LREs. Let us now take a look at the relationship between frequency and results:

Second test: results of lexical LREs that appeared...

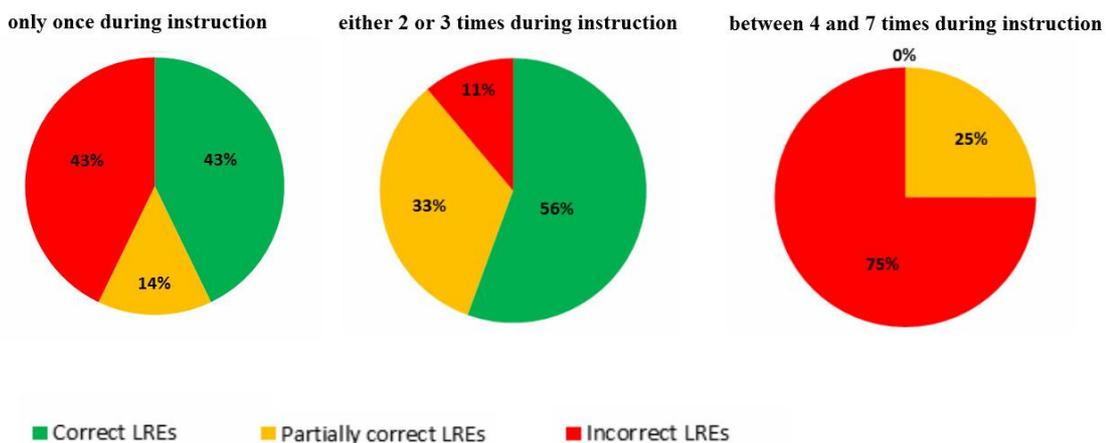


Figure 9. Charts showing the results of the second post-test for lexical LREs in relation to their frequency of appearance during instruction.

By comparing these results with those of the first post-test, we see that, strangely enough, the percentage of lexical LREs correctly guessed, after increasing from a frequency of 1 time to a frequency of 2-3 times, is equal to zero in the domain of the most frequent LREs. The percentage of incorrect LREs displays a strange trend too: it makes up the majority of the LREs that appeared the most during instruction. Let us now look at the mean frequency:

Lexical LREs: results of the second post-test	Mean (Average frequency)
Correct LREs	1,87
Partially correct LREs	3
Incorrect LREs	3,14

Table 9. The mean frequency of appearance of lexical LREs during instruction in relation to their results in the second post-test.

The figures for the mean frequency confirm the aforementioned irregular trends. In conclusion, insofar as lexical LREs, there seems to be no logic behind the relationship between frequency of appearance and test results.

Below are the results for grammar LREs.

Grammar LREs: results of the second post-test

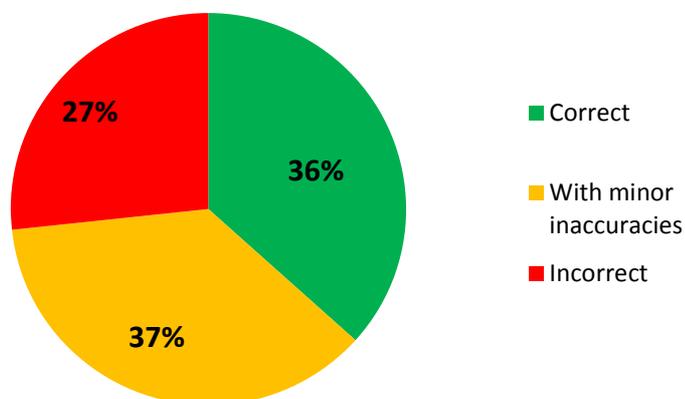


Figure 10. A chart showing the results of the second post-test in relation to grammar LREs.

By looking at the chart, it could be possible to infer that intake of grammar forms has been more successful than intake of lexical LREs, in that the percentages of correct and partially correct LREs are higher. Still, these percentages are smaller than those related to the first post-test (Fig. 6), probably due to the month of non-instruction. Below are the data referring to the relationship between frequency and test results:

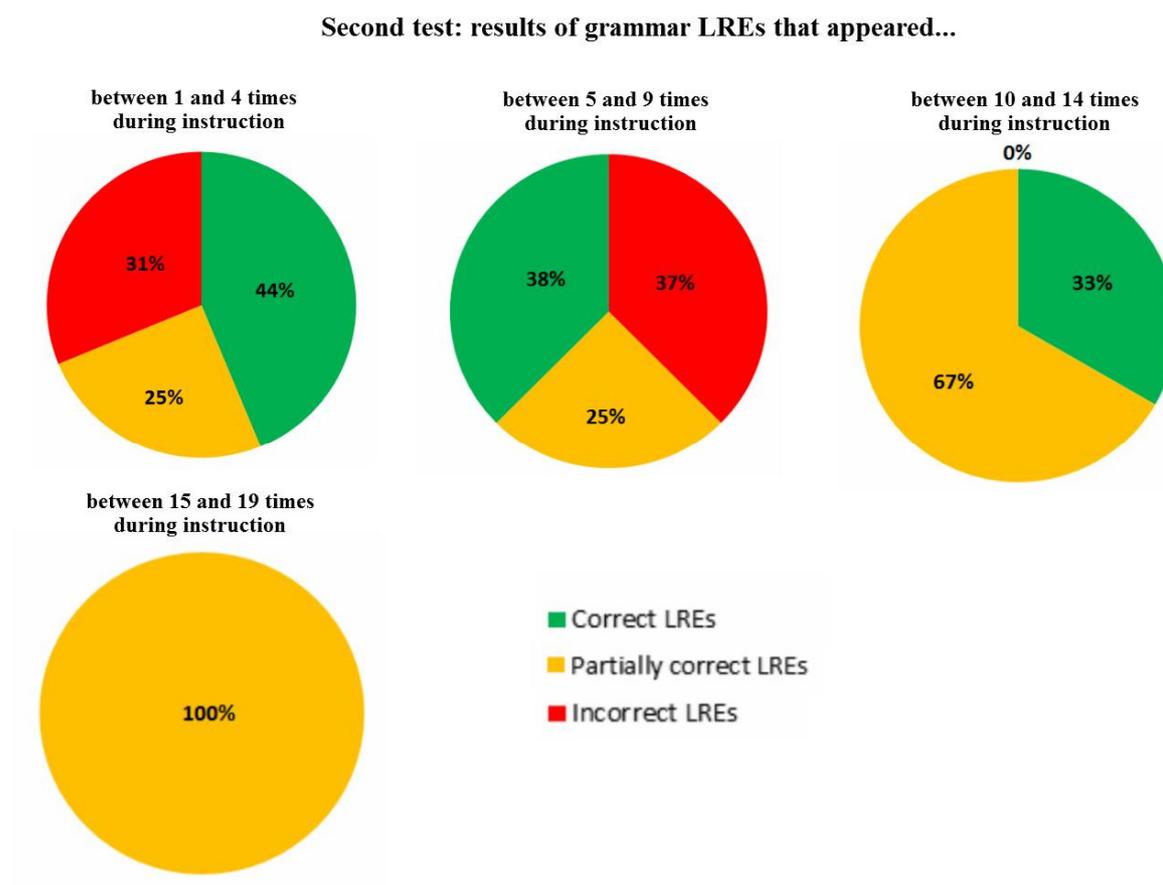


Figure 11. Charts showing the results of the second post-test for grammar LREs in relation to their frequency of appearance during instruction.

By looking at the data it is possible to notice that the grammar LREs that were not guessed correctly (in red in the chart) are those that appeared less frequently during instruction. The LREs guessed correctly do not seem to follow a rigid trend, whereas the number of partially correct LREs increases with frequency. In fact, the majority of LREs selected for the test were recalled by the learner with some inaccuracies, and this seems to

be the prevailing trend in the second post-test. Let us now take a look at the mean frequency of appearance during instruction of grammar LREs in relation to the second post-test outcomes:

Grammar LREs: results of the second post-test	Mean (Average frequency)
Correct LREs	4,36
Partially correct LREs	8,72
Incorrect LREs	4,12

Table 10. The mean frequency of appearance of grammar LREs during instruction in relation to their results in the second post-test.

To conclude, it is possible to infer that:

- Intake was not 100% successful: whereas some forms were correctly remembered, it seems that in the long run it is impossible for the learner to retrieve all the LREs produced during instruction. In fact, forms are recalled but some inaccuracies accompany their use;

- Overall, if we look at the amount of LREs correctly or partially correctly retrieved, the learner appears to have internalized more grammar forms rather than lexical forms. The relationship between the number of times an LREs appeared during instruction and its test outcome seems to hold for grammar forms only (see Figure 11): grammar forms that were attended to the least are usually those that the learner recalled the least.

In order to complete the framework it is also necessary to look at results from qualitative data, namely the teacher's diary and the interviews.

4.1.3 Results from qualitative sources: research question n° 1

Pattern n° 1, which is reported in § 3.4.2.2, was synthesized in the following statements, which can be considered as the results of the content analysis carried out to answer research question n°1.

<u>Results of content analysis for research question n° 1</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The learner struggles with recalling some forms because (1) he rarely uses them, (2) there is a transfer from his L1 (Norwegian) or, as is often the case, from Spanish, the other romance language he is learning, (3) the form is very different from the corresponding one in Norwegian (for instance, articles);• <i>Preposizioni</i> are one of the forms he struggles the most with;• There is some incorporation of forms during the sessions, some spontaneous use and improvement in the learner's performance.

From these statements it is possible to shed some light on the results of the tests. Relevant discussion of all these results is reported in § 5.

4.2 Results for research question n°2

Research question n°2 aimed to investigate the effects of Skype-based focus on form on proficiency, which was interpreted as a combination of fluency and accuracy (§ 3.4.3). Proficiency was measured by analyzing the speech produced by the learner during the first and last sessions; the analysis took AS-units as a reference for comparing different

moments of instruction. As already mentioned in § 3.4.3, the main indicator that was used to determine the proficiency of the learner's performance was the mean length of error-free AS-units, in that this measure combines an indicator of the fluency (length of utterances) with an indicator of the accuracy (number of error-free AS units). Below are the results of such measurements.

For the sake of completeness, other relevant indicators are reported, such as the percentage of error-free AS-units and the mean length of AS-units. We will start by reporting the results related to fluency.

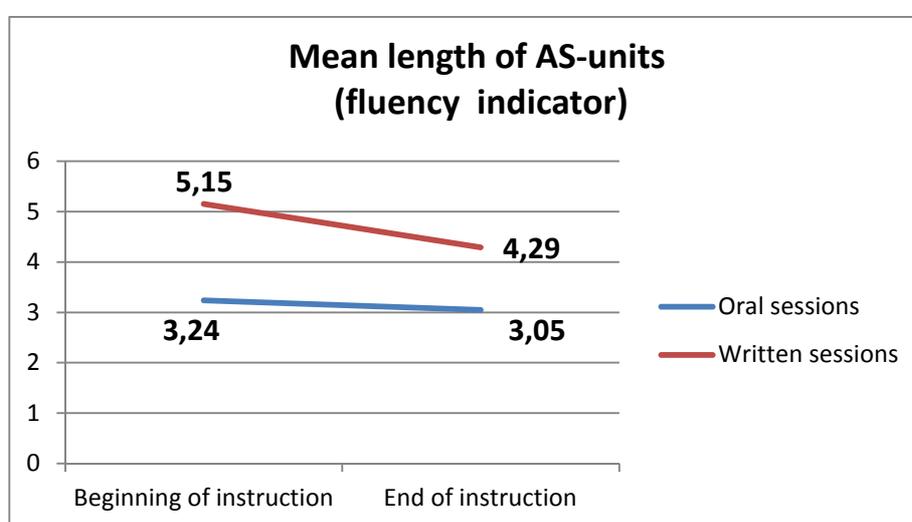


Figure 12. A chart showing the mean length of AS-units (a fluency indicator) at the beginning of instruction and at the end of instruction.

As can be seen from the above chart, surprisingly enough, the mean length of the AS-units has decreased since the beginning, for both oral and written sessions. However, this result could be interpreted as being due to task constraints: probably, when performing tasks, less output is produced than during focused open conversations (which is the type of activity carried out at the beginning of instruction, see § 3.4.2). Finally, we can see that the written session registered a higher level of fluency, probably because, when typing,

the learner is less likely to be interrupted by the teacher. Below are the results related to the percentage of error-free AS-units (an indicator of accuracy):

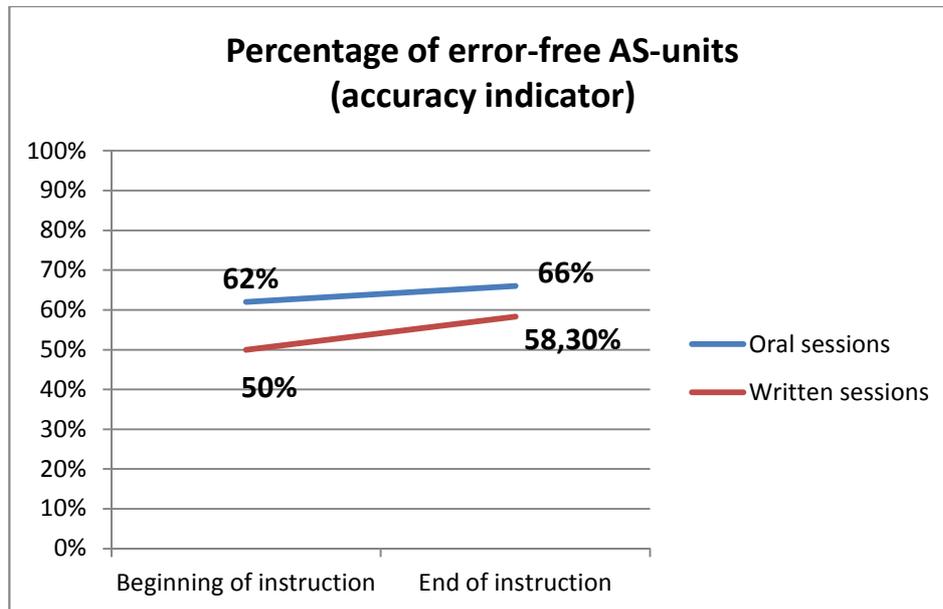


Figure 13. A chart showing the percentage of error-free AS-units (an accuracy indicator) at the beginning of instruction and at the end of instruction.

Accuracy appears to have increased as an effect of instruction, as the higher percentages of error-free AS-units registered during the last sessions suggest. Both before and after the 20 sessions, oral speech was characterized by less mistakes and inaccuracies than written output. However, written speech was the one that improved the most over the 5 weeks (+ 8,3 %, compared to +4% of oral speech).

Let us now have a look at the indicator that combines fluency and accuracy, namely the mean length of error-free AS-units, which was used to measure proficiency.

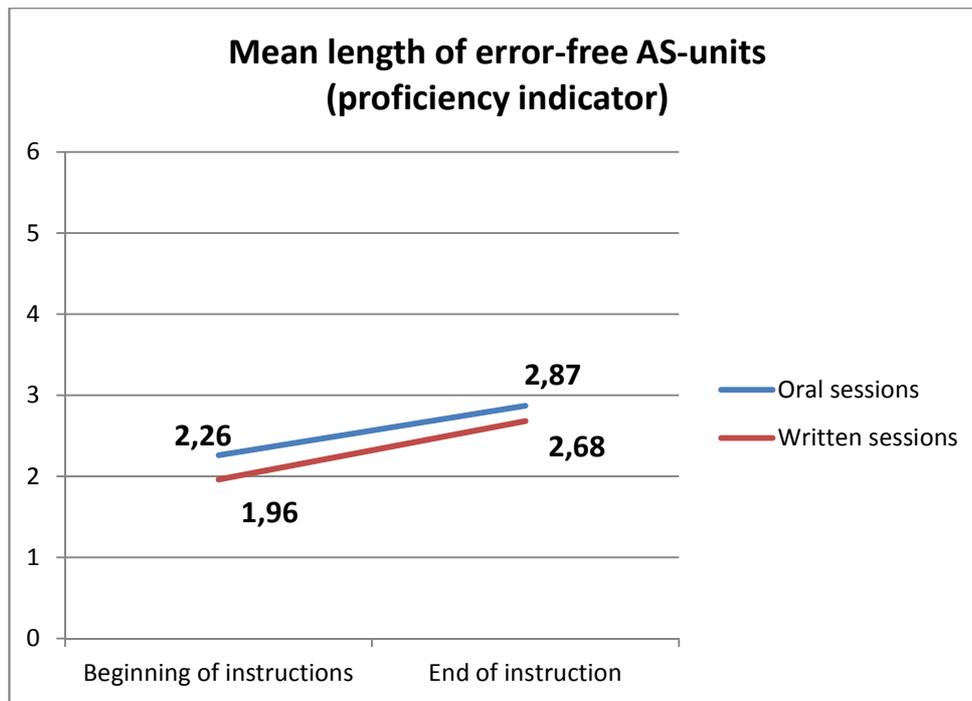


Figure 14. A chart showing the mean length of error-free AS-units (a proficiency indicator) at the beginning of instruction and at the end of instruction.

By looking at the chart, it is possible to infer that there has been a similar increase in proficiency for both oral and written output, although slight (+0,72% for written output and + 0,61% for oral output).

To answer research question n°2, it seems that Skype-based focus-on-form instruction resulted in very little increase in the learner's proficiency. However, it is possible that such results may have been affected by the decrease in the level of fluency (see Fig. 12). This decrease is probably due to task constraints preventing the learner from producing longer utterances in the later stages of instruction. Such an explanation seems reasonable if we look at the increase in accuracy (see Fig. 13), a positive result which could be well interpreted as a beneficial effect of Skype-based focus-on-form instruction.

4.2.1 Results from qualitative sources: research question n° 2

Additional data coming from qualitative sources can be a useful contribution to the aforementioned results. As anticipated in § 3.4.3.1, pattern n° 2 was considered fitting for this purpose. Below are some statements that synthesize what emerges in this pattern.

<u>Results of content analysis for research question n° 2</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The learner is not shy about producing output: on the contrary, he seems frustrated at the idea of not being able to express himself fully in Italian;• During written sessions the learner produces more output, probably because he has more time to think about it;• <i>Fluency</i> comes with self-confidence and manifests itself as the sessions progress;• <i>Accuracy</i> comes with using the language: if the learner has put into practice some phrases and expressions in the past (such as common formulae used in emails), he will be able to retrieve them easily without making mistakes.

Such statements give useful insights on the results coming from quantitative analysis. Relevant conclusions will be drawn in § 5.

4.3 Results for research question n°3

In order to answer question n°3 (“What are the implications for the learner of the use of Skype in communicative, focus-on-form type of instruction?”) a content analysis was undertaken which identified three different patterns. The statements synthesizing them are

reported below with specific reference to the different aspects that were considered as “implications”.

<u>Results of content analysis for research question n° 3</u>
<p>1) Suitability of focus on form for teaching a language on Skype:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on form and Skype share the same goal: communication. Meaning and form are strictly connected in the methodology adopted, in that focus on form is necessary for reaching communicative goals;• Focus on form naturally generates LREs (Language-related episodes); it creates opportunities for questions on the use of specific forms to arise and for feedback to be given in real time;• Some tasks are too complex for the learner.
<p>2) Learner’s attitude towards Skype-based focus-on-form instruction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The learner actively participates and responds to tasks;• The learner enjoys greater part of the activities, he has fun while doing them;• As the sessions progress, he is less afraid of using the language and experiments more with it.
<p>3) Learner’s perceptions towards Skype-based focus-on-form instruction and Skype-based teaching in general:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The learner recognizes the importance of a structured Skype teaching methodology such as that he has experienced over the 5-week instruction rather than simple conversations with a native speaker (e-tandem), especially for lower levels of proficiency;• Skype-based instruction is seen as a good option for him, since in this way he can be attended to properly, unlike traditional classroom settings;• Skype-based teaching also allows him to be more focused on what he is doing

and be less distracted;

- According to the learner, Skype-based instruction is also good for people who do not have means or opportunities to drive to a language school, like him.

4) Possible ways of improving Skype-based focus-on-form instruction and considerations on the learner's personal learning style and needs:

- *Vocabulary* is the most difficult part of the language according to the learner;
- The learner needs to be “flooded” with the language and be exposed to it in order to make knowledge subconscious and automatic;
- The learner acknowledges he learns differently from the majority of his peers, in that he acquires a lot by listening and seeing: in this view, videos are a good tool;
- Tiredness is a factor that in some cases might influence his performance;
- The learner needs to interiorize patterns and exemplars in order to acquire a foreign language;
- The learner needs to use the language in different contexts and situations in order to acquire it;
- According to the learner, it is first important to first learn what he calls “the technicalities” of the language, i.e. learn the language in a more structured way, and then practise a lot with native speakers;
- The learner suggests that 3-4 hours a day is a good amount of time to devote to Skype-based instruction;
- According to him, Skype-based instruction is good especially for adults.

From such statements it is possible to infer that:

- Focus on form seems to be a good approach to implement in Skype-based instruction;
- The learner enjoys the tasks and actively participates to them;
- Skype-based focus-on-form instruction appears as a suitable option for the specific characteristics of the subject under investigation;
- The learner has a peculiar learning style, which relies mainly on listening and seeing, and in memorizing patterns and exemplars:
- The learner likes immersion: ideally, he would like to be immersed in the language at least 3-4 hours a day.

In the following section, a discussion of the results so far obtained will be given, with specific reference to the objective of the case study (§ 3.1).

5. Discussion

The main objective of this research was to ascertain the effectiveness of the implementation of focus on form in Skype-based instruction. The notion of “effectiveness” was operationalized through the three research questions, to which a thorough analysis of data collected during instruction has attempted to answer. In this section we will try to discuss the results obtained, which are reported in § 4; new opportunities for further research may also be opened up. One way to interpret the concept of “effectiveness” was in terms of *uptake* and *intake* (§ 3.4.2). The first research question investigated whether there was a positive correlation between the implementation of focus on form and *uptake*, i.e. the acquisition in the short run of the forms brought into focus, and *intake*, i.e. the acquisition of those forms in the long run. As for the effectiveness of focus on form for uptake, the results (§ 4.1) have shown that

uptake has been partially successful, in that the learner was not able to recall all the forms that had been attended to during instruction, but, generally speaking, those forms that had been focused on the most, i.e. with a higher frequency of appearance, were correctly retrieved. This trend seems to be more evident for the acquisition of grammar forms. These findings confirm those obtained by Williams in her study (2001) (see also § 3.4.2), which was partially taken as a model. Williams administered a post-test two weeks after the instruction to students belonging to different proficiency levels. The test aimed at investigating whether the LREs that had been focused on would be retrieved by the learners. Insofar as lower proficiency levels are concerned – which is also the case of the subject of the present study – uptake was successful for 45.3 % of the LREs (50% of lexical LREs and 50% of grammar LREs) (2001:332). Such results are similar to those reported in § 4.1.1. Uptake was therefore partially successful, as was the case of less proficient learners in Williams' study. It is precisely the lower proficiency level that is seen by Williams as an important factor in influencing the effectiveness of focus on form for uptake, in that learners with a higher level of proficiency seemed to benefit the most from the provision of LREs. However, in our case, the learner's partially bad performance on other LREs might be justified by its interlanguage being restructured, in that it was possible to perceive the learner's intention to recall the correct form when completing the test.

As for *intake*, results from the second post-test (§ 4.1.2) are less easily comparable with the findings reported in Williams (2001), mainly because the assessment measures are different: in fact, whereas for this research a test was administered, Williams investigated subsequent use of the forms in later transcripts, and only lexical forms were taken in consideration. Having said this, we will still attempt to provide a discussion of these results. The findings of the present case study show that *intake* was not successful for all forms: whereas some forms were correctly retrieved, the remaining ones were

recalled with some inaccuracies. The findings are in line with what Williams reports in her study, namely that only a small percentage of the LREs brought into focus had been retrieved by the learners in subsequent use (2001:332). The correlation between the frequency of appearance of LREs during instruction and their correct retrieval, however, seems to hold only for grammar LREs, whereas it produces contrasting outcomes insofar as lexical LREs are concerned (§ 4.1.2). There are several explanations for this. First of all, an important premise must be made on the nature of assessment, which might not represent the ideal tool to measure productive ability. This is further confirmed by the results coming from qualitative data (§ 4.1.3), which suggest that incorporation of some forms in the input has occurred in subsequent use, a fact that is not easily captured by tests. Another variable to take into consideration is the setting: the present research was conducted in a foreign language learning context, whereas Williams' and other studies on focus on form have investigated this issue in second language acquisition situations. The boundaries between "second language learning" and "foreign language learning" are often blurred in literature. However, a clarification of these concepts may be crucial for understanding the results so far obtained. The following points, taken from Balboni (2008: 200-201), are particularly relevant for the present case study.

	<i>Foreign language</i>	<i>Second language</i>
<i>Environment</i>	A foreign language is not present in the environment where it is studied.	A second language is present in the environment where it is studied.
<i>Input</i>	The teacher selects the input, which is not naturally available to the learner outside the lessons.	The learner is <i>immersed</i> in the input of the second language, so that the teacher has no control over what the learner has acquired spontaneously.

<i>Activities</i>	In many cases the activities are pragmatically fake (such as roleplays), which simulate reality.	Usually the teacher can ask real questions, of which he does not know the answers.
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The most important keyword here is *immersion*: clearly, the situation offered by the present case study is a typical foreign language context, where little opportunities for immersion are given to the student, for a variety of reasons. In fact, the learner does not live in the country where the foreign language is spoken; moreover, both the learner and the tutor do not have the chance to practise for a large amount of time every day. Therefore, the learner was not *immersed* in the foreign language when he was taught it, and this variable might have influenced his performance (whereas most studies, including that of Williams, were conducted in a second language learning context). The importance of immersion as a crucial factor in supporting focus-on-form instruction also emerges from the interviews conducted with the learner (§ 3.44). In them, the learner points out how in his opinion a good way to effectively learn a foreign language on Skype would be to devote at least 3-4 hours a day to it. This is an important reflection that also involves research question n°3, investigating also possible ways to improve the methodology adopted. More on this later.

Another reason explaining why intake has not been 100% successful is perhaps linked to the learner's proficiency level, which could seem to confirm what Williams (2001) concluded in her study, namely that the effectiveness of focus on form through LREs increases with proficiency. Our learner's low proficiency level, therefore, could be a variable resulting in unsuccessful intake.

The learner's not being able to recall some forms, especially lexical forms (§ 4.1.2) could be also connected to the fact that he was not able to process these forms well, i.e. the learner may not have selectively attended to those forms (Schmidt, 1990), as

reported in § 2.1.1, or, as White (1987) puts it, given that intake - therefore what is noticed according to Schmidt - is defined by the learner's internal grammar, it may be possible that those forms have not made it into the long-term memory because they were beyond the learner's acquisition stage, thus resulting in poor performance in the second post-test. It may be possible to recall here the notion of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), defined by Vygotsky (1978), which is a prerequisite for task design in order to provide the learner with input that can be noticed and incorporated for subsequent use (§ 2.2.1.1.2). The observation that some tasks could have resulted as too complex for the learner also emerges from the teacher's diary (record 3.11, § 3.44): therefore the learner might not have incorporated some forms because his internal grammar was not "ready" to notice them.

Another relevant observation can be made about the relationship between the number of times a form had been focused on during instruction and intake of the form. As the results of the second post-test suggest (§ 4.1.2), for grammar forms there seems to be a positive correlation between the frequency of appearance and the successful test outcome; however, such correlation did not appear to hold for lexical forms. There seems to be no connection between the two variables. A premise must be made here, namely that there seems to be a difference, in terms of noticing and acquisition, between grammar and lexical forms insofar as the subject of this case study is concerned: whereas the former are relatively easier for the learner to incorporate and use later, the latter are retrieved with more difficulty. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, it is more likely for a grammar form to occur in the input more often than a lexical form; in this view, results of the first and second post-test are not comparable, in that, proportionally, grammar forms appeared more frequently in the input. Moreover, the majority of tasks were designed having in mind specific grammar forms, rather than lexical forms (§ 3.5.3) However, it is still possible to discuss noticing and incorporation of lexical forms by looking at data

coming from interviews with the learner. The difficulty in remembering new vocabulary emerges from pattern n° 4 (record 4.1, § 3.44), where the learner himself acknowledges his personal struggles to acquire new words during the 5-week instruction. Such acknowledgements, coupled with other relevant observations he made regarding his way of learning a foreign language – namely that he needs to “interiorize patterns” to make learning subconscious and automatic (record 4.5, § 3.44) – would suggest that a different approach for incorporating new forms, especially lexical forms, might be needed for the present case study. The Lexical Approach devised by Lewis (1993) introduced the idea of teaching a language through formulaic chunks, collocations, polywords, an approach which is largely based on the primacy of meaning, taught through idiomaticity. It appears that such an approach could well suit the specific features of the learner, for whom, as emerged from both qualitative and quantitative data, intake of lexical forms has not been entirely successful.

Another relevant variable which might have influenced the data is given by the learner’s mental peculiarities connected to his having Cerebral Palsy (CP). As anticipated in § 3.2, there might be a connection between this disease and the learner’s way of learning a foreign language. Research indicates that people affected by Cerebral Palsy are likely to experience learning difficulties. It is often the case that they find it difficult to focus on doing something if there are distractions; in addition to this, 20% of people affected by CP display attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) or attention-deficit disorders (ADD)⁶. Although no specific disorder affects our subject, some minor forms of attention-span problems might have prevented him from noticing and incorporating certain forms. Moreover, it seems that the learner prefers learning by listening and seeing, as emerges from the results of pattern n° 4 (§ 4.3); such personal

⁶ Source: *A guide to understanding Cerebral Palsy*. Center for Cerebral Palsy at Gillette Children’s Specialty Healthcare <https://ethnomed.org/patient-education/neurological-conditions/cerebral-palsy/A%20Guide%20to%20Undertanding%20Cerebral%20Palsy.pdf>

methodology was largely employed by the learner to acquire and master English. The learner reports that at the beginning he started learning English by listening to music and watching English TV and programs with subtitles in his first language; only at a later stage did he start writing in forums on the Internet and speak with native speakers⁷. This peculiarity might be connected to his having Cerebral Palsy, as other studies in the field suggest. In this regard, it is interesting to report Richard Boydell's case, mentioned by Krashen (1985). Boydell, born with severe jaundice and cerebral palsy, could not speak or write; however, he was very intelligent and could understand people around him well. He was exposed to the language through books, radio and TV programs. When he started writing using a typewriter at the age of 30, his writing production skills were excellent, despite having never written anything before. Krashen used Boydell's case to support his view according to which speaking is not essential to learn output skills; what is essential is input alone. Such a case might put forward the uselessness of Swain's *output hypothesis* (1985) – one of the theories upon which the present research is based – in favour of the importance of input only. However, this case is misleading, in that Boydell learnt English as a child, English being his mother tongue, which cannot make his case comparable to the situation offered by our case study, which was developed in a foreign language learning context: the acquisition of a first language takes place through the LAD (Language Acquisition Device) postulated by Chomsky (1965) (see also § 2.1.2.1), whereas other mechanisms are involved in the acquisition of a second or a foreign language. In addition to this, Boydell's case only refers to writing skills, whereas no evidence of speaking skills is provided. However, although Boydell's case cannot be compared to ours, some useful insights can be gained from it, namely the importance of *input*, which should not be neglected in favour of output only. This reflection also emerges from data coming from the teacher's diary and interviews with the learner: the

⁷ Subject's personal communication, December 8 2013.

necessity to introduce a lot of input, as well as providing the conditions in order for output to be practiced, is evident, for instance, from record 4.2 (§ 3.44). Given also the subject's personal learning style, the results related to uptake and intake of the forms brought into focus might arguably have been more positive if more input had been incorporated during instructions, such as videos and songs, in that the learner seems to prefer these tools when acquiring a foreign language.

Let us now take a look at the results attempting to answer research question n°2, namely the question investigating the effectiveness of Skype-based focus-on-form instruction on proficiency. Such results, as reported in § 4.2, show little increase in proficiency levels, in particular insofar as fluency is concerned. As anticipated, this outcome could be explained by the characteristics of some tasks, which might prevent AS units – the units used to dissect speech in the analysis – from being too long in oral sessions. However, there could be other reasons motivating this. One first reason may be due to limitations in the memory-based system, namely the system allowing for a fast retrieval of exemplars. As seen in § 2.1.2.1, such a system privileges meaning at the expense of form and is responsible for achieving fluency in speech. It may be possible that the learner cannot retrieve such exemplars easily, or storage of the exemplars has not been successful, which would confirm the aforementioned hypothesis according to which the sessions administered to the subject of the present case study should have been more exemplar-oriented, following the model offered by Lewis (1993). Limitations in the working memory may also be eased up if more planning time is allocated before the task is performed, as Ellis (2005) suggests. Moreover, according to Ortega: “Planning removes some of the cognitive load and communicative pressure of a given task, thus freeing up attentional resources for the learners to reach the upper limits of his or her interlanguage and to ease online performance” (1999, as cited in DeKeyser, 2007). The results obtained in the present study seem to confirm this hypothesis: perhaps it is not a case, for instance,

that written practice through chat resulted in more fluent output (§ 4.2) than oral output, as the higher mean length of AS-units show. However, this may also be due to the nature of written chat, which is less likely to be interrupted as happens during a live conversation.

As for accuracy, we have already seen that it is ensured by a rule-based system (§ 2.1.2.1), which emphasizes form. The approach implemented in the present case study seems to have helped improve accuracy, in that the percentage of error-free AS units increased over the 5-week instructional period (Fig. 13 in § 4.2). In particular, as the results from qualitative data reported in § 4.2.1 suggest, it appears that a relevant factor fostering accuracy is given by frequent use of certain forms and exemplars, which makes it possible for the learner to produce accurate output. However, knowledge of the system of rules that govern a language is also vital to ensure accuracy. The better performance obtained in oral speech could be explained by the fact that many utterances were reformulated correctly by the learner after receiving feedback from the teacher, which led to an increase in accuracy, and also by the learner's "psychological" reaction to the more evident presence of the teacher in videoconferencing sessions rather than in written chat, which may prevent him from making too many mistakes.

As far as the implications on the learner of the use of Skype-based focus-on-form instruction are concerned, it seems that the results confirm the predictions, as well as what the literature reported in § 2.2.1.1.2 indicates. Overall, the implementation of focus on form in Skype-based instruction has positive implications. The first of these regards the learner's attitude. As the results related to research question n°3 suggest, it seems that the learner enjoyed the methodology adopted and felt more confident in using the foreign language as a result of it; he also displayed great participation and engagement when performing the tasks (§ 4.3). Such results confirm the findings of Warschauer (1996) and Stepp-Greany (2002), which are reported in § 2.2.1.1.2, and which essentially support the

view according to which web-based instruction fosters engagement and motivation to learn a foreign language.

The implications of the approach implemented in the present case study were also interpreted in terms of suitability of focus on form – and of its implementation through the task-based methodology - for Skype-based instruction, with particular reference to the subject of the study. As the results suggest, the tasks proposed during the instructional period generated many LREs, which is an indication that noticing has occurred often (§ 4.3). Moreover, the results coming from field notes written by the teacher (*Teacher's Diary*) show that when implementing such an approach, it is possible to concretely observe how meaning and form are intertwined (§ 4.3), and feedback occurs in real time, which is precisely what synchronous online communication fosters (§ 2.2.1.1.2). In addition to this, the results from the interviews with the learner confirm the predictions outlined in § 2.2.1.1.2.1, namely that Skype-based language teaching is preferable over e-tandem, especially for students with little proficiency in the foreign language like our subject. It appears that having a more structured set of sessions rather than just performing a conversational exchange helps learning a foreign language more effectively.

The approach and the technological setting used for this research is also particularly suitable for the subject. Being a student with a special learning style, the subject found learning on Skype effective in terms of attention to his personal needs; by looking at the results obtained through an analysis of soft data in order to answer research question n° 3 (§ 4.3), it appears that Skype-based language teaching allows the student to focus on his learning process without too many distractions, and makes sure that the right attention, resources and time is allocated for his needs. This situation is quite different from the classroom experience our subject had during middle and high school, when he refers to having felt “left aside” by the teachers. In this way, Skype can provide language education in a more tailored way, “anywhere, anytime”, to recall Caburlotto (2012).

Finally, some considerations on possible ways of improving the methodology adopted are also needed. From the results synthesized in § 4.3, it would have been possible to make the approach more effective if:

- (1) the plan had included more sessions per day;
- (2) the sessions had integrated more visual materials, such as videos and songs, in order to suit the subject's learning style better;
- (3) the approach had tried to get the learner notice new vocabulary (and also non-lexical material) through chunks and formulaic patterns, following the model offered by Lewis' Lexical Approach (1993).

In the following section, a short conclusion synthesizing the considerations outlined so far will be attempted.

6. Conclusion

The present case study attempted to investigate the effectiveness of the implementation of focus-on-form in Skype. By combining the contributions of existing literature in the field of noticing (Schmidt, 1990), task-based learning and teaching (Ellis, 2003), focus on form (Long & Robinson, 1998, and others) and the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) with recent findings in the domain of computer-mediated communication and CALL (Pellettieri, 1999 and others), the case study consisted of administering 20 Skype sessions – 10 written sessions and 10 oral sessions – aiming at fostering noticing of a number of forms through a series of tasks (§ 3.5) to a subject learning Italian as a foreign language. The results showed partially successful uptake and intake of the forms that had been

brought into focus during instruction. In particular, the analysis of the data collected demonstrated that the subject's learning style required the methodology to be more exemplar-oriented, as Lewis suggests (1993), and incorporate more visual input (videos, songs). The study also registered a slight increase in fluency and accuracy after the 20 sessions (§ 4.2). Having said that, the approach proved itself effective in terms of learner's attitude and needs, as well as and suitability of the focus-on-form methodology.

The experience was, overall, positive, in that it provided useful insights on the application of focus on form to one of the most popular online synchronous communication tools, which is being used increasingly by language teachers all over the world. However, the results hereby reported should not be generalized, in that they belong to the domain of a case study, which, as seen in § 3.3.1, has its limitations. Nevertheless, given the limited scope of this study, and its focusing on a single learner, this attempt should encourage further research in the field of one-to-one Skype teaching with particular reference to a communicative, focus-on-form approach that, as shown in this study, was particularly fitting for a VoIP setting. It would be interesting, in particular, to investigate how the Lexical Approach could be applied and if it can result in more successful uptake and intake of the forms that are noticed, in particular of lexical forms. Moreover, further research may be needed to analyse the effectiveness of the approach hereby proposed on other learners with different characteristics (age, proficiency level, sex and so on).

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APPENDIX A
LEXICAL LREs COLLECTED DURING INSTRUCTION, THEIR
INCLUSION IN THE POST-ASSESSMENT AND THE RESULTS
OBTAINED IN BOTH TESTS

LEXICAL LRE	FREQUENCY ⁸	INCLUSION IN THE FIRST POST-TEST ⁹	RESULTS (FIRST POST-TEST)	INCLUSION IN THE SECOND POST-TEST	RESULTS (SECOND POST-TEST)
c'è / ci sono	7	WT:7	Good for the plural (singular not assessed)	WT:4	Good the singular, bad the plural
FARE + profession	6	WT:6	bad, but he know he should use fare		
lezione: feminine	6	WT:6 / WT:1	good	WT: 3	bad
vicino A	6	WT: 4	bad the preposition (vicino DI)	WT:4	bad for the preposition (influence of Spanish)
"dipinto"	4	WT: 3	incorrect word (pittura)	WT: 3	bad
andare A: to	4	WT:7 / WT:1	good		
come? (how)	4	WT:5	good		
DA = from (a place)	4	WT:5	bad (he missed it)		
QUALE medicina = which...?	4	WT:5	good		
"chimica"	3	WT:7	bad (written in English)	WT: 3	bad spelling
"correre"	3			WT:4	good
"dietro"	3			WT:4	bad
"incontrare"	3				
"parrucchiere"	3	WT: 6	bad (did not remember)		
"quaderno"	3	WT: 3	good		
"qualche"	3				
"uscire di casa"	3				
avere + ANNI	3	WT:6	good	WT:4	good
DI FRONTE A	3	WT: 4	bad (fails to understand)		
esattamente	3				
persona - persone: feminine	3				

⁸ The number of times the lexical LRE appeared during instruction.

⁹ The item in the test which features that LRE (Ex. WT:1 = activity n°1) (see Appendixes C and D)

SIA....SIA...	3				
"ancora" = yet	2				
"cantante"	2	WT:3	good		
"chi"	2	WT:6	good		
"colazione"	2	WT: 7	bad (writes the word in Spanish)		
"destra"	2				
"disegno"	2	WT: 4	good		
"fare colazione"	2	WT:7	bad (writes the phrase in Spanish)		
"fattoria"	2				
"figurine"	2				
"finestra"	2			WT:4	good
"in avanti"	2				
"lente d'ingrandimento"	2				
"litigare"	2				
"modo"	2				
"pittura"	2			WT:4	good
"pranzo"	2			WT:5	spelling mistake
"preferito"	2	WT:5	he uses verb "preferisci" instead		
"pulire"	2				
"qualcosa"	2				
"qualcuno"	2				
"quattrocento"	2				
"scultura"	2	WT:7	good	WT:4	spelling problem
"sedia"	2	WT:4	good		
"sembrare"	2				
"seminario"	2				
"sopra" (trad. above)	2				
"spiegare"	2				
"stampante"	2	WT:7	bad (cannot remember)		
"Sud-est"	2				
"tagliare"	2				
"testimone"	2				
"tutto,a"	2				
"vecchio"	2			WT:3	good
"vedere"	2				
"venire con me" (trad. join)	2				
"vivo"	2				
A CHE ORA	2	WT:6	good		

a destra di	2				
AL centro della stanza	2				
altro (adj)	2				
andare a letto	2	WT:6	good		
buono vs va bene	2				
chiamare qualcuno (senza preposizioni)	2				
cinema: masculin	2				
DI	2				
FACEVA: imperfetto of FARE	2	WT:7	writes "favo", did not remember that fare was irregular so he applied the rule as it were regular --> might be the IL being restructured		
questo SONO io	2				
senza	2				
TRA.....E... ..	2				
"A mezzogiorno" (no articles)	1				
"a qualsiasi ora" / "quando vuoi"	1				
"a quanto ne so"	1				
"abitare"	1				
"accendino"	1				
"adesivo"	1				
"agenda"	1			WT:3	good
"aiutami"	1				
"alcuni,e"	1				
"all'aria aperta"	1				
"all'estero"	1				
"all'improvviso"	1				
"alzarsi"	1				
"ancora" = still	1				
"andare in bicicletta"	1				
"andare matto per"	1				

"angolo"	1				
"anziano"	1	WT:7	uses "vecchia" (less polite)		
"aperto": part. Pass. Of APRIRE	1				
"appuntamento" (transl. DATE)	1				
"argomento"	1				
"armadio"	1			WT:3	bad (uses another word)
"ascia"	1				
"autunno"	1				
"avere bisogno di"	1				
"avere fretta"	1				
"avere un meeting"	1				
"azione"	1				
"badante"	1				
"banco del mercato"	1				
"bere"	1				
"bianco"	1				
"biologia"	1				
"birra"	1			WT:3	good
"bocca"	1	WT:7	good		
"borsa"	1				
"Botticelli"	1				
"buono in confronto a"	1				
"Cagliari"	1				
"cancelli"	1				
"caramelle gomgnose"	1				
"carta di credito"	1			WT:4	not so good
"carta"	1				
"cassetto"	1			WT:4	bad (writes it in English)
"cattedrale"	1				
"champagne"	1				
"chiacchierar e"	1				
"chiamato/a"	1				
"chiaro?"	1				
"chiavi"	1	WT:7	spelling mistake: chiEvi		
"classe"	1				
"classe": feminine	1				

"classiCista"	1				
"coinquilino"	1				
"colazione": feminine	1				
"collina"	1	WT:7	bad: does not know		
"colonia di formiche"	1				
"colorare"	1				
"colore": masculine	1				
"Come mai" = perché	1				
"come" = as	1				
"commettere un crimine"	1				
"comodino"	1	WT:7	bad: writes "commoda"	WT:3	bad
"compagni di classe"	1				
"competizion e"	1				
"comunque"	1				
"conoscere" vs sapere	1				
"conoscersi"	1				
"convincere"	1				
"corso" = part. Passato of correre	1				
"così"	1				
"crimine"	1				
"cUcinare"	1				
"cuscino"	1				
"da qualche parte"	1				
"danese"	1				
"dare la tinta a" (capelli)	1				
"dare"	1				
"decentement e"	1				
"dentista": masculine	1			WT:4	good
"dentro"	1				
"detto": part. Pass. Of DIRE	1				
"dintorni"	1				
"dipartimento "	1				
"disegnare"	1				
"dispiaciuto"	1				
"divinità"	1				
"divisa"	1				

"dolci": masculin	1				
"dopo" (Trad. later)	1				
"dov'è"	1				
"Dovrei"	1				
"dovuto"	1				
"durante"	1				
"eccezione"	1				
"empatia"	1				
"epoca"	1				
"escursione": feminine	1				
"esperimenti"	1				
"essere umano"	1				
"ex": also feminine	1				
"far crescere"	1				
"far male"	1				
"fare fotografie"	1				
"fare lezione"	1				
"fare ordine"	1				
"fare passeggiate"	1				
"fare pausa"	1				
"fare shopping"	1	WT:7	good		
"fare un incidente"	1				
"fare un massaggio"	1				
"fare una telefonata"	1				
"felice"	1				
"fotografa"	1				
"fumare"	1				
"Fuori"	1				
"futuro": masculine	1				
"gelosia"	1				
"gentilezza"	1				
"Germania"	1				
"già"	1				
"giallo" (noun)	1				
"gita"	1				
"giubbotto"	1				
"Giulio Cesare"	1				
"goloso": adj	1				
"golosone"	1				

"guadagnare"	1	WT:7	bad: uses "fare" (from English "make")		
"guancia"	1				
"guaritrice"	1				
"guida"	1				
"guidare"	1				
"idraulico"	1				
"in mostra"	1				
"incontro di lavoro"	1				
"incontro"	1				
"indirizzo"	1				
"indovinare"	1				
"infanzia"	1				
"Inghilterra"	1	WT:7	good		
"intervallo"	1				
"intorno"	1				
"introduzione"	1				
"invece"	1				
"inverno"	1				
"latino"	1				
"lavarsi i denti"	1	WT:7	bad: does not remember		
"legge"	1				
"lento"	1				
"libreria"	1				
"luglio"	1				
"luogo"	1				
"mai"	1				
"mai" (trad. ever)	1				
"mal di denti"	1	WT:7	bad: "dolore di tooth"		
"mal di stomaco"	1				
"mal di testa"	1				
"massaggiatore"	1				
"massaggio"	1				
"materia"	1				
"mediamente"	1				
"mentre"	1				
"merce"	1				
"mercificazione"	1				
"messa"	1				
"metà"	1				
"metà"	1				

"mettersi d'accordo"	1				
"mi dispiace"	1				
"misto"	1				
"moda"	1				
"modella"	1				
"moglie"	1				
"Molte volte"	1				
"musulmano"	1				
"nascita"	1				
"natale"	1				
"NEL weekend"	1				
"noi"	1				
"noioso"	1				
"non molto"	1	WT:6	good		
"Non penso = I don't think so"	1				
"notare"	1				
"O": trad. either	1				
"odiare"	1				
"oggi"	1				
"ogni"	1				
"oppure"	1				
"ora": sing. Feminine	1				
"ospedale"	1				
"pagare"	1				
"palestra"	1				
"pancia"	1				
"parete"	1				
"parte": feminine	1				
"partita"	1	WT:7	good		
"pausa pranzo"	1				
"pedalare"	1				
"perlustrare"	1				
"perso": part.pass. Of perdere	1				
"pesci": plural	1				
"pianura"	1				
"pittore": masculine	1				
"po"" (spelling)	1				
"poiché"	1				
"politico"	1				

"portare"	1				
"presa "	1				
"preso": part. Passato of PRENDERE	1				
"presto"	1				
"prete"	1				
"prezzo"	1				
"prodotto"	1				
"Pronto" (to answer the phone)	1				
"pronto" = ready	1				
"proprio" = at all	1				
"prospettiva"	1				
"purtroppo"	1				
"quadro"	1				
"quarto" (trad. quarter)	1				
"quello, a"	1				
"Questo è"	1				
"qui"	1				
"quindici minuti di camminata"	1				
"quindici"	1				
"rabbia"	1				
"Raffaello"	1				
"raffinato"	1				
"raffreddore"	1				
"rappresentar e" (trad. portray)	1				
"re"	1				
"registro"	1				
"relax"	1				
"reliGioso": spelling / pronounciatio n	1				
"ricordarsi"	1				
"rilassarsi"	1				
"rileggere"	1				
"Rinasciment o"	1				
"riscaldament o"	1				
"ritornare"	1				
"ritrovare"	1				
"rubare"	1				
"rubinetto"	1				

"salire in macchina"	1				
"salotto"	1				
"sapere"	1				
"scannerizzare"	1				
"scappato"	1				
"scaricare"	1				
"scaricare"	1				
"scatola"	1				
"scegliere"	1				
"schiena"	1				
"scienza"	1				
"scioccato,a"	1				
"scontrino"	1				
"sconvolto"	1				
"scritta"	1				
"scrivania"	1				
"Se"	1				
"secondo"	1				
"sfondo"	1				
"simile"	1				
"sinistra"	1				
"So che" vs "Lo so"	1				
"sogno"	1				
"soprammobile"	1				
"sorridere"	1				
"sotto"	1				
"specialmente"	1				
"specifico"	1				
"spesso"	1				
"spirituale": adjective	1				
"stagione"	1				
"stamattina"	1				
"stanza"	1				
"stare"	1				
"stato": part. Pass. Of ESSERE	1				
"stesso"	1				
"su"	1	WT: 4	good		
"su": trad. on, about	1				
"subire un furto"	1				
"sul fondo"	1				
"suonare uno strumento"	1				

"tagliarsi i capelli"	1				
"tante volte"	1				
"tastiera"	1				
"tè": masculin	1				
"tecnico di supporto"	1				
"Teoria criminologica"	1				
"tesina"	1				
"toscano"	1				
"tosse"	1				
"troppo poco"	1				
"troppo,a"	1				
"T-shirt": feminine	1				
"uccidere"	1				
"ultimo"	1				
"uscire con" = to date	1				
"valigia "	1				
"valori"	1				
"vedersi"	1				
"Venere"	1				
"venire"	1				
"verità"	1				
"viaggio"	1				
"viale"	1				
"video" plural of "video"	1				
"vinto": part. Pass. Of vincere	1				
"visto": part.passato of vedere	1				
"vivace"	1				
adulto - adulta (adj)	1				
adulto (noun)	1				
AL mercato: trad. AT	1				
AL ristorante: at	1	WT:7	good		
AL telefono	1				
appena for "just"	1				
attività (=business), plur. Attività	1				
bambino	1				
capelli: plural	1				

chiesto: part. Passato of chiedere	1				
circa	1				
Criminologia	1				
DA....A....	1				
DEVE: present of DOVERE	1				
DI: trad. from: un dipinto DI	1				
dipende da	1				
dire A	1				
diverso vs differente	1				
DOPO + noun	1				
dovere = have to	1				
E' piovuto: aux for PIOVERE	1				
FA: dieci anni fa (trad. ago)	1				
FACCIO: presente of FARE	1				
FATTO: part. Passato of fare	1				
frequentare	1				
giocare A	1	WT:7	he writes "giocanno a calcio"		
infinito	1				
iniziare A cantare	1				
invece	1				
l'ultima volta CHE	1				
mente	1				
molto, molti	1				
nato: participio passato of nascere	1				
NIENTE (trad. anything): non ha comprato niente?	1				
pensare	1				
PER chiedere = expressing a purpose	1				

POSSESSIV ES	1				
PREFERIRE: conjugation presente	1				
pressione	1				
Può: present of POTERE	1				
puro, pura	1				
Qual è la differenza	1				
ricordare	1				
SA: presente of SAPERE	1				
scrivere SU	1				
SI (reflexive particle)	1				
SONO Alessandro = form used on the phone	1				
tra	1				
TRA due minuti	1				
VENERDì (no articles for days of the week)	1				
VERSO LE + ora	1				
voluta = part.passato of volere	1				

APPENDIX B
GRAMMAR LREs COLLECTED DURING INSTRUCTION, THEIR INCLUSION IN THE POST-ASSESSMENT
AND THE RESULTS OBTAINED IN BOTH TESTS

GRAMMAR LRE	FREQUENCY OF APPEARANCE ¹⁰	INCLUSION IN THE FIRST POST-TEST ¹¹	RESULTS (FIRST POST-TEST)	INCLUSION IN THE SECOND POST-TEST	RESULTS (SECOND POST-TEST)
rule of definite articles	19	WT: 1	good: 5 out of 7	WT:1	ok, some minor problems
use of imperfetto	18	WT: 2	good: 6 out of 8	WT:2	ok, some minor problems
necessity for articles	15	WT: 1-2	bad ("LA mia sorella")	WT:1	not so good
agreement article + adjective + noun	13	WT: 3	good	WT:3	good
use/necessity of <i>passato prossimo</i>	12	WT: 2	good: 7 out of 8	WT:2	ok
<i>presente</i> of verbs of <i>prima coniugazione</i> (Ex "io canto")	10	WT	ok: 7 out of 13	WT:2	some problems
agreement of <i>participio passato</i> (passives + <i>passato prossimo</i> with aux <i>essere</i>)	9	WT: 2	bad: 2 out of 5	WT:2	ok
position of clitics (ex "L'ho sempre voluto", "telefonarti") (enclitic and proclitic)	8			WT:4	bad
word order in questions: SVO ("Marco ha fatto la spesa?")	8	WT: 5	good	WT:4	bad
<i>in + il = nel</i> (preposizione articolata)	7	WT: 4	good	WT:4	good
preposition <i>a</i> + name of city (Ex "A Venezia")	6			WT:4	good
<i>passato prossimo</i> of verbs of movements (requiring aux. <i>essere</i>)	6	WT: 2	good: 3 out of 4	WT:2	partially correct

¹⁰ The number of times the grammar LRE appeared during instruction.

¹¹ The item in the test which features that LRE (Ex. WT:1 = activity n°1)

<i>passato prossimo</i> of reflexive verbs (Ex "Mi sono lavato")	6	WT: 2	bad	WT:2	bad
informal vs formal	5	WT:7	good	WT:2	good
<i>imperfetto</i> of <i>essere</i> ("io ero", "tu eri", etc)	4			WT:2	
<i>imperfetto</i> of verbs of <i>prima coniugazione</i> (ex "io andavo")	4	WT:2	good: 3 out of 4		
<i>imperfetto</i> of verbs of <i>seconda coniugazione</i> (Ex. "io credevo")	4	WT:2	bad	WT:2	good
<i>in + la = nella</i> (preposizione articolata)	3	WT: 4	good		
preposition <i>in</i> + name of countries (no article) (Ex. "in Italia")	3	WT:7	good	WT:4	good
preposition <i>da</i> + name of person/profession (Ex. "Vado dal dottore")	3			WT:4	bad
<i>presente</i> of verb <i>essere</i> ("io sono", "tu sei", etc)	3				
<i>presente</i> of reflexive verbs (Ex. "io mi lavo")	3	WT:7	bad	WT:4	bad
<i>futuro semplice</i> of verbs of <i>prima coniugazione</i> (Ex. "io canterò")	3			WT:2	good
<i>presente</i> of <i>piacere</i> (structure) ("mi piace / mi piacciono")	3	WT:6	ok, spelling problem	WT:4	not so good (problem with 3rd person singular)
<i>imperfetto</i> of <i>c'è / ci sono</i> ("c'era / c'erano")	3			WT:4	good
3rd person sing. possessives in Italian: agreement with the noun and not with the possessor ("la sua ragazza", "il suo ragazzo")	3			WT:4	ok
rule of plural: -e for feminine (<i>amiche, ragazze</i>), -i for masculine (<i>ragazzi</i>)	3				
rule of indefinite articles	2	WT:3	good	WT:1	ok, minor mistakes
necessity for <i>articolo partitivo</i> (<i>dei libri, delle sedie</i>)	2	WT:3	bad		
<i>di + la = della</i> (preposizione articolata)	2				
<i>a + la = alla</i> (preposizione articolata)	2				
preposition <i>nel</i> + year (Ex. "Nel 1989")	2	WT:7	good		

use of <i>presente</i> for a future event (Ex. "Domani <i>vado</i> al cinema")	2	WT:7	bad (he uses futuro)		
<i>passato prossimo</i> with aux <i>avere</i> (no agreement with the subject) (Ex. "Maria ha mangiato la mela")	2			WT:2	good
<i>presente</i> of verbs of <i>seconda coniugazione</i> (Ex. "io credo")	2				
use of <i>congiuntivo</i> after verbs like <i>pensare</i> (Ex. "Penso che tu <i>sia</i> simpatico")	2				
<i>condizionale presente</i> of verbs of <i>seconda coniugazione</i> (Ex. "io crederei")	2				
<i>di + il = del</i> (preposizione articolata)	1	WT:7	bad (writes "dal")		
<i>in + lo = nello</i> (preposizione articolata)	1			WT:4	uses NEL instead of nello
<i>su + la = sulla</i> (preposizione articolata)	1	WT: 4	good		
<i>su + il = sul</i> (preposizione articolata)	1			WT:4	good
<i>di + le = delle</i> (preposizione articolata)	1			WT:4	
<i>in + i = nei</i> (preposizione articolata)	1				
<i>in + gli = negli</i> (preposizione articolata)	1				
<i>futuro semplice</i> of <i>essere</i> ("io sarò")	1				
<i>presente</i> of <i>avere</i> ("io ho, tu hai, etc")	1				
use of <i>passato prossimo</i> for sudden actions (Ex. "All'improvviso è <i>arrivato</i> Carlo")	1	WT:2	ok		
<i>imperativo presente</i> of verbs of <i>prima coniugazione</i> (Ex. "Mangia!")	1				
form of <i>presente</i> ("io abito", NOT "io sono abito")	1				
<i>passato prossimo</i> of <i>piacere</i> ("mi è piaciuto"/"mi sono piaciuti")	1				
<i>passato prossimo</i> of verbs of <i>prima coniugazione</i> (Ex. "io ho mangiato")	1	WT:2	good		
use of <i>congiuntivo presente</i> after "dovrei aspettare che"	1				
<i>part. passato</i> of verbs of <i>seconda coniugazione</i> (Ex. "creduto")	1			WT:2	bad

<i>imperfetto of piacere</i> ("mi piaceva"/"mi piacevano")	1	WT:7	bad		
necessity for the verb in a sentence	1				
<i>congiuntivo presente of essere</i> ("che io sia")	1				
rule of <i>imperfetto</i> : "andava" (no auxiliaries)	1				
use of <i>passato remoto</i> (Ex. "Nel 1945 finì la guerra")	1				
comparativo di maggioranza (Ex. "Roma è più bella di Milano")	1	WT:7	ok	WT:4	good
<i>se</i> + future tense (Ex. "Se pioverà, staremo a casa")	1				
use of personal pronouns	1				
<i>participio passato</i> used as adjective	1				
Use of preposition <i>da</i> in the structure "Parlo con lei da molti anni"	1				
NO ARTICLES with members of the family and possessives	1	WT:1	bad	WT:1	bad
reflexive pronouns: <i>si</i> (Ex. "Lei si lava")	1	WT:7	bad		
<i>pronomi complemento</i> vs <i>pronomi soggetto</i> (Ex. "anche a te")	1				
<i>pronomi complemento indiretti</i> (<i>mi, ti, gli, le, ci, vi, loro</i>)	1				

APPENDIX C

FIRST POST-TEST

(administered one week after the end of instruction)

1. Completa con le parole giuste (se necessario)

Mia sorella ha ___ cane. Si chiama Fuffi ed è molto dolce. ___ ragazzo di mia sorella lo ha comprato per lei come regalo di compleanno.

Ieri ___ mia sorella è andata ___ veterinario per sterilizzare ___ cane. Lì ha incontrato ___ signora Rossi, una sua amica. Hanno parlato per un'ora, poi si sono salutate.



Anna ha ___ amica, si chiama Alberta. Amano andare ___ cinema assieme. ___ due amiche hanno la stessa età: 25 anni. Frequentano ___ stesse lezioni all'università e hanno ___ stessi amici. Sono come sorelle!



2. Completa con il tempo(=*tense*) giusto.

Ieri sera Marco _____ (andare) al cinema con la sua ragazza. Mentre _____ (aspettare) in coda (=queue) per comprare il biglietto, all'improvviso, _____ (ricordarsi) di aver lasciato a casa il portafoglio. Allora _____ (correre) a casa, _____ (telefonato) alla sua ragazza, _____ (prendere) il portafoglio ed _____ (uscire) di casa. Mentre _____ (tornare) al cinema, _____ (incontrare) un vecchio amico. Nel frattempo (=in the meanwhile), la sua ragazza _____ (attendere = wait for) Marco davanti al cinema. Marco _____ (arrivare) mezz'ora dopo (=later).

Quando era piccolo, Giovanni _____ (amare) andare a pescare con suo nonno Luca. Loro _____ (svegliarsi) presto la mattina, _____ (uscire) di casa alle 6 e _____ (prendere) la macchina per andare al lago. Giovanni _____ (divertirsi) molto.



3. Che cos'è? Che cosa sono?

Es:



Una macchina gialla.



.....



.....



..... (hint: *drawing*)



..... (hint: *small*)



..... (hint: *famous*)



..... (hint: *ancient*)

4. Dov'è?



Dov'è il gatto?



duomo

battistero

Dov'è il battistero?



Dov'è il gatto?



Dov'è l'uomo?



Dov'è il segnalibro (=bookmark)?

5. Scrivi le domande alle seguenti risposte. (= Write the questions to the following answers).

Ex) - Sì, sono andata al cinema.

- *Sei andata al cinema?*

Ex) - Vado a Roma il 5 gennaio.

- *Quando vai a Roma?*

a) - Sì, Marco ha fatto la spesa.

- ?

b) Il mio libro preferito è Harry Potter.

- ?

c) - Vengo da Napoli.

- ?

d) - Sto bene, grazie.

- ?

6. Traduci e rispondi alle domande.

a) *What's your job?* =



RISPOSTA:

.....

b) *How old are you?* =

RISPOSTA: **34**

.....

c) *How many lessons have you got?* =

RISPOSTA: **3**

.....

d) *Who are you?* =

RISPOSTA: **Alexander**

.....

e) *What time do you go to bed?* =

RISPOSTA: **23.30**

.....

f) *Do you like books?*

RISPOSTA: not very much.

.....

7. Completa con le parole giuste.

a) L'arte comprende la pittura e la



b) La mattina alle 7 io



c) Questa è una



d) Questa è una donna



e) Questa è una





f) Le di casa.

g)



MONTAGNA



.....

h) Che cosa c'è vicino al letto?



i) Che cosa fanno?



l) Dove sono le ragazze?



m) Che cosa studi?



n) Quando ero giovane,



o) Fabio 1000 euro al mese.



p) A 20 anni, mia madre



q) Dove abita John?



r) Che cosa fanno?



s) Incontri la signora Pina. Come chiedi(=ask) “how are you?”? (remember: she is older than you!)

.....
.....



t) Marco ha dodici anni. Quando è nato?
.....

u) Di chi (=whose) sono questi libri?
Sono bambino.

v) Sabato prossimo (io) (=watch) la alla televisione.



z) La Norvegia è(smaller than) Russia.

k) Quando ero piccolo, (I used to like) andare (to school).

x) Descrivi questa stanza.



.....
.....

Descrivi questa stanza.



.....
.....

APPENDIX D

SECOND POST-TEST

(administered one month after the first post-test)

1. Completa con le parole giuste (se necessario)

a) Oggi a lezione c'era nuovo ragazzo. Forse è studente. suo nome è Alberto Rossi.



b) Come si chiama cugina di Anna? Non mi ricordo. Ha nome strano.

c) Sara ha bella famiglia. suo nonno è molto simpatico, e suo padre è generoso.



2. Completa con il tempo(=*tense*) giusto.

a) Quando era piccolo, Fabio (andare) spesso al cinema con la sua famiglia.

b) - Che cosa (tu – fare) ieri pomeriggio?

- (io – andare) al supermercato.

c) Ieri, mentre mio fratello Gianni (prendere) la metropolitana,
(incontrare) un vecchio amico.

d)

- Il poliziotto: “Dove (essere) ieri sera alle 20, signora Rossi?”

- Signora Rossi: “..... (io – essere) al supermercato”.



e) - Che cosa hai fatto stamattina?

- (io - alzarsi) alle 7 e (io - lavarsi).

f)- Dov'è Anna?

- (andare) in banca.

g) L'anno prossimo (io - viaggiare) in America: Las Vegas e Los Angeles.

h) – Sei andato alla festa ieri sera?

- No, non (io – potere)

3. Completa le frasi.

Esempio:



Ex) Ho comprato *una mela rossa*



a) Ho visto(hint: *old*)

b) Ho seguito (=attended) (hint: lessons)



c) Ho comprato



d) Sono andato all'Ikea e ho visto per la mia



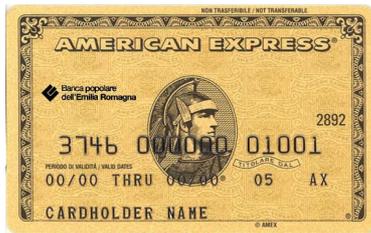
camera.

e) Al pub ho preso (hint: small)



4) Completa.

a) Paghi in contanti (=cash) o con



b) - Dove vai?



- Vado

c) - Dov'è il gatto?

- E'



d) Fuffi è il gatto di Francesca. = E' il gatto.



e) Come si chiama la cugina di Anna? = Qual è il nome cugina di Anna?

f) – Conosci Alberto?

- Sì, (=I know him).

g) -? (hint: ask the question to the following answer)

- Sì, Marco è andato in vacanza.

h) – Dov'è il gatto?



- E'

i) – Dove abiti?

- Londra, Inghilterra.

l) Traduci:

She doesn't like football. =

m)

Oggi c'è il sole.

Ieri la pioggia.

n) – Dov'è il gatto?

-zaino.



o) Traduci:

The girls' books =

p) Londra è(*bigger than*) Oslo.

q) Mio fratello ama



r) - Dov'è il gatto?

- E' (hint: *wall* = muro)



s) - Dov'è il gatto?

- E' cane.



t) Descrivi la stanza.



In questa stanza.....

u) Descrivi la stanza.



In questa stanza

t) Translate:

What time do you go to bed? =

u) Translate:

How old are you?=

[answer the question in full]:

v) Translate:

How many lessons are there? =

z) L'arte comprende la(=*painting*) e la



.....

5) Completa.

a) Translate:

Many people =

b) – *What do you eat for lunch?* =

