

Foreign Language Motivation in Distance Learning A Study on Academic FL Online Activities During the COVID-19 Outbreak in Italy

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Abstract This article belongs to the ongoing debate in online FL (foreign language) motivation, which was brought into the limelight by the COVID-19 outbreak. More broadly, it stands *vis-à-vis* the theoretical framework of FL learning motivation in the distance learning context and the role of the learning experience on students' FL motivation. The study was conducted with 76 university students attending an online foreign language course as part of their academic curriculum and examines the impact of online individual and collaborative activities on students' FL motivation. Data was collected through a self-completion questionnaire, which was published online. Findings indicate that even if respondents show a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motives to participate in the activities, their motivation to persevere learning tends mostly towards internal sources regardless of whether they engage in individual or collaborative activities.

Keywords FL motivation. Distance Language Learning. Collaborative online activities. Virtual Learning Environments.

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1 Introduction

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

Since universities have adapted to the new governmental dispositions regarding the sanitary emergency, academic activities have been occurring mostly online. Against this background, this research aims at investigating how FL motivation could be affected by distance learning, especially as regards the impact that this shift towards e-learning has had on university students' attitudes towards foreign language education.

This multifaceted problem has received substantial interest in research on FL motivation. As far as we know, however, no study to date has examined FL motivation in distance learning during the COVID-19 outbreak, particularly as regards the effect of individual and collaborative activities on motivation. To illuminate this almost uncharted area, we conducted a survey with university students enrolled in FL online courses across Italy during the COVID-19 outbreak. Then, we analysed the data and investigated whether the results could be comparable to previous studies in FL online learning.

The aims of this study are two-fold. First, we focus on investigating the FL learning experience during the pandemic from the teaching perspective (what type of e-learning activities are required most frequently in online FL courses). Second, we explore how students perceive individual and collaborative activities in terms of motivation, which activities they find most motivating and why. Hence, the present study documents several key contributions made to the field of FL motivation.

2 Distance Language Learning

Remote learning through internet technologies is the apex of development of distance language learning. In fact, distance language learning has evolved through several successive generations, from print-based courses to current models using the internet and real-time tools for interaction. As White (2012) states, the print-based mode of correspondence was the predominant form of distance language education up to the 1960s. The next generation of course models emerged with broadcast programmes, initially via radio and television, and lat-

er with audio- and video-based language courses. Afterwards, computer technologies extended learning opportunities using web presentations of materials, e-mails, and discussion boards. Besides, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) platforms started to offer new opportunities for communication and interaction between teachers and learners.

As can be seen from this evolution,¹ the shift in the use of technology from mere distribution purposes to its use for communication (White 2006) constitutes the root for the development of online language courses. Furthermore, innovation in distance language learning can be described as a move from the concern with appropriate learning materials to a concern with interaction, as White (2012) suggests. In other words, foreign language learning in distance education is being reshaped as a social process supported by communication technologies. This study focuses precisely on the two opposite forms of interaction in FL online learning, individual and collaborative, assuming that the latter is perceived to be more motivating than the former in the remote learning context.

In this regard, more recent attention has focused on identifying a teaching model which could fit in better with the e-learning context. As La Grassa (2021) suggests, to date, Troncarelli's (2011) model seems to be the most adequate. This teaching framework involves the realisation of several teaching units, each of which includes a final task and subsequent teacher's assessment. Troncarelli's model is designed to be used in VLEs,² which will be analysed in more detail in the next chapter (for a complete review of operational models suitable for e-learning, see La Grassa 2021).

1 As noted by Balboni, the *evolution* in online language teaching has not yet taken on a grander scale, that we can talk about a *revolution*, or in Balboni's words a "rivoluzione glottodidattica" (Balboni 2017, 10). In fact, online language teaching is still seen as a mere complement to face-to-face teaching (for instance, in the form of blended learning). Despite the advances of new internet technologies and the affordances of distance learning, it appears that language teaching in presence cannot be substituted by online learning (as quoted in La Grassa 2021).

2 In this article, the term Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is not synonymous with Learning Management System (LMS). Despite referring both to learning platforms, they reflect a very different approach to learning (Pinner 2011). Whereas an LMS is mostly used for administrative processes (e.g., expedite communication between educators and students, and automated administrative tasks) and as a tool to monitor students' performance, a VLE is based on a more constructivist approach. A VLE focuses on facilitating collaborative learning, allowing both teachers and learners to develop, upload and share content. In addition, it offers multimedia enhancements, thus making the learning experience more interactive and engaging. As Pinner (2011) points out, although many VLEs and LMSs share similar features, such as discussion boards, forums, quizzes and reporting systems, it is the way they are being used that distinguishes them. "It is possible to use Moodle, for example, for purely behaviourist type mechanical drills and compliance training and thus it becomes an LMS through the way it is used" (Pinner 2011, 5). It is precisely on these grounds that the term VLE is used throughout this paper to describe a learning environment that promotes active and collaborative construction of knowledge.

2.1 Virtual Learning Environments

Following the significant disruption of the academic activities due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March, universities have re-organised teaching and learning through distance mode, especially with setting up online learning platforms. According to Arduini and Chiusaroli's (2020) study on the modalities of teaching delivery during the lockdown period in Italy (March-May 2020), 53.5% of universities employed Microsoft Teams as the main e-learning platform, 36.6% Moodle, 33.8% used alternative platforms and software packages (e.g., Blackboard, Kaltura, Kiro, Zoom, etc.), and 29.5% used a Google software (Arduini, Chiusaroli 2020, 97-101).³

Online learning platforms, or Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), can be defined as computer-based platforms, allowing interactive encounters with other participants, and providing access to resources (Wilson 1996, 8). VLEs share many similarities with Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI); for example, learners can access learning materials independently and follow different learning paths through them. However, whereas CAI represents mostly an individual experience, the VLE concept encompasses the communication dimension, which is pivotal in the current idea of distance education. In fact, in a VLE students can communicate, collaborate, access learning materials, upload homework and assignments, answer online quizzes, seek assistance from their teachers, etc., beyond the confines of their classroom and beyond the official class hours (Albashtawi, Bataineh 2020; Brocke et al. 2010).

Recently, VLEs have been integrated with computer networking and videoconferencing tools to provide a more communicative experience for the students.⁴ It is evident that internet technologies seek to compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication, and arguably bridging the gap between face-to-face and distance learning with ever more sophisticated tools. These advances in computer and internet technologies have become of overriding importance during the COVID-19 outbreak when all academic activities were suspended to shift to remote learning.

3 Arduini and Chiusaroli's (2020) study is based on a sample of 71 universities across Italy, among state and non-state institutions. Data was obtained from institutional notifications published on the university websites between March and May 2020. The authors point out that these data refer exclusively to the choices made by the universities and not by individual teachers who, nevertheless, could make independent choices as regards the e-learning tools used for their courses.

4 For a review on the use of blogs in language learning see Alm 2009; Block 2007; Ducate, Lomnicka 2008; Raith 2009; Ferroni 2018. On the use of wikis, see Dehaan et al. 2012; Kennedy, Miceli 2013. On the use of Synchronous Notification Services (SNSs), see Back 2013; Pasfield-Neofitou 2011. On the use of videoconferencing, see Craig, Kim 2012; Kotula 2016. For a comprehensive review on the use of ICT in language teaching and learning in Italy, see Luise, Tardi 2017; Torsani 2021; Villarini 2019.

2.2 COVID-19 Consequences on Academic Teaching and Learning

The Coronavirus pandemic has created significant challenges in academic instruction, affecting both teaching and learning. The spread of the virus to Italy resulted in the academic sector transitioning the activities to online environments (UNESCO 2020). After the Italian Minister of University and Research announced the universities' closures starting from 2 March 2020, lessons have been delivered online and graduations have been conducted using Skype.⁵

A survey conducted by Fondazione della Conferenza dei Rettori Italiani (CRUI 2020) reported that by the end of March 88% of all the academic activities in Italy were being conducted online. At the same time, more than half of the Italian Universities were delivering more than 96% of the courses through online platforms. Arduini and Chiusaroli (2020) noted that although e-learning was already present in most universities in Italy, it had to be implemented and e-learning systems had to be strengthened, "adapting them to the new needs originated by the copious and simultaneous accesses to the platforms and the huge quantity of data transferred" (Arduini, Chiusaroli 2020, 95).

Furthermore, teachers had to re-think and re-organise their teaching methods, especially in terms of learning activities and interaction with their students. In their seminal article, Rapanta et al. (2020) suggest that the most significant challenge for university teachers has been their lack of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) (Shulman 1987) necessary for teaching online (Angeli, Valonides 2005; Kali et al. 2011; Ching et al. 2018). PCK includes the pedagogical foundations and knowledge of principles needed to design for, and facilitate meaningful online experiences (Rapanta et al. 2020, 2). It is precisely the careful design of activities to be identified as the pivotal component of a successful language course.⁶

As the authors, suggest the activities or tasks should provide a mix of design approaches (synchronous, asynchronous, online, offline), be adequate for the students' capabilities, be clear and accurate, and be related to authentic situations. In addition, most teachers have not been trained in the necessary technical and pedagogical skills

⁵ De Giorgio, T. (2020). "Coronavirus in Lombardia, al Politecnico di Milano la tesi di laurea si discute via Skype". https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/26/news/coronavirus_in_lombardia_al_politecnico_di_milano_la_tesi_di_laurea_si_discute_via_skype-249628719/.

⁶ In line with these studies, Celentin et al. (2021) investigated the perceived level of competence in teaching online of 1,618 language teachers, of whom 1,134 were foreign language teachers. The most striking result to emerge from the data is that 55.5% of the participants in the research claim to have little or no competence in e-learning and language teaching (Celentin et al. 2021, 19).

to integrate digital technology instruction (Schleicher 2020). This lack of training could arguably have significant repercussions on students' motivation to persevere learning at distance. As seen, this study seeks to identify those activities that seem to foster motivation and students' engagement even in a sanitary emergency such as the one we are experiencing, thus offering teachers and educators several insights on how to promote more stimulating online activities.

3 Motivation in the Language Learning Experience

Motivation has been defined as the engine of learning (Paris, Turner 1994). Motivated learners are those who are willing to take higher risks, are actively engaged in activities, have a more creative and persistent approach to learning, and are more successful in their studies (Hartnett 2016). For several decades, researchers in social and cognitive psychology, neurobiology and education have recognised the importance of motivation for successful language learning, together with other affective variables such as attitude, orientations, anxiety, and aptitude and have proposed a variety of models and theories aiming at describing and analysing motivation.

Socio-educational models stem from Gardner's (1985) distinction between integrative (wishing to integrate into the target culture) and instrumental motivation (pursuing academic and work-related advancement). This model is largely reflected in Deci and Ryan's (1985) original theory of intrinsic (stemming from the individual) and extrinsic motivation (determined by external factors such as praise or rewards). Only thereafter Deci and Ryan's (2008) Self-determination Theory presented a shift from a static description of motivation to a continuum with varying degrees of individual autonomy.

Another influential model of motivation, which specifically accounts for the learning dimension, is Dornyei's Motivation Self Theory (Dornyei 2005). According to this theory, motivation is represented as a dynamic process, which interrelates with other variables such as personality, beliefs, attitudes, and the learning setting. Dornyei's approach to L2 motivation contemplates three distinct levels, the language, the learner, and the learning situation: the Ideal L2 self (the ideal image that one person would like to have of oneself as an ideal L2 speaker); the Ought-to L2 self (characterised by obligations and duties perceived by an individual as an L2 speaker); and the L2 learning experience. While the first two levels were largely based on the work of Gardner, the third level is more complex, encompassing class dynamics and the learner group. It was precisely the L2 learning experience component of this theory to have inspired this study and, consequently, the desire to understand how the characteristics of a particular context might affect motivation in FL learning.

Alongside socio-psychological studies in motivation, the so-called cognitive revolution aroused interest in motivation research in the 1970s, as scholars started to study the main cognitive aspects of human behaviour and consequently identified the multifaceted nature of human actions (Dornyei 2020). A cognitive facet of motivation was explored by Weiner (1986) with Attribution theory, suggesting that motivation in learning is influenced also by attributions to one's success in learning. In alignment with Weiner's theory, Eccles and Wigfield (2002) formulated the Expectancy-Value Theory, which claims that achievement-related choices are motivated by a combination of people's expectations for success and subjective task value in particular domains. Attention was also given to the learners' beliefs in their abilities in Bandura's (1997) theory, which considers the pleasure derived from the learners' perception of their self-efficacy. The sense of self-efficacy does not have any relation with real abilities or competences, but rather it stems from complex cognitive processes based on people's opinions, feedback, past experiences, encouragement, or lack of it.

As seen, the research in this field is very extensive (for a complete review see Dornyei, Ushioda 2011). For this reason, only those theories which underpin the current study have been selected and briefly summarised in the following pages. The aim is to provide theoretical background to the research described in this paper, especially as regards the unique context in which language learning has occurred, i.e., the fully online mode.

3.1 The Language Learning Experience

Dornyei's Motivation Self Theory (Dornyei 2005; 2009) initially guided the present study as it specifically accounts for the learning dimension. Here the L2 learning experience is viewed as an aspect of motivation "which concerns situated, executive motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g., the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, the experience of success)" (Dornyei 2009, 29). Moreover, Dornyei considers the L2 learning experience as "the perceived quality of learner's engagement with various aspects of the learning process" (Dornyei 2019, 7); hence, it is a strong predictor of motivated behaviour.

In this definition of L2 learning experience, Dornyei distinguishes between the notion of motivation and engagement: while motivation indicates only the students' potential for persevering learning rather than its actual realisation, the engagement construct also encompasses the behavioural aspect of motivation (Dornyei 2019). Among the various facets composing the construct of language learning engagement, the "learning tasks" (Dornyei 2019, 7) have been identi-

fied to be the pivotal component of the present study. In this regard, the current study investigates the impact of online language activities on students' motivation and on their perseverance in participating in the online course.

Similarly, Schumann in his Stimulus Appraisal Theory (as quoted in Daloiso 2009) starts with the premise that emotion underlies most of what we consider cognition and accounts for success or otherwise in language learning. According to this perspective, the appropriate input in language learning, as in the case of language activities, most likely results in the acquisition of the target language (as quoted in Bier 2013). It has been explained by Schumann that the human brain continuously receives stimuli from the outside; then, each person establishes, more or less consciously, a relation between each stimulus and their expectations, need and wishes (Daloiso 2009).

Schumann's view of motivation could be further complemented by Baboni's (2008) model, which devises a triangular continuum of three factors, duty, need, and pleasure, to describe motivation in language learning. Duty could evolve in the sense of duty, thus becoming more motivating when communicative and linguistic needs are fulfilled (as quoted in Novello 2012). Likewise, when needs are met, pleasure follows. Furthermore, drawing on the importance of intrinsic motivation, Caon (2006; 2008) suggests three ways in which the fulfilment of duty could be perceived as the accomplishment of a personal desire: engaging with interesting content, and with stimulating learning techniques, or establishing a pleasing relationship with the teacher and the fellow students (as quoted in Novello 2012). In the same vein, Cucinotta (2017) found that teachers attribute students' motivation to teaching choices, namely the type of activities carried out in class and the relationship between the students and the teachers.

Taken together, these theoretical models and studies suggest that the type of activities requested influences the language learning experience, and the emotional as well as cognitive impact they have on the language learner. This implies that the choice of appropriate activities, which meet students' needs and desires, could arguably trigger students' motivation to persevere learning.

3.2 Self-Determination Continuum

While Dornyei's L2 experience concept guided the initial phase of the present study, the analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire was conducted based on Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT). As seen, this theory describes moti-

vation as a continuum rather than a unitary concept.⁷ As Ryan and Deci suggest, motivation cannot be merely explained through the contrast between two bipolar opposites, such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci’s SDT ranges along a continuum from a-motivation to intrinsic motivation. At one of the extremes of the continuum stands intrinsic motivation, the most autonomous and self-determined instances of behaviour. On the other extreme stands a-motivation, the state of lacking any motivation to act. In the middle between these two extremes are extrinsically motivated behaviours with varying degrees of autonomy and self-regulation [fig. 1].

Figure 1 The self-determination continuum (adapted from Ryan, Deci 2000)

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

Ryan and Deci (2000) identified four forms of extrinsic motivation, which show different levels of autonomy, regulation, and locus of causality, i.e., external, introjected, identified, and integrated regulation (for full details, see Ryan, Deci 2000, 72). These gradations of extrinsic motivation shed light on Ryan and Deci’s (2000) main idea behind their SDT continuum, that is the importance of promoting autonomous regulation also in extrinsically motivated behaviours (Ryan, Deci 2000, 73). The two scholars reiterate that ‘relatedness’, i.e., the sense of being connected with others, ‘perceived competence’, i.e., the sense of being efficacious, and ‘autonomy’, i.e., the sense of freedom from external pressure, facilitate the integration of intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation.

⁷ The SDT continuum has been associated with the Enneagram of psychological types in Sisti’s study (2020). The Enneagram is an archetypal framework, which presents nine interconnected personality types, and it has been mainly used within spirituality and business disciplines. Contemporary Enneagram theories are derived from the studies of Claudio Naranjo and his collaborators at Berkley University in the 1990s. In the educational sector, Levine (1999) highlighted the significant use of the Enneagram to improve the relationship between students and teachers (for a complete review, see Levine 1999; Naranjo 1990; 1996; Sisti 2020).

As shown in Figure 1, Ryan and Deci's (2000) theoretical framework takes into account the pivotal role of self-regulation in motivation, associating it with other variables, such as autonomy and the locus of causality. Self-regulation is the control that students have over their cognition, behaviour, emotions, and motivation using personal strategies to achieve the goals they have established. Motivation and self-regulation are two aspects of the same process: learners generate motivations to initiate and maintain learning, and then apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies to regulate their learning processes (Zimmerman 2008).

In other words, motivational factors are treated as pre-requisites for self-regulated learning (Ryan, Deci 2000) and motivated students learn how to regulate their learning more actively. According to Zimmerman's (2002) model, motivation to perform a task is the result of the combination of several variables, namely students' beliefs of their capability to perform the task (sense of self-efficacy) and to succeed in the task (outcome expectations); perceived relevance of the task for students' goals (task value) and students' beliefs about their learning purposes (goal orientation); liking of the task (interest).⁸

In this regard, the present study seeks to investigate whether individual activities stimulate the same regulatory styles and sources of motivation as collaborative activities, or whether the type of interaction required by the activities somehow affects students' motivation in online learning. Therefore, the SDT continuum has proved to be a comprehensive and exhaustive theoretical framework to analyse motivation in online learning, as it considers many variables, which could influence students' engagement in the learning tasks.

3.3 Collaborative Activities in Online Language Learning

The impact of online language learning activities, especially in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, to enhance learners' motivation in university instruction has been examined in numerous studies (Bikowski, Vithanage 2016; Jeong 2019; Liu, Lan 2015; Yanguas 2020; Zou, Wang, Xing 2015). Here we shall focus on the distinction between individual and collaborative activities, as it is hypothesised that the latter are perceived to be more motivating than the former. For example, in Liu and Lan's study (2016) two classes of EFL students were recruited and randomly assigned into one of the

⁸ For a complete review on theoretical frameworks for e-learning, in particular as regards teaching strategies and techniques, see Domenici 1990; 2009; Calvani, Rotta 2000; Trincherò 2006; Trentin 2001; Maragliano 2004. As regards cognitive aspects, see Pellerey 2006; Biasi et al. 2013.

two groups, ‘individuals’ and ‘collaborators’. The participants in the study were instructed to use the Google Docs application to carry out some language learning activities. The results of this study indicated that not only ‘collaborators’ performed better in vocabulary gain, but they were also more motivated to engage in the activities than ‘individuals’ and perceived the learning experience more positively.

Findings of these and many other studies (e.g., Abrams 2016; Aydin, Yildiz 2014; Bikowski, Vithanage 2016; Elola, Oskoz 2010; Kessler et al. 2012; Lee et al. 2016; Mori, Baldi 2021; Wang 2015; Zou et al. 2015) investigating the potential effects of online collaborative activities on foreign language learning, seem to demonstrate that collaborative activities increase students’ engagement and their level of self-confidence in the learning process.

Consistently with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, these studies indicate that language is best learned through interaction with others. Likewise, through technology-mediated tasks, productive language output can be promoted. In other words, what Swain (2000) termed ‘collaborative dialogue’ can be developed with learners engaged in online problem-solving and knowledge-building activities; this type of activities can facilitate group interaction and build a sense of community, hence increasing students’ motivation to learn and collaborate. Starting from these assumptions, the present study explores the relationship between collaborative and individual activities, and students’ sources of motivation, in an attempt to understand whether the different type of interaction affects students’ interest and desire to carry out the online tasks.

4 Research Aims and Questions

As seen, the main reason for conducting this research is to explore the impact that the shift from face-to-face to distance learning has had on FL motivation among university students in Italy. The assumption that motivation is negatively affected by distance learning and lack of face-to-face communication among the teachers and the students, is the background against which this present research is set. Thus, language activities in Virtual Learning Environments take on a particularly important role in sustaining students’ desire to participate in the interaction with others and to persevere learning. Indeed, it is believed that FL motivation could benefit primarily through collaborative learning. Starting from the premises discussed so far, this study aims at providing interesting insights into FL online activities with the intent of improving teachers’ PCK.

To investigate the above hypotheses in-depth, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1 What type of individual and collaborative activities are most frequent in FL online learning?
- RQ2 What individual activities are perceived to be most motivating and why?
- RQ3 What collaborative activities are perceived to be most motivating and why?

5 Participants and Methodology

The data was obtained by submitting a questionnaire to seventy-six university students enrolled in bachelor's and master's degrees at Universities in Italy and attending an FL course in distance mode as part of their course of studies. The respondents took part in the survey voluntarily as the questionnaire was published on three Facebook group pages designed for academic research ("SOS Questionari"; "WE WANT YOU! - Questionari per tesi e ricerche degli studenti"; "Aiuto Test Tesi sperimentali"). Consequently, subjects were selected via random sampling.⁹

By the end of September 2020, a total of seventy-six students answered the questionnaire. According to the demographic section of the questionnaire, subjects' age ranged between 18 and 50. 69.7% of the participants have an age between 18 and 25, and 27.6% between 25 and 30. As regards the geographical location of the Universities attended, 44.7% of the respondents were attending a University in the North-West of Italy, and 21.1% in the North-East. Some of the respondents replied that they were attending a university in the centre, and in the South or in the islands, 18.4% and 11.8% respectively. A description of the group of participants, as regards the FL studied and the reasons for studying it, is provided in Table 1 and Table 2.

⁹ As Frippiat and Marquis (2010) noted, web surveys have widely recognised advantages. Posting a survey on the web can significantly reduce the costs; data are collected more quickly as opposed to face-to-face questionnaires and in a format that is easier to process; questionnaires can reach individuals that would otherwise be difficult to contact. Nevertheless, as the authors suggest, there might be some issues in the research process, namely recruiting the sample and administering the questionnaire. There is some consensus among scholars (for a complete review, see Frippiat, Marquis 2010) that internet access is not evenly distributed across all section of the eligible population and consequently, individuals do not all have the same chance to take part in the web survey. Furthermore, allowing individuals to decide to take part or not in the survey, as in the case of the present study, means that the researcher cannot calculate each person's probability of being included (Frippiat, Marquis 2010, 295). In the current study, we cannot deny also the presence of some sample selection biases because the quality of the data yielded may be affected by question comprehension (as the questionnaire is in English) and sincerity of responses (Frippiat, Marquis 2010).

Table 1 Foreign Languages studied by the participants

Foreign languages studied as part of the academic curriculum		
Language	Number of respondents	Percentage
English	62	81.6%
Spanish	5	6.6%
French	6	7.9%
German	1	1.3%
Other	2	2.6%

Table 2 Reasons for studying a Foreign Language at University

Reasons for studying a foreign language	Number of respondents	Percentage
I want to use the FL in my future job	23	30.3%
I want to get a job abroad where the FL is spoken	13	17.1%
I want to get further education abroad	4	5.3%
I agree that the FL may be needed in my future life	18	23.7%
Because it is required by the course plan	10	13.2%
Because I enjoy learning it	7	9.2%
I agree that the FL gives advantages when applying for a job	1	1.2%
Total	76	100%

Through the use of a questionnaire, we aimed at identifying not only the frequency with which individual and collaborative activities were conducted online, but also which type of activities was the most frequent (explanatory notes for each activity mentioned in the survey were added to avoid misunderstandings). This helped determining the learning context in which language teaching occurred during the pandemic emergency. After having selected the activities, respondents were asked to indicate the most motivating among both individual and collaborative activities. This aimed at pinpointing some mismatch between students' preferences and the actual offer of the language course. Finally, respondents were asked to motivate their answers; despite relying mostly on quantitative data, the questionnaire was designed also to gather data in the form of verbatim responses to open questions, investigating students' motivational perceptions about individual and collaborative activities.

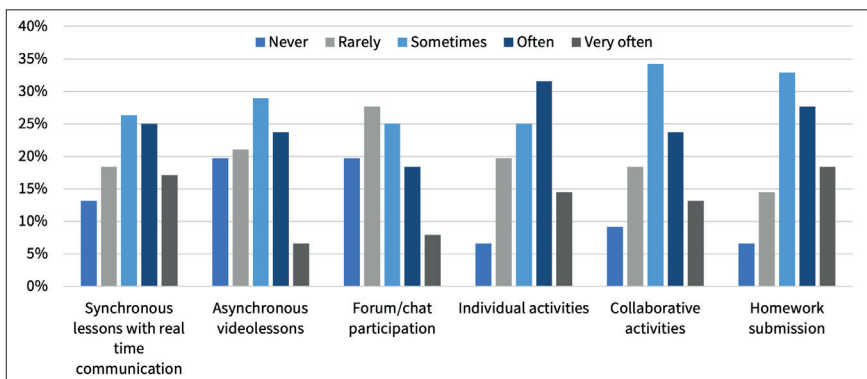
The quantitative data collected via the closed questions in the questionnaire were elaborated through descriptive statistical anal-

ysis, using percentages. Bar graphs were used to quantify the data. Open-ended answers were coded using content analysis, identifying recurring themes to code answers into a meaningful set of categories that lend themselves to further quantitative statistical analysis.

6 Results. Students' Perceptions of FL Online Activities

Graph 1 displays the frequency of online activities on a five-point scale (with 'never' and 'always' as the two bipolar opposites) according to the questionnaire responses. Graph 1 does not distinguish between individual and collaborative activities, but respondents are simply asked to express their perceptions about the frequency of various activities in foreign language online learning. Analysing the data reported in Graph 1, it appears that most of the respondents replied that 'homework submission' is the most frequent activity conducted online, followed by 'individual activities'. Unsurprisingly, 'synchronous lessons' seem to be quite popular in a foreign language course. Also, 'collaborative activities' could be considered a significant part in an online language course, as nearly 25% of the respondents claim that this type of activity is required 'often', and just below 25% 'very often'. As opposed to the above frequent activities, many respondents reported that 'forum/chat participation' is 'rarely' (for more than 25% of the respondents) or 'never' (for just below 20% of the respondents) required in an online language course.

Graph 1 Frequency of online language activities

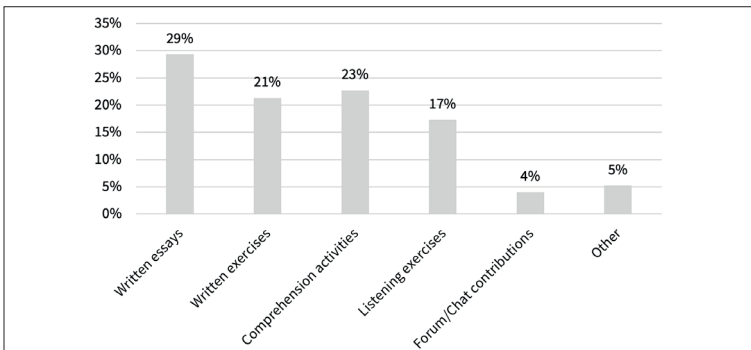


As regards the specificity of individual activities, Graph 2 shows the activities required mostly in the language course attended by the respondents, and Graph 4 shows the most motivating individual activities according to the respondents (45 answers were submitted

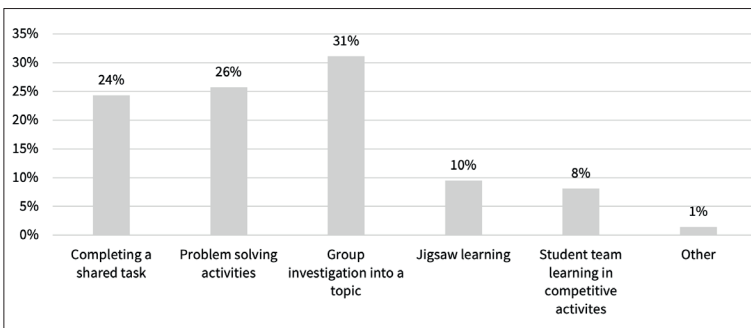
out of a total of 76 respondents). Table 3 displays respondents' motives to persevere attending or doing individual activities (out of 45 replies, only 30 have motivated their response). Respondents' whole answers¹⁰ or parts of them are quoted in Table 3 and keywords have been highlighted.

As regards collaborative activities, Graph 3 shows the most frequent collaborative activities as appears from the survey responses (74 out of 76 respondents replied to this question). Graph 5 presents the percentages regarding the most motivating collaborative activities (only 41 responses were submitted). Finally, Table 4 displays respondents' motives to engage in collaborative activities (only 37 complete answers were submitted).

Graph 2 The most frequent individual activities

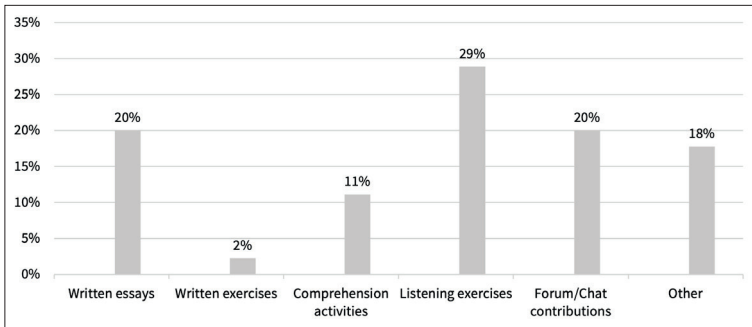


Graph 3 The most frequent collaborative activities

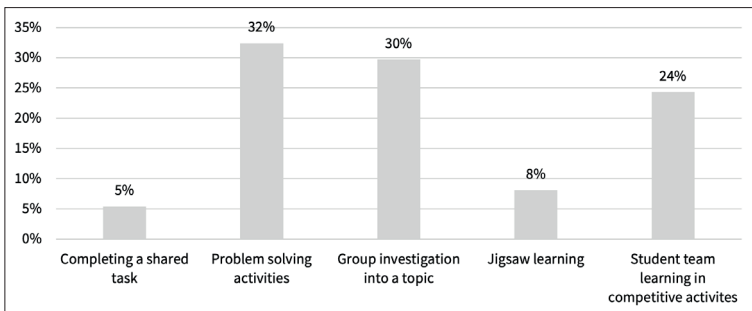


¹⁰ Respondents' answers have been quoted without considering their grammatical or syntactical correctness. Some of the answers were given in Italian and have been reported in this article as they were in the survey.

Graph 4 The most motivating individual activities



Graph 5 The most motivating collaborative activities



It appears that 'listening exercises' are perceived to be the most motivating among the individual activities mentioned in the questionnaire [Graph 4], despite being not so frequent in the online language course, as seen in Graph 2. 'Written essays' and 'forum/chat contributions' are reported to be the most motivating by a quite high number of respondents. However, comparing results in Graph 4 with those in Graph 2, it can be noted that while 'written essays' are the most frequent activities in online language courses, 'forum/chat contributions' seem to be the least frequent of all. This result is in stark contrast with the results in Graph 4, presenting 'forum/chat contributions' as the most motivating activities for 20% of the respondents. In fact, 'written essays' and 'written exercises' seem to be the most frequent, but the least motivating. As seen, students seem to enjoy 'listening exercises' and 'forum/chat contributions' more, despite being reported as not frequent at all in the language courses they are attending. Among the collaborative activities, students find most motivating 'problem-solving activities' and 'group investigation into a topic', followed by 'jigsaw learning' as shown in Graph 5.

Table 3 Individual activities: why are they motivating?

Individual activities	Because they develop various language skills and subskills	Because they are useful in every-day life or for future career prospects	Because they could promote interaction among the learners	Because they meet the personal taste of the respondents
Written essays 9 out of 30 responses (30%)	4 out of 9 responses (44,44 %) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – try new syntactic structures – write freely – focus on what I want to say – develop a specific topic language 	4 out of 9 responses (44.44%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – use the language in everyday life – are most useful – perché aiutano nello studio della materia¹¹ – help me practice language 	1 out of 9 responses (11.11%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – especially in teams 	
Written exercises 1 out of 30 responses (3.33%)	1 out of 1 response (100%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – have to use different types of your language skills 			
Comprehension activities 4 out of 30 responses (13.33%)	1 out of 4 responses (25%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – perché racchiudono più capacità¹² 	3 out of 4 responses (75%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – most useful in real-life experiences – useful in everyday life – we can read all the topic we want, especially from the journals 		
Listening exercises 9 out of 30 responses (30%)	5 out of 9 responses (55.55%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – can improve different skills – I can improve the skill of understanding the language – for the pronunciation – most important skill to learn – improve my listening skills 	2 out of 9 responses (22.22%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – in my future work I'll talk to a lot of people – this is what I will have to do when I live abroad 		2 out of 9 responses (22.22%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – I feel directly involved in it – because this is my best ability

¹¹ 'Because they are helpful in the study of the subject' (transl. by the Author).

¹² 'Because they encompass several abilities' (transl. by the Author).

Individual activities	Because they develop various language skills and subskills	Because they are useful in every-day life or for future career prospects	Because they could promote interaction among the learners	Because they meet the personal taste of the respondents
Forum/Chat contributions 7 out of 30 responses (20.68%)	2 out of 7 responses (28.57%) – improve speaking – be free to speak English	1 out of 7 responses (14.28%) – it is like a real-life conversation	3 out of seven responses (42.85%) – share opinions – more interactive – interact in real-time	1 out of 7 responses (14.28%) – they are engaging

Table 4 Collaborative activities. Why are they motivating?

Collaborative activities	Because they are perceived as a pleasant or interesting activity	Because they are appreciated for their authenticity and closeness to real-life situations	Because they motivate the students to persevere in learning	Because they are perceived as meaningful for the learning process
Completing a shared task 2 out of 25 (8%)				2 out of 2 (100%) – it improves team – work skills – cooperation is the fastest way to learn
Problem-solving activities 9 out of 25 (36%)	2 out of 9 (22.22%) – it's interesting and motivating – it's a nice skill	4 out of 9 (44.44%) – simulate real discussions – it can help you with the real-life – they are related to real situations – it will be asked during your job		3 out of 9 (33.33%) – you have to think a lot – increase one's skills – put in practice theoretical knowledge
Group investigation into a topic 5 out of 25 (20%)	3 out of 5 (60%) – nice way to work together [...] with friends – interesting – more fun			2 out of 5 (40%) – they develop team working [skills] – they allow the group to come up with innovative ideas
Jigsaw learning 2 out of 25 (8%)	1 out of 2 (50%) – new stimulating method			1 out of 2 (50%) – learn how to work in teams

<p>Student team learning in competitive activities 7 out of 25 (28%)</p>	<p>3 out of 7 (42.85%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - interesting because you discuss and collaborate with other people - fun and engagement - stimulating and funny 	<p>3 out of 7 (42.85%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - give me the right motivation to keep working - spinge ogni studente a partecipare in maniera attiva e a produrre di più¹³ - give students more motivation to complete a task 	<p>1 out of 7 (14.28%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - because of the communication
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Regarding the individual activities, the majority of the respondents indicated the development of some language skills as the main reason for which individual activities are perceived to be motivating. Being University students, the respondents value the activities required in a course based on their usefulness towards getting credits, passing an exam, and acquiring skills that can be exploited in a future career. The prospect of using the FL in future arrangements, as well as in present situations, is also perceived to be motivating to participate in the individual activities. Even in the case of collaborative activities, students indicate usefulness as the main reason for considering these activities the most engaging; in particular, students mention the fact that motivating activities are meaningful for the learning process and develop specific language skills. Besides, respondents mention the fact that certain collaborative activities, perceived as interesting or fun, motivate learners to persevere learning and participating in online tasks.

7 Discussion

RQ1 What type of individual and collaborative activities are most frequent in FL online learning?

The first question in this study sought to explore the type of activities or tasks most frequently required in distance language courses during the pandemic emergency. Indeed, an initial objective of the research was to understand whether individual or collaborative activities are most frequent in an online learning context. From the analysis of the results emerges that 'homework submission' is the most frequent activity, followed by 'synchronous lessons'. As regards the specificity of individual and collaborative activities, this study did

¹³ 'Encourages every student to participate more actively and to produce more' (transl. by the Author).

not find a significant difference. These results are in accord with Rapanta et al.'s (2020) study indicating the importance of providing a mix of design approaches in distance language learning. In general, therefore, it seems that teachers attempted to offer a stimulating learning environment to supply for the lack of face-to-face contact.

It is interesting to note that 'written essays' are selected as the most common individual activity. By contrast, 'forum/chat contributions' are reported to be the least frequent. On the other hand, 'group investigations into a topic' are reported to be the most frequent collaborative activities, followed by 'problem-solving activities'. 'Student team learning activities' and 'jigsaw learning' are selected as the least frequent. As we can see, the recurring individual and collaborative activities are also the most traditional in a language course. A possible explanation for this might be that some teachers resorted to familiar language activities even in a distance setting. In accordance with the present results, previous literature (Rapanta et al. 2020) have demonstrated that university teachers lacked significant PCK to teach online and, conceivably, also the confidence to engage in more complex lesson planning. However, a note of caution is due here since respondents to the survey might have misunderstood the typology of some activities or their answers might be unreliable (due to tiredness or lack of interest in the survey).

RQ2 What individual activities are perceived to be most motivating and why?

With respect to the second research question, it was found that 'listening exercises' are selected as the most motivating individual activities, followed by 'written essays' and 'forum/chat contributions'. The most interesting finding is that both 'listening exercises' and 'forum/chat contributions' are the least frequent activities reported by survey respondents. Unsurprisingly, respondents find motivating those activities that are useful to develop language skills for academic or career prospects. These results corroborate the idea of extrinsic motivation (Deci, Ryan 1985), suggesting that motivation to learn stems from the expectation of pursuing academic and work-related advancement.

In line with the expectations, respondents show a high level of identified regulation (Ryan, Deci 2000) to attend individual activities: as seen in Figure 1, a more autonomous and self-determined form of extrinsic motivation is "regulation through identification. Identification reflects a conscious valuing of a behavioural goal or regulation, such that action is owned as personally important" (Ryan, Deci 2000, 72).

Furthermore, the answers reported in Table 3 indicate that motivation is characterised by the interaction of three components, duty, need and pleasure, as in Balboni's (2008) model. These three components are reflected in the four categories in Table 3: respondents value the online language activities because

- they enable them to fulfil their duties as students,
- they meet the students' language needs,
- they are a source of enjoyment.

It is worth mentioning that the activities, which intrinsically motivate the students, are 'listening exercises' and 'forum/chat contributions'; as indicated above, these activities are perceived to be pleasant or interesting, and determine somewhat inherent satisfaction when doing them. What is surprising is that these activities are reported to be infrequent in online language courses. A possible explanation for these results may be the students' desire for novelty and change. However, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as findings might not reflect entirely participants' true opinions and may be influenced by temporary or incidental factors (such as tiredness, misunderstandings or lack of interest).

RQ3 What collaborative activities are perceived to be most motivating and why?

On the question of which collaborative activities were the most frequent in online language courses during the pandemic emergency, this study found 'group investigation into a topic' and 'problem-solving activities' were the most recurrent. An interesting result is that both of them are indicated as the most motivating as well.

Initially, it was hypothesised that collaborative language activities were perceived to be more motivating than individual activities by the students in an online setting, and more broadly in any language learning environment. Indeed, prior studies have noted the importance of collaboration in foreign language learning, in terms of motivation as well as language acquisition (see, for instance, Lin and Lan 2015). However, the results of our study did not show whether respondents preferred collaborative over individual activities, except for one aspect. Collaborative activities are reported to be motivating because they are perceived to be pleasant or interesting. This accords with our earlier observations which showed that collaborative activities increase students' engagement in the learning process. Furthermore, these results confirm the association between collaborative activities and intrinsic motivation; as Ryan and Deci (2000) explain, intrinsic motivation stems from a sense of inherent satisfaction in doing an activity and the pleasure deriving from it.

Similarly to individual activities, collaborative activities are also positively valued when they are perceived to be meaningful for the learning process. These results are likely to be related to the academic setting and, consequently, to the students' desire to accomplish study or career goals. According to Ryan and Deci's SDT, this source of motivation is somewhat internal because it is generated by internally held value, such as gaining new skills. This assumption demonstrates the close link between self-regulation and motivation, whereby motivated students learn how to regulate their learning more effectively.

To sum up, motivation to participate in the FL online activities seem to be related to identified, introjected, and intrinsic regulation according to Ryan and Deci's Self-determination continuum (2000). These results are consistent with Barnard et al.'s study (2009) which pointed out how students exercise more autonomous control over learning in online courses as opposed to face-to-face ones. Despite having analysed both individual and collaborative activities, it is not possible to identify which ones are perceived to be most motivating. Even more so given the fact that students indicate similar motives to participate in individual or collaborative activities. Students seem to find equally stimulating or monotonous individual and collaborative activities, without showing a preference for one or the other.

8 Limitations of This Study

The main weakness of this study was the paucity of respondents (76). As has been previously reported in literature (Frippat, Marquis 2010), web-based surveys have a relatively low response rate; authors suggest that internet access might be the reason behind this. Moreover, in the current study, participants joined the Facebook groups to publish their own surveys as researchers and obtain replies from other group members. Indeed, this limits dramatically the possible sample among the eligible population because the survey could not reach those not following the three interest groups on Facebook.

Furthermore, the approach utilised in the web survey suffers from the limitation that many variables cannot be controlled, such as participants' language proficiency, the foreign language studied and the main reason behind the language choice. Because of this potential limitation, it is unknown to what extent these variables might influence students' motivation in distance learning. An additional uncontrolled factor is the possibility that some respondents did not fully understand the questions or gave hasty replies without much thought. Since the data were limited to the web survey, it was not possible to compare them with other survey modes. Changing the survey mode could have had some effect on the sample and the type of responses collected (Rookey et al. 2008).

Because of its limited design and scope, this small-scale study does not of course permit us to make any significant generalisations about the effective dimension of motivation in FL learning in a distance mode. Affective learning experiences are bound to vary from individual to individual and depend on their characteristics as learners. Considerably more work will need to be done to determine what factors affect motivation in distance learning and to fully understand the implications for demotivation in this setting.

9 Conclusions

Despite having initially hypothesised that collaborative activities would be preferred by the students since they were assumed to be creating a sense of group belonging, often lacking in distance learning, results highlight a different scenario. Individual and collaborative acts are considered equally motivating provided they are perceived to be useful for future life prospects or for developing specific language skills. Our results cast a new light on students' motivation in FL online learning, showing that identified and integrated motives determine students' participation in both individual and collaborative activities.

Initially, students' motivations for attending an online FL course were identified; then, factors affecting motivation during the actual FL course were investigated, in particular the role of individual and collaborative activities. Findings indicate that students experience a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motives to persevere in FL learning, which seem to be particularly affected by the online learning context brought about by the current sanitary emergency.

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

The tendency of studying an FL for its practicality rather than for enjoyment or general interest in the FL and its culture is mirrored in the data gathered through the questionnaire. The analysis and discussion of the data demonstrate that students' motivation to persevere learning in the online environment is related to their perception of the FL's usefulness. It appears that respondents consider activities to be motivating when they develop important language skills or are perceived to be convenient for the students' prospects, regardless of

whether they are conducted individually or collaboratively. Through the content analysis of the questionnaire responses, it appears that the most relevant regulatory processes in participating in FL online activities are the conscious valuing and the congruence with one's values. This demonstrates that despite being externally motivated, students perceive to be motivating those activities that foster relatedness and competence, as well as autonomy, as seen in Organismic Integration Theory (Deci, Ryan 1985).

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

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

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

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