

Second Language Distance Learning: The Issue of Language Certification in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

Language teaching has undergone numerous changes as a result of COVID-19, and has adapted to the new scenario and digital tools. While the programs for university and language school courses have been modulated to the new teaching conditions, language courses aimed at obtaining certifications require the final exam to remain the same. The present study focuses on eight adult students of Italian as a foreign language. These adults are interested in certification and were previously enrolled in a language course in Italy, but this course was transformed into an online offering due to the coronavirus. Some questions arose: how can one ensure the continuity of the new online language course? What didactic activities and teaching materials could be applied to facilitate online teaching aimed at obtaining a language certification? The aim of this study is to look at the pros and cons of online teaching for obtaining a language certification, and at effective methods and operational procedures for online teaching during COVID-19. The study results have been collected from the teacher's own didactic experience and through distance learning questionnaires to which the students were subjected.

Keywords: Language Certification, COVID-19, Adult Education, Second Language Distance Learning, Italian as a Second Language

Introduction

The critical health situation we have faced in the past five months has forced teachers and students of all levels of education to change the way they teach and learn.

In Lombardy, the region in northern Italy where the first patient tested positive for the virus, schools, universities and all educational institutions have not provided face-to-face courses since February 24 and courses are unlikely to resume until September. Consequently, the need arose to reprogram all the teaching, from kindergarten to university courses, to allow all students access to educational services and to exercise their right to study.

In this series of changes, there were two different scenarios in the field of language teaching: school and university language courses, in which teachers modified the structure of the courses and the contents of the exams according to distance learning, and online language courses for a language certification.

In this article, I will discuss a case study related to the second scenario presented regarding a course for Italian as a second language (L2) involving eight adult students, which took place

before and during the lockdown period; the aim of the course was to pass level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) exam certification.

During the lockdown, three main problems were encountered in the management of the course and the content of the class. The first one concerned the desire to guarantee the continuity of the lessons during an emergency in which nobody—neither the institutions, nor the politicians, nor individual citizens—knew what to do. What could be done to guarantee continuity to the course? A second issue concerned the contents. Since it was a language course with the aim to prepare students for a language certification, how could the contents be adapted to distance learning? The third issue concerned the activities and materials proposed to the students. It was necessary to motivate the learners to become more aware of the health situation and the final exam. As it was no longer possible to guarantee the presence of the teacher in the classroom, how could the learners be stimulated? What kind of tools could be used to guarantee the teacher's guidance? What activities could be proposed and which of them would actually prove useful for passing the exam?

In this article, we will try to answer these questions. After a theoretical introduction to the new technologies in distance language learning and an in-depth analysis concerning linguistic certifications in general, we will focus on Italian language certifications. The problems that arose during the transition from a face-to-face course to distance learning will be then commented on, and proposals and solutions will be sought through a data collection tool consisting of a questionnaire administered to the students at the end of the course.

The aim is a reflection on distance language learning related to language certifications. Operational suggestions and recommendations will be proposed drawn from the teacher's experience and the learners' opinions in order to contribute to the training of language teachers by providing practical and effective solutions for dealing with emergency situations such as the one we have experienced.

Review of the literature

2.1 Distance language learning

Distance learning is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “a way of studying in which you do not attend a school, college, or university, but study from where you live, usually being taught and given work to do over the internet”; while in the Oxford Dictionary it is described as “a system of education in which people study at home with the help of special internet sites and send or email work to their teachers”. The two definitions are very similar, and in both cases the term ‘distance education’ is used as a synonym of ‘distance learning’. We can therefore assert that distance learning is a form of teaching that does not take place in the presence of a teacher and within institutions such as schools or universities, but at distance and within one's own home, and the transmission of contents is mediated by the Internet.

In general, distance learning is a controversial issue from many points of view including the access to education, the process of adjustment to new learning environments, individual development (White, 2005), the development of learning autonomy, the knowledge and the awareness of students, and the active participation of students in the learning process (Jiménez Raya & Pérez Fernández, 2002; Reinders & White, 2011). Nevertheless, in recent years a great deal of research relating to distance learning of foreign languages has been carried out (Blake, 2013; Shelley, Murphy & White, 2013; White, 2014). Distance language

learning is considered different from other online disciplines because it is more difficult to learn a language by this method and consequently language learners require a high degree of self-regulation when compared with learners of other subjects (Hurd, 2006). In relation to the distance learning of languages, Hurd (2006, p. 304) argues that "It is also true that learning in distance mode has always been seen as problematic for the acquisition, practice, and assessment of foreign language speaking skills, given the physical absence of a teacher, the isolated context, and reduced opportunities for interacting in the target language."

The main factors influencing distance learning are the capacity to be autonomous (Cotteral, 1999), the teacher feedback (Hyland, 2001; White, 2003; Hurd, 2006) and, undoubtedly, maintaining strong motivation for the duration of the online language course (Liao, 2006). As asserted by Hurd (2006, p. 305) "In the case of the distance learner, motivation is directly implicated, given the demands of the distance setting and the need to persevere, sometimes against overwhelming odds. Both the distance tutor and learner are engaged in a dynamic relationship at a distance; as the locus of control moves from one to the other, students increase their metacognitive awareness and skills, and perceptions and behaviours evolve and change". As we will see later, the teacher assumes a fundamental role in distance learning, guaranteeing his or her presence through feedback and motivating students.

White (2005, p. 166) identifies different distance learning methods including "distributed learning, online learning, asynchronous learning networks, telematics, e-learning and blended learning". The possibility of taking an online language course is an opportunity that has been given to learners for decades, but the choice of where and how the course is delivered is almost always made by the student or institution. In the specific case of this article (and in the vast majority of teaching situations during the last five months) it was not a choice, but a necessity due to an emergency; consequently, the teachers and institutions were not prepared for it.

There was considerable uncertainty regarding issues such as when the distance learning period would end and when and how classroom courses would restart. Today, in Italy, it is still not possible to answer these kinds of questions. Therefore, all schools, universities and cultural institutions have equipped themselves to guarantee access to online courses and exams, and the same applies to courses for language certifications.

2.2 Language certification

A language certification is a document that attests the linguistic and communicative competence of a learner in a specific language. It is a certificate that has international value and it is recognized in schools, work places and associations; it is part of the qualifications that students should have to build their career trajectory (Angouri, Mattheoudakis & Zigrika, 2010). Having a linguistic certification means being able to certify in a transparent and comparable way that you have reached a certain level of knowledge in a language (Chini and Bosisio, 2014).

This recognition has not only a personal utility because it attests to the level reached in mastering a certain discipline, but also a professional one because it constitutes a recognized testimony of one's own skills. According to Chini and Bosisio (2014), language certifications have two common macro features:

The division into levels, since with the diffusion of the CEFR and the respective rating scale, the levels are now approved and all certifications, at least in Europe, refer to the six levels of competence of the Framework from A1 to C2.

The administration of different tests for each level, aimed at certifying the basic skills and, generally, the metalinguistic competence.

The skills attested by the certifications mainly concern the so-called “common language”, although in many cases the individual institutions offer targeted certifications, limited to a certain sector-based language (for example economics) or to a certain type of person (immigrants, children or adolescents).

The linguistic certifications are characterized by their autonomy and independence from specific educational paths (Barki et al. 2003): in fact, external institutions carry out the certification tests. The importance of language certificates is demonstrated by numerous studies and in-depth analyses on their construction (see <https://www.cambridge.org/elt/catalogue/catalogue.asp?cid=371>) and, consequently, all students clearly recognize the usefulness of the certificates (Angouri, Mattheoudakis & Zigrika, 2010).

2.3 Italian Language Certification

For the Italian language, there are four certifications recognized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<https://www.linguaitaliana.esteri.it/lingua/corsi/certificazioni/ricerca.do>):

CELI: University for Foreigners of Perugia (<http://www.cvcl.it/categorie/categoria-64?explicit=SI>) Certificate of the Italian Language.

There are 6 levels of the CELI based on the model of the CEFR.

Regarding the targeted certifications, there is the “CELI Immigrati” (immigrants) for the first three levels of CEFR (A1, A2, B1), that is a certification only aimed at low educated adult immigrants with the purpose of promoting their integration in the Italian context; while for adolescents there is “CELI Adolescenti” (adolescents), on the three levels of CEFR A2, B1, B2, which shows adequate knowledge of the language related to this age group.

The University for Foreigners of Perugia also manages the “CIC”, the Certificate of Knowledge of Business Italian, which is aimed at people who work or intend to work in business and verifies the knowledge of commercial Italian suitable for professional figures able to move in a business context. It is divided into two levels B1—intermediate, and C1—advanced.

CILS: University for Foreigners of Siena (<http://cils.unistrasi.it/79/82/1 LIVELLI CILS.htm>) Certificate of Italian as a Foreign Language.

The CILS covers all of the six levels identified by the CEFR, and certifies linguistic and communicative skills suitable for social, professional and study contexts. Anyone who studies Italian, works and studies in contact with the Italian reality and wants to obtain a long term residence permit can take a CILS.

The CILS tests are not tied to particular methods or language courses: each candidate can prepare for the CILS exams in the way he or she deems most appropriate. CILS exams require

¹ The date of the last consultation of all the links to websites present in this contribution is July 3, 2020.

minimal knowledge of Italian society, history, geography and culture. For children and adolescents, specific A1, A2 and B1 Level Certification forms have been created.

CERT.IT: Roma Tre University (<http://www.certificazioneitaliano.uniroma3.it/>) Certificate for knowledge of Italian as L2.

This certification has only four of the six levels provided by the CEFR (A2, B1, B2, C2). For each level, the basic skills and use of Italian in everyday life situations are tested.

PLIDA: Dante Alighieri Society (<http://plida.it/>) Dante Alighieri Italian Language Project.

The PLIDA certification is divided into the six levels of the CEFR. The exam includes four tests: oral comprehension, written comprehension, oral production and written production. In addition to the six levels, there are also the “PLIDA Juniores”, intended for teenagers, with four levels (from A1 to B2) and the “PLIDA Commerciale” (for commerce) intended for those who work in the commercial, financial and industrial fields, which consists of three levels (B1, B2 and C1).

All the certifications described are valid in Italy and abroad and aim to improve study opportunities, as they allow access to courses in Italian universities, and boost career prospects.

Research design and methods

In this paper, we deal with a case study on foreign students who attended an Italian L2 course to prepare for the PLIDA level B1 exam. The Italian L2 course was aimed at eight students who needed a language certification to be admitted to the Theological University of Northern Italy in Milan.

Table 1 shows some sociolinguistic data of the learners.

Country	European languages
<i>Nigeria</i>	<i>English</i>
<i>India</i>	<i>English</i>
<i>India</i>	<i>English</i>
<i>Tanzania</i>	<i>English</i>
<i>Rwanda</i>	<i>French</i>

Table 1: Sociolinguistic data of the students

As can be seen from Table 1, two of the learners come from Asia and the rest come from Africa. The European languages known by the students are English and, in one case, French. In any case, the language used throughout the course was Italian.

The course started in October 2019 and ended in April 2020, and when the course started all the students were beginners. A month and a half before the end of the course, on February 21, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was registered in Lombardy. On February 24, 2020 an order by the Lombardy government imposed the closure of all schools and universities. During the

first week of closure, the lessons were suspended: it was not clear what was going on and how serious the situation could be.

The following week uncertainty reigned, so a solution was devised and proposed by the Italian teacher to avoid the loss of too many lessons. The face-to-face course was thus converted into an online course via the Skype platform; the student group was divided into two groups of 4 students each, to allow a better interaction and to ensure a better content transmission.

It should not be forgotten that the aim of the course was to pass the level B1 PLIDA certification and, consequently, many of the proposed face-to-face activities were designed according to the certification exam.

The online lessons were therefore divided into three different parts, trying to maintain continuity with the face-to-face course: the first part included a grammatical explanation by the teacher, starting from an input text and an analysis of the morphosyntactic, communicative and lexical structures; the second part included exercises designed to simulate the exam; and the third part was a conversation between the students or between the teacher and the students on topics covered during the lesson, that could be useful for the oral part of the exam.

At the end of the course, in April 2020, a questionnaire, consisting of ten questions, was administered to the students via Google Forms (<https://www.google.it/intl/it/forms/about/>). The aim of the questionnaire was to obtain feedback from the students on the activities offered during the period of distance learning to start a reflection on the usefulness and validity of the teacher's proposals.

The first three questions refer to sociolinguistic data (age, transfer to Italy and Italian study period) and aim to provide a context to the case study; questions four and five include a self-assessment of knowledge of Italian at the beginning and end of the online lessons. As stated by Reinders and White (2011), the self-assessment is useful for encouraging reflection and awareness of one's own learning, and in the case of adult students and online lessons it is necessary to stimulate the development of autonomy in learning.

Questions six and seven concern the utility and use of the teaching materials proposed by the teacher; the aim is to understand which materials have been used and which of them were appreciated by the students.

Question eight asks the students to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is the minimum and 5 is the maximum) the usefulness of some of the activities carried out ("Skype lessons; classroom lessons; homework; exam simulation; self-correction of homework; video on YouTube"). Finally, the students were asked to indicate a positive and a negative aspect of distance learning (question nine) and a suggestion for organizing a potential online Italian course (question ten).

The answers allow us to analyse the work done by the teacher, trying to understand if it was useful for students in order to pass the certification exam and to propose good practices and tools for future online courses for language certifications.

Data collection and analysis

This section collects the data of the questionnaires which the students of the Italian L2 course completed, following the research methodology outlined above. A critical discussion on the results is proposed. In this research work, the data were collected through the personal

experience of the Italian L2 teacher, her observation and the answers of the questionnaires. The comparison and interpretation of the data made it possible to identify some useful activities and materials for online courses to obtain a language certification.

From the first answer, concerning the age of the students, as shown in table 2, it emerged that 38% of the interviewees are over 45 years old; 25% are aged between 40 and 45; 12% are between 35 and 40 years old and the remaining 25% between 30 and 35 years old.

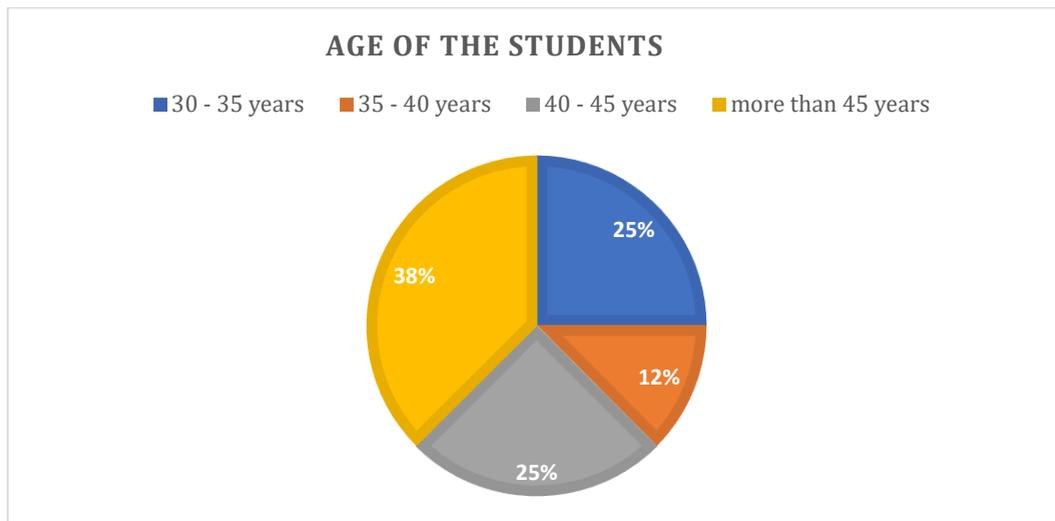


Table 2: Age of the students

The second question, relating to the transfer to Italy, had the objective of understanding whether the students were integrated into the Italian context. The answers were the following: one student had been in Italy for a year and eight months¹; one student for eleven months; three students for eight months; one for seven; and one for five². None of them turned out to be fully integrated in a context external to the Italian class. It is likely that one of the causes can be attributed to COVID-19 because when the students were about to make the transition from the basic variety to the post-basic variety (Gilardoni, 2005) of the language they were forced to stay at home.

Regarding the study of Italian, however, one student indicated that he had been studying Italian for more than a year; one student for ten months; three for eight months; two for seven months; and one only for four months.

Regarding the self-assessment of knowledge of the Italian language before starting the distance learning, as shown in Table 3, it emerged that 12% of the students considered themselves to be at level 1, 64% at level 2, 12% at level 3 and 12% at level 4. It is likely that the majority of the students indicated Level 2 because they did not feel completely sure about their knowledge of the language, especially regarding oral production and grammar. At the end of the online course, however, the general picture, as shown in Table 3, showed an

¹ He is a repeating student. He attempted the PLIDA language certification exam last academic year, but failed.

² He is the only student from Rwanda.

improvement: level 1 has disappeared, level 2 has decreased by 52%, level 3 has increased by 24% and level 4 has increased by 38%.

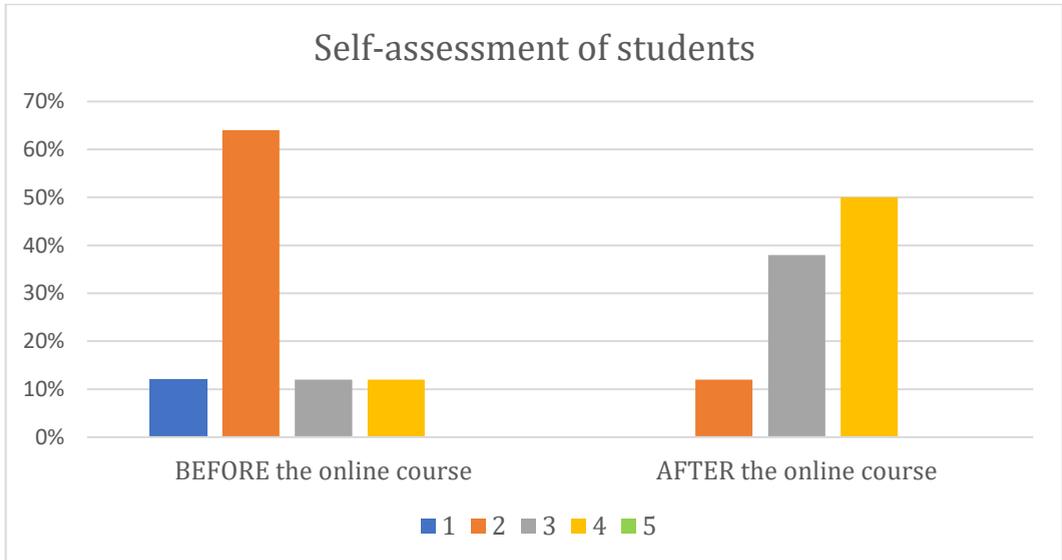


Table 3: Self-assessment of students before and after the distance learning

As is evident, despite the difficulties due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and the problems related to the transmission of content via an online platform, the average of the self-assessment before the course was at a level 2.24, while after the course the average has achieved a level of 3.38, with an increase of 51%.

One of the possible causes of this increase is attributable to the materials provided by the teacher. During class lessons, supplementary materials were rarely provided: in most cases, these consisted of exam simulation or summarizing charts and tables containing particularly difficult grammatical rules. The textbook chosen for the face-to-face course is *"Il nuovo affresco italiano"* by Maurizio Trifone and Andreina Sgaglione, Mondadori Education, which contains exercises for written and oral comprehension and production and many exercises to improve the grammar and the phonological and lexical aspects of the language. Consequently, during the face-to-face course it was not considered necessary to provide additional materials so as not to overload the students.

It was different matter with the distance learning. The book chosen for the face-to-face lessons was used during the online course exclusively as a guide for the topics to be covered and as a workbook. However, during the meetings on Skype, it was not possible to carry out a large number of the exercises in the book and for this reason, teaching materials of various kinds were integrated into the lessons.

The students were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is the minimum and 5 is the maximum) their opinion on the utility of the materials provided by the teacher during the online course. What emerged (Table 4) is that 26% of the students considered the materials useful at level 3, while 37% considered their utility to be level 4 and 37% indicated level 5.

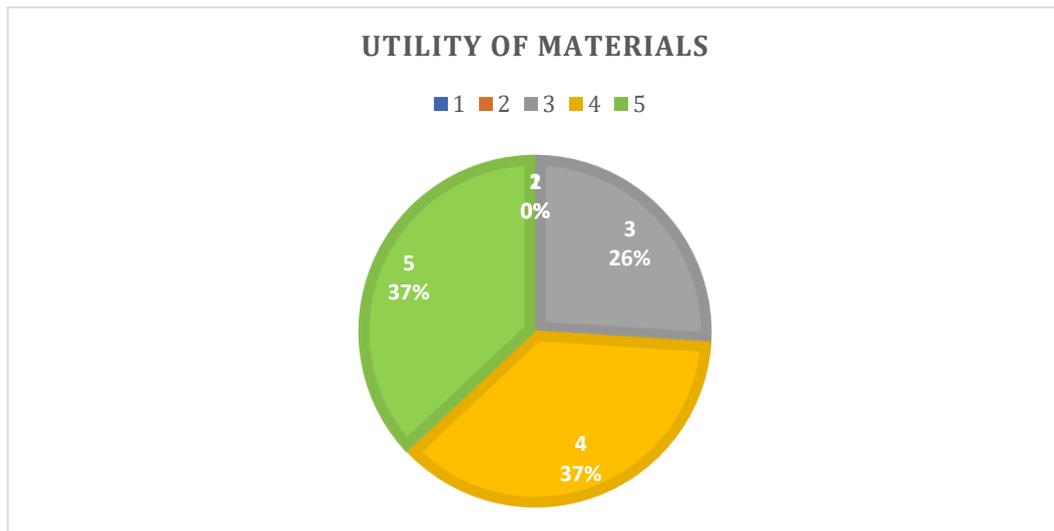


Table 4: Utility of materials

The idea of using supplementary materials was therefore appreciated by all the students. In particular, the following resources were proposed: cards containing grammatical explanations prepared by the teacher; websites of publishing companies dealing with Italian L2 which provide free materials such as videos and exercises; Italian online newspapers and magazines; Italian dictionaries; dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms; dictionaries of idioms; Treccani encyclopedia¹; videos on YouTube; and the RAI website².

The most used materials, as can see from Table 5, were grammar cards prepared by the teacher and videos on YouTube. This preference is due to the facility with which the contents are transmitted.

Websites with Italian L2 exercises and dictionaries, verb conjugators and encyclopedia were used but to a lesser extent than the grammar cards and videos because using them in the correct way requires cognition, self-determination and self-study. The RAI website was not utilized very much despite the fact that it contains exercises, teaching videos and grammatical explanations. Perhaps this was because the website requires a high level of autonomy and motivation.

Finally, online newspapers and magazines were never used by students. This is probably due to the fact that strong motivation and interest are needed to read news and entire articles in L2. Furthermore, the journalism lexicon is notoriously rich in rhetorical devices which are difficult for foreign students to understand.

¹ The Treccani encyclopedia deals with the compilation, updating, publication and dissemination of the Italian Encyclopedia of Sciences, Letters and Arts for the development of humanistic and scientific culture, as well as for educational, research and social service needs. (Source: <http://www.treccani.it/istituto/la-nostra-storia/>).

² The RAI "Radiotelevisione italiana" (Italian radio and television) website has a section dedicated to Italian L2: <http://www.italiano.rai.it/>.

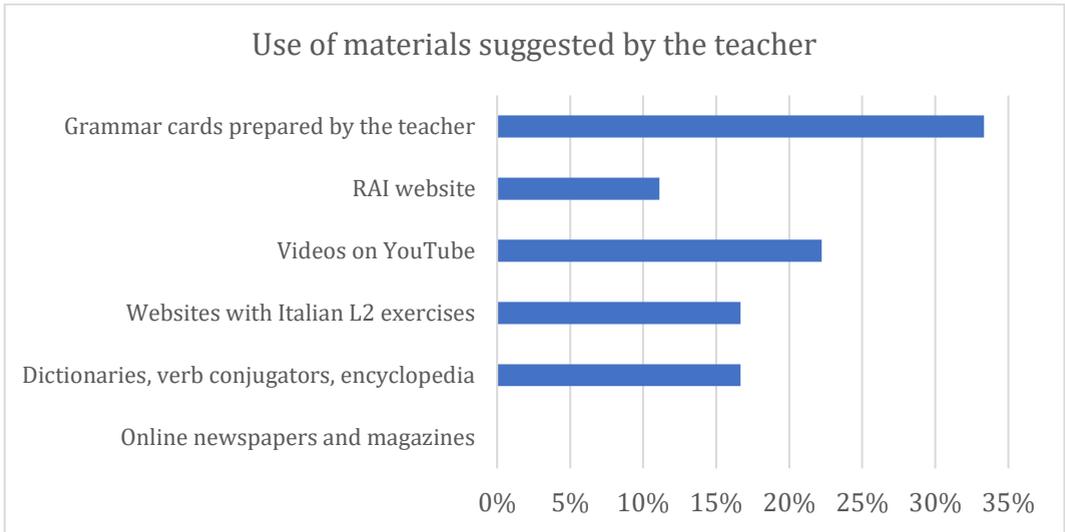


Table 5: Use of the materials suggested by the teacher

As we can see, question eight concerns the usefulness of the activities proposed by the teacher. Table 6 shows the activities proposed by the teacher during the whole Italian course: the activities that were most appreciated are the face-to-face lessons, homework and their self-corrections and the exam simulations. The PLIDA exam simulations consisted of short compositions (150 words) that the students had to write and which were corrected by the teacher (face-to-face before the lockdown and via email during the lockdown). These simulations allowed the learners to prepare for the exam using the past exams and taking advantage of personalized corrections.

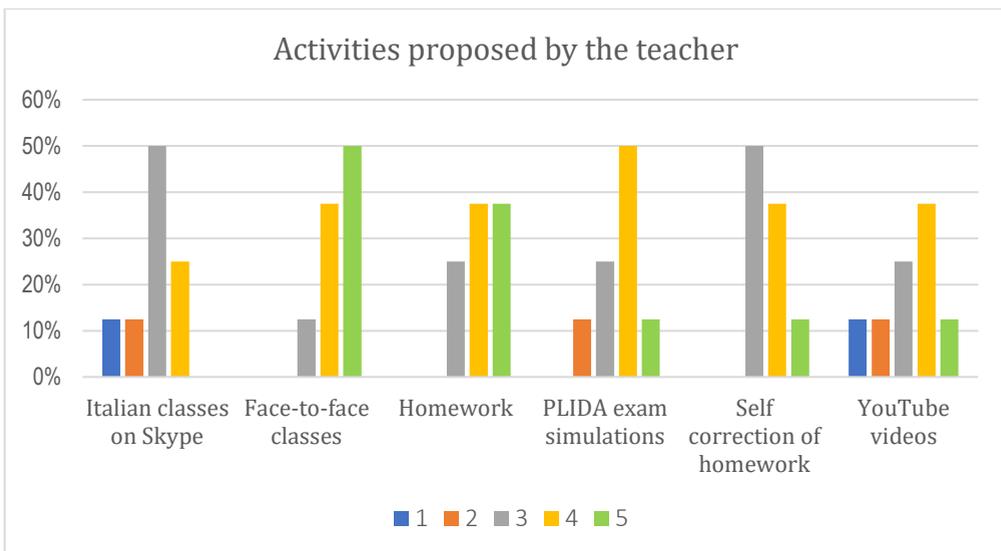


Table 6: Activities proposed by the teacher

Compared to the question on the activities, the lessons on Skype were underappreciated which is reflected in the answers to the next question that concerns the request for a negative and a positive aspect of the distance learning experience.

Among the negative aspects, half of the students indicated problems with internet connection. Unfortunately, the problem of adequate tools for distance learning constitutes a huge obstacle in Italy, especially among the less well-off segment of the population and among younger students.

One student defined distance learning as "incomplete" and "ineffective" learning because of the lack of interaction, especially if compared "to what you have in class with your classmates and with the teacher". Clearly it is not possible to compare the solitude and the lack of contact of distance learning with the physical presence of classmates and the teacher.

At this point, the teacher's role deserves a reflection: although the face-to-face course was interrupted and the teaching methods changed abruptly, the students kept their attention threshold high during the online lessons; they worked independently, taking advantage of the materials suggested and sent by the teacher and they carried out the assigned exercises and the PLIDA simulations demonstrating interest and awareness. This can be seen by the numerous emails received by the teacher for the correction of the exercises and for the review of PLIDA simulations. Teacher feedback was found to be fundamental for students, especially in the emergency condition in which they were forced to change the entire course setting despite the fact that the final exam was the same. White (2003, p. 187) asserts that "feedback plays a critical role for distance language learners, not only as a response to their performance, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement and motivation to continue." Needless to say, the teacher had an important role in the management of the course and in the transmission of the contents, even if at a distance.

Among the positive aspects of distance learning, however, three students noted that this was the only way to be able to go on with the study of the language in an emergency, making the most of the time during the quarantine. Other students highlighted the convenience of following the lesson from the comfort of home, saving money and time. One student found it useful because of the online learning materials that he would otherwise have been unable to use.

Regarding the last question, the students' suggestions for a possible future online language course were:

Limit the number of students to enable an effective interaction.

The idea of dealing with a limited number of students was a good solution. The initiative to divide students into two groups of four was a success because it was possible to guarantee greater participation of learners and a development of oral production.

Avoid too long grammatical explanations as they would appear as a monologue.

It is extremely easy to get distracted during an online lesson and it is difficult to be able to keep the attention of students high without being able to count on the movement or visual stimuli given by the physical presence. For these reasons, efforts were made to make the lessons as interactive as possible, often stimulating the students to intervene.

Introduce the topics of the next lesson in advance.

The students particularly appreciated the idea of being sent an introduction to the next lesson. It allowed them to have a complete picture of the work to be done and the teacher to have a more interactive engagement with the students.

Use a fast internet network and a better video calling program.

As already mentioned, the problem of the tools available to students and teachers affected all the teaching activities at all levels during the entire lockdown period and continues to represent the greatest obstacle to any distance learning that is expected to begin with the new school year. In the case of this experience, what could have been improved is without doubt the use of Skype. Today there are many programmes to carry out video lessons, but when it was decided to start the online course, the most immediate and easily available solution for students was Skype.

Overall, the students showed a positive and proactive attitude towards the course, suggesting ideas and advice to be integrated into the work we have already done.

The experience was positive both for the teacher, because she was able to test herself in a completely new field, and for the students who appreciated the methods of using the contents, the teacher's corrections and the materials.

Conclusion

The article dealt with an unusual subject: the experience of distance courses aimed at obtaining language certifications. The topic is interesting, first of all, because it is widespread all over the world and therefore involves numerous students and teachers, and secondly, because it is a current topic for which a definitive solution has not yet been found; therefore, it is important for teachers to gather and share their experiences to suggest good practices.

The work involved the sudden transformation of a face-to-face language course into distance learning, without any preparation on the part of the teacher and no choice made by the learners. The health crisis forced the teacher to adapt the tools available and to reinvent the teaching activities.

This article aimed to examine the work done by the teacher through the opinions and suggestions of the learners. It thus emerged that, despite the difficulties caused by the distance and the lack of organization and advance notice, it was possible to offer a distance learning course to obtain a language certification. The activities that were most useful for the students were the exam simulations with the teacher's corrections, self-corrected homework and teaching videos on YouTube, while the most used materials were the grammar cards prepared by the teacher. Moreover, the students' responses revealed the importance of teacher feedback in distance learning (Hyland, 2001; White, 2003).

In addition to the activities and materials preferred by the students, suggestions were made for future distance courses such as that of forming small classes, avoiding too long grammatical explanations and introducing the topics of the next lesson in advance.

Thus the strengths and weaknesses of distance language teaching emerged. The advantages include saving time and money and being able to take advantage of new multimedia teaching materials. On the other hand, among the critical issues "incomplete" learning and the need for a fast internet network with better video calling programs have been reported.

Although it is my personal belief that face-to-face teaching remains the most suitable method for the transmission of linguistic content, the case presented has shown that it is possible to adapt resources and content to distance language teaching. There is still a lot of work to be done on online teaching, although the tools have evolved and in the few weeks during the period of COVID-19 many digital teaching materials were made available free of charge to help students and teachers. At university level or in adult courses, motivation and awareness have made online teaching a good solution, while the hardest work will certainly have to be done in kindergarten and primary school courses.

The hope is that the teachers continue to share experiences and materials so that distance courses will continue to be improved.

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