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Distance Learning and Language Teaching. A Research on the Effects of the Pandemic on Language Teaching in Italy

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# **Distance learning and language teaching. A research on the effects of the pandemic on language teaching in Italy**

## **ABSTRACT**

Language teaching represents one of the language sciences that can be regarded as applicative (Balboni). The teaching of modern languages is a discipline that is intrinsically interconnected with other disciplines and, from the moment it was scientifically recognized on the epistemological level, it has been characterized by a keen interest and affinity towards the technologies (Favata 56). This essay showcases the results of a survey conducted on a sample of teachers on the effects of the pandemic on language teaching in Italy.

## **1. Glottotechnologies**

Technologies, in language teaching, are called glottotechnologies (Porcelli), if they are related to language teaching and learning. The use of technology in teaching modern languages corresponds to the wide gamut of glottotechnologies, which are all the tools, including hardware and software devices, aimed at improving, perfecting and optimizing language courses.

Language technologies range “from the new media, to the tools that teachers use while drafting the syllabi, curricula and programming, as well as the audio-visual recording and reproduction devices, IWBs, overhead projectors and intelligent-smart devices, such as smartphones, Smart TVs, Smart PCs and tablets” (Nitti 40).

This long list should be considered a simple draft, as scientific and technological progress constantly provides new equipment and devices (Betti, Garelli). However, the glottotechnologies represent much more than mere operational tools: “the relationship that links the teaching of Italian as a second language and the teaching of modern languages to glottotechnologies can be observed within psycholinguistic and linguistic-acquisitional theories over the last 60 years” (Nitti 40).

Besides, cognitivist theories deal with the forms of knowledge representation, aim to look into cognitive processes and lay the foundation for the constructivist theories of learning; everybody is supposed to have their own idea of the world and, in a more or less conscious fashion, would

constantly review their subjective representations based on their own experience. The pivot around which constructivist theories of learning revolve, is the building and organization of experience and knowledge. At the didactic level, constructivism has been relevant since the second half of the XX century, in that it has characterized learning as an active, constructive, cooperative and interactive process, in which the learner is regarded as an somebody capable of using autonomous and encyclopaedic strategies, tactics and schemes, always connected to the previous matrix (Nitti 43).

Indeed, the glottodidactic implications are relevant (Peacock), as constructivist theories (Dolci) have steered teaching in the direction of giving value to each individual student, as well as keeping into account cognitive profiles and individual learning strategies. Moreover, in this framework, the past and present of the students are kept into considerations, and emphasis is placed on the progressive transformation of contents into skills, on cooperative practices and the consideration of the lesson as an experience (Hampel, Lamy).

In this regard, Porcelli argues that “the means through which the message is conveyed attains considerable importance in determining some fundamental qualities of the message itself; it is therefore to be taken into account the fact that advanced didactic technologies and, in general, audio-visual and computer tools, can be employed” (Porcelli 151-152). If technologies, therefore, modify communication itself, this modification takes place also in teaching practices, with particular regard to the characteristics of distance learning, in which proxemics and mimics can be placed in the background, if compared to the role played in this case by verbal communication *stricto sensu*. The possibility of making use of glottotechnologies has undoubtedly resulted in a substantial improvement in the didactic efforts aimed at teaching and learning languages: In fact, it is possible to analyse voices that are different from that of the teacher, to record, listen to and view multiple times all actions, events and communicative contexts: “if in an advanced level Italian L2 course there’s the need to point out the different phonological and morphosyntactic outputs of two or more varieties of Italian, glottotechnologies enable to reproduce the communicative exchanges and allow learners to listen to them and view them again and again, thus eliciting the structures under discussion” (Nitti 40). Furthermore, the contents produced through glottotechnologies can also be programmed “for self-learning, which can be made us of by those who intend to learn Italian, but aren’t able to find courses available in their area or during their hours available for attendance. However, although much of the work

can be done on one's own, in self-access mode, the presence of the teacher is nevertheless essential: he/she guides the self-learning, provides answers to doubts, helps fill in the gaps that the software was not able to fill in, checks the results of self-assessment tests in a qualitative, not simply quantitative fashion. Above all, the human teacher frees the student from the stiff relationship with a machine that is not capable of predicting all possible communicative behaviours. More and more frequently, a mediation between self-learning and participation in an Italian course is attempted. In this case, one may talk about distance teaching, but the expression is not adequate: in fact, this is indeed self-learning, guided by a teacher who is at a distance from the students. This model is based on connecting several computers through a modem that allows for written interaction in real time, on screen; in given instances, a telephone is added to the modem, so that pupil and the teacher at distance might communicate orally. A qualitatively much better strategy for distance learning of Italian can be based on video teleconferencing: through computers, telephones and video cameras, class interaction is achieved even among distant people" (Balboni 115).

Many training/teaching companies and organizations, as a consequence of the recent health crisis, have transformed their offer of courses, previously based on presence, into a distance-based education. In the case of theoretical subjects, the distance teaching mode does not cause major problems, with the exception of those typical for e-learning courses, i.e. a more chances for distraction (Dörnyei), shorter teaching times and a lesser degree of interaction within the classroom (Emanuel, Nitti). As regards, however, the teaching of languages, the situation seems much more complicated (Mezzadri): one of the most critical issues consists precisely in the development of communicative competence. This implies a de facto interaction, and distance learning is not always capable of satisfying the need for interaction that is associated with language acquisition. According to Porcelli, the technological level of the teaching activity is one of the main criteria that may be employed in order to classify an activity within the didactic practice: "the techniques that imply the use of devices and technological tools [...] can be proposed, pending the availability and the adequate functioning of the technological supports" (Porcelli 220).

Furthermore, glottotechnologies can be suitable at the level of language acquisition, as they enable, thanks to the high rate of perceptive salience and involvement of the student, to effectively stimulate the brain and memory. In fact, research in language teaching and

educational linguistics has shown that acquiring a language is a process that is favoured by the activation of both cerebral hemispheres, generally following a sequence that begins from the whole and reaches the level of analysis (Danesi). Since the process of acquiring a language is very complex and articulated on the neurolinguistic level, and it requires continuous connections between the two hemispheres, glottotechnologies can be particularly helpful: In fact, they allow to represent visual and interactive elements, favouring the exposure to the input through more dynamic mediators than the iconic sources printed on a book, accompanied by cartoons, as generally occurs in traditional teaching. The linguistic input can thus be proposed to the group of learners in its totality and dynamism, as a reproduction of a real communicative event: “a language has a cultural and social dimension and must therefore be understood as mediation of complex knowledge and variously structured social and cultural behaviours, which are essential to the communicative system” (Zuanelli Sonino 11).

With regard to the critical factors that are associated with glottotechnology, one that is particularly relevant in distance learning is the feeling of insuperable difficulty in using the technology or the false belief that technology itself can replace the teaching practice (Nitti). As far as the use of glottotechnologies in class is concerned, there are some criticalities we need to be aware of: teachers and educational institutions can be resistant to the introduction of technological innovations (Santalucia), because they require time for getting acquainted with them and their use might end up altering or disrupting the routine structure of teaching practice. Another risk is related to the opposite attitude, according to which glottotechnology may be regarded as omnipotent and omnipresent; this attitude can be observed in those who tend to believe that technology is able to solve and represent the language lesson. The first two specifically pertain to teachers and training institutions; however, also the students may believe that technology is able to replace the mental effort needed to understand and study a language (many applications more or less explicitly claim to be able to replace to the student, especially for memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules), or be computer illiterate (Nitti).

In fact, glottotechnologies “are agents of a new cultural, social and existential sensitivity” (Maragliano 17). Furthermore, the lack of a declarative or procedural knowledge of the technological tools can be one of the problems for those who attend a primary or secondary school class, though in this case the students are young and belong to the category of digital natives; moreover, “it is in the first years of school that quality language teaching should be

encouraged, so as to enable younger students to acquire better skills” (Favata 71). Therefore, it is by no means enough to be part of the age group of the digital natives to be able to use an application or hardware for educational use: a digital native, in fact, can easily make use of some applications, but may find difficulties while using others. Thus, glottotechnology is the harbinger of that new cultural and social sensitivity previously described by Maragliano.

Based on the above, we decided to conduct a research focused on the training needs of the teaching staff (Facchetti, Grosso, Nitti), looking also into the changes that have affected part of the Italian educational system during the health crisis triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Language teaching through distance learning is marked by some peculiarities (Facchetti, Nitti) which, as seen above, are related to the subject at hand. Teaching a language means developing communicative competence (Balboni) and, on the basis of an autonomous level of command of the subject, it is surely possible to organize and manage distance courses, starting from a common level of basic communicative skills. As far as the more advanced levels of learning are concerned (Selinker), distance teaching certainly does not pose any relevant problems, apart from those possibly linked to the effectiveness of the interaction provided by the platforms, by the applications, and by the teachers themselves. Some platforms (Zoom, Moodle, Microsoft Teams, etc.), in fact, allow to create “rooms” suitable for the work of two or more students included in a class group (Zanola 147). The criticality that arises in such cases pertains to the monitoring of the work carried out by these groups (Balboni) and this is why, as highlighted above, starting from an autonomous level of command of the language inevitably leads to a lower number of mistakes. On the other hand, it is the elementary levels of language command that cause the greatest problems with regards to distance learning. The needs of the students who are particularly limited in their basic language skills within heterogeneous groups (Nitti) emerge consistently, and this might end up jeopardising most of the teaching goals. The telematic means is not helpful in controlling all sources of dispersion that may occur at the lowest levels of language learning (Danesi). There’s a feature of the learning environment, which can facilitate or get in the way of the effectiveness of the didactic activity: “the configuration of the learning environment, which is fundamental in this direction. The traditional classroom environment is intended for teaching, and it needs to be reconfigured to become a space for learning in a community and collaborative context. The setting must be innovative, facilitating, and above all it should be encouraging in terms of being and doing ‘together’, fostering team collaboration in a

constructivist perspective. The learning setting should activate cognitive and social processes as well as stimulate curiosity, research, comparison and respect toward ‘the other’; it should also enable to carry out collaborative activities under the guidance and monitoring of the teacher” (Cinganotto, Cuccurullo 36).

## **2. Distance teaching and learning and communicative competence**

As reported above, distance learning was a compulsory choice for all schools of all levels in Italy during the health crisis triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. We have also clarified that language teaching is not devoid from the issues associated with distance teaching and learning, and this applies particularly to the very low levels of interlanguage. Therefore, “the health crisis has accelerated a transformation process in language teaching, which is presently undergoing a radical transformation. In the Internet era, it is inevitable that the traditional language classroom, where teachers and students are in direct and dialogic contact, is getting increasingly replaced by the virtual classroom, in which the relationship between the two is mediated by the screen, or even eliminated” (Danesi 154).

In fact, the acquisition of a language other than the native one is a complicated process: a second or foreign language “is acquired according to different stages in the learner’s competence, that develop over time” (Chini 27). Within these stages, some production rules can be identified, which generally lead to the fixation of linguistic structures, and can lead to errors as well.

According to Selinker, an interlanguage is based on cognitive processes as well as “the transfer from an L1 of lexemes and morphosyntactic, phonological and textual rules; learning strategies inherent to the linguistic behaviour of a learner, aimed at simplification; the transfer of training associated with the input plan that the learner is subjected to during a language course; the communication strategies, through which the learner interacts with native speakers; the hyper-generalization of the rules learned, and the fossilization, or the tendency of the learners to arrest their linguistic progress below the level (of full competence) of native speakers. The variability of the interlanguages accounts for the lack of a common and unitary theory of learning second and foreign languages that can be globally and universally shared, as opposed to what is the case for the description of the mother tongue’s acquisitional mechanisms” (Nitti 26).

Notwithstanding the above, research in language teaching and in the related disciplines (linked to language sciences), has undoubtedly accomplished meaningful objectives, by focusing on

different dimensions, such as phonology, lexicology, morphology, syntax, textuality, pragmatics, environmental factors, cognitive and affective aspects, the role of language teaching, the relationship between language and culture.

Therefore, the development of textuality is one of the most delicate goals of linguistic development: the text can be regarded as “a linguistic production created with the intention and the effect of passing on a particular communicative content to one or more recipients” (Cerruti, Cini 3).

Furthermore, in view of the proposed definition, the text can be conceived as a linguistic production, which is unconnected with the channel through which it is mediated; as a matter of fact, texts can be written, oral or transmitted by way of other communication means (Lorenzetti).

Textual competence, therefore, may be described as the ability of the recipient to establish “relationships between elements, based on the knowledge of global cognitive schemes [...], to integrate the meaning of the communication by connecting what is being said to the unspoken [...], to recognize the type of text and its peculiarities and, on the basis of all these elements, to configure a system of expectations that facilitates the process of interpretation. In other words, to know if what is being said represents a sentence, what we need to do its only make reference to our linguistic competence, while in order to decide whether a sequence of sentences represents a text requires knowing the context and also relying on extra-linguistic elements. The textual competence, together with the sociolinguistic and pragmatic ones, integrates the linguistic one *stricto sensu*, thus forming the more general communicative competence” (Palermo 29).

The above definition associates textual competence with the broadest communicative competence, contributing to defining language as a means for human expression and interaction, organized through multiple “factors that act concurrently” (Nitti 76).

Communicative competence represents one of the most valuable and useful concepts in language teaching and educational linguistics, as it includes different sub competences:

- 1) Linguistic competence – the knowledge of the system of language rules;
- 2) Sociolinguistic competence – the ability of the speakers to use and understand the diatopic, diastratic, diaphasic, diamesic and diachronic varieties of the language;
- 3) Pragmatic competence – the ability to properly understand the communicative purposes of the messages;

- 4) Interactional competence – the capability of managing communication rituals as well as the role of silence;
- 5) Cultural competence – the faculty of recognizing the cultural references of the language in question;
- 6) Proxemic and gestural skills – the faculties that pertain to the management and interpretation of distances, gestures and clothing according to the cultural profile (Nitti).

With particular regard to the intersection of the different sub-competences and the consequent development of communicative competence, within the Italian school system it often happens that the teaching of a language focuses on literature or on the general understanding of texts, neglecting the strengthening of competences that should deal with out-of-school reality and the development of other basic and integrated skills.

In fact, language teaching courses and materials should be structured, by always keeping into account the role of communicative competence with respect to language learning and teaching. The proposal of “real-life” materials may be regarded as a paramount method for increasing communication skills, because emphasis would be placed on products that were not created for educational purposes, but for aims that correspond to actual communication needs.

“Real-life” materials, however, can be tricky to use, as the linguistic input may result to be too advanced if compared to the development of the inter-language levels of the students.

The role played by the teacher consists, in these cases, in making the material suitable for teaching purposes, i.e. in the arrangement of didactic tools compatible with the objectives of the course and with the language levels of the learners (Nitti).

### **3. The research**

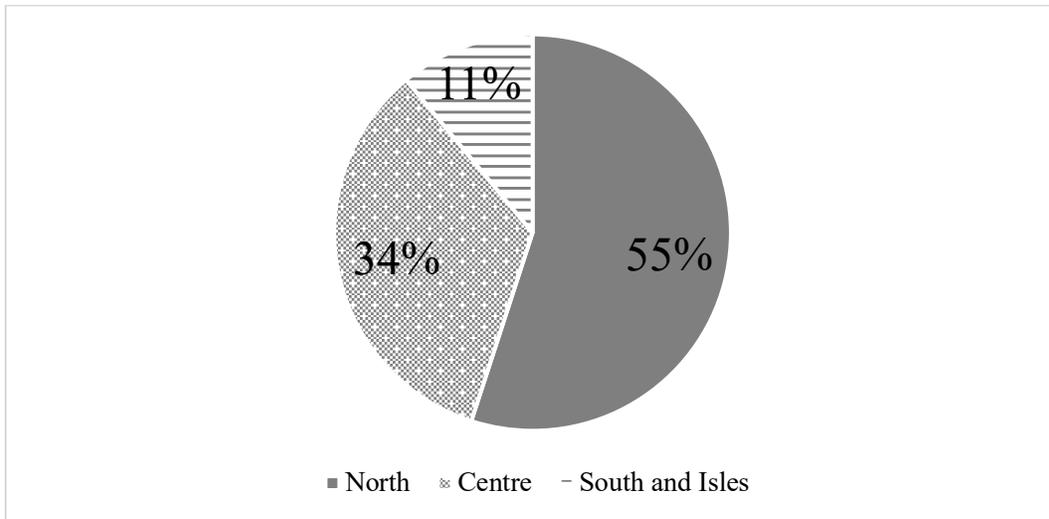
The research was focused on a sample of 600 teachers of modern languages in Italy and was conducted in early June 2020, by gathering the opinions of the teachers about the most widely used distance teaching tools, in terms of language teaching: “language education, in fact, is characterized by a continuous study of the dynamics that take place during learning, so that the didactic action can have a positively influence on the cognitive processes of the learner” (Favata 72).

The sample, selected from the database of the Intercultural Centre of the City of Turin and using the platforms dedicated to teaching on the major social media (*Facebook, LinkedIn*), was invited to fill out an electronic questionnaire (Nitti), which included 17 questions and took less than 15 minutes to complete. The choice of a brief questionnaire was made in order to avoid lengthening the time for compilation and, in doing so, saving the teachers' time. In fact, the choice of a reduced set of questions does not invalidate in any way the discussion derived from data analysis, as the research is exploratory in nature and linguistic phenomena "as such cannot be considered the object of research; the researcher's task is to extract some fragments of reality, in this case linguistic data, to pose his questions to them" (D'Agostino 242). The matter of the complexity of linguistic data, in fact, is thoroughly clarified in the scientific literature: "data of this kind, obtained through surveys in which respondents are asked to report how they behave linguistically in certain situations [...] require a certain caution, as they are related to self-declarations" (Berruto 23). Beyond the above highlighted critical issues, "it is a matter of setting parameters that will help define what can be used as empirical evidence, i.e. what, in the framework of that investigation, represents a linguistic datum. Therefore, whatever the choice made, linguistic have to be looked for and produced (rather than just gathered) or, more precisely, built through a set of procedures that need to be stated and made explicit each time" (Berruto 23).

In regard to surveys on language teaching practices, generally "sociolinguistic questionnaires are used to analyse learners' and teachers' interlanguages or languages, the perception of linguistic uses and the practices of language teaching" (Nitti 34).

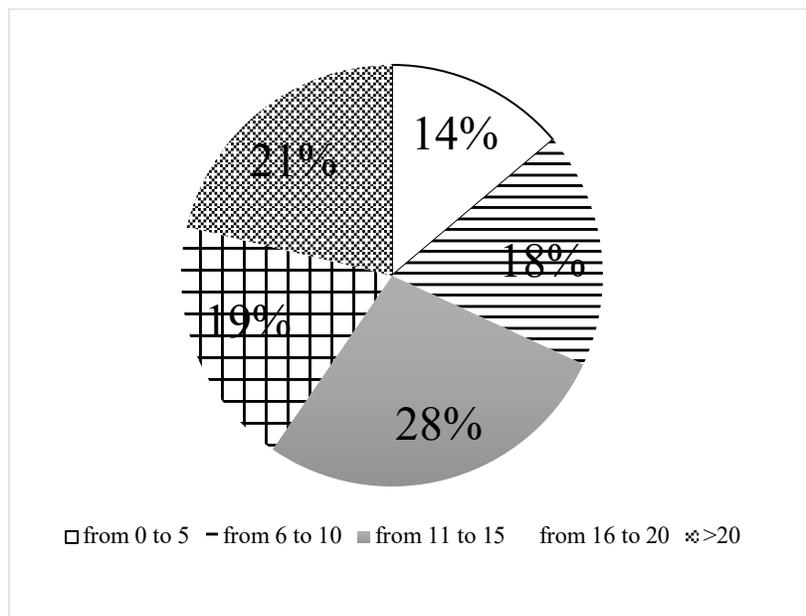
As is the case with any research-related tool, the questionnaire is based on the characteristics of the investigation and the processes under investigation: during the preliminary phase of each research, often the most complex one, researchers should clarify their objectives, and formulate the questions from which they need to receive answers. It is at this step that the general questions and the articulation of the more specific issues need to be made explicit in the clearest and most detailed fashion possible, in the framework of what is commonly referred to as "the research design" (D'Agostino 242).

As regards this survey, as has been clarified, the design of the research deals with language teaching practices relating to distance learning.



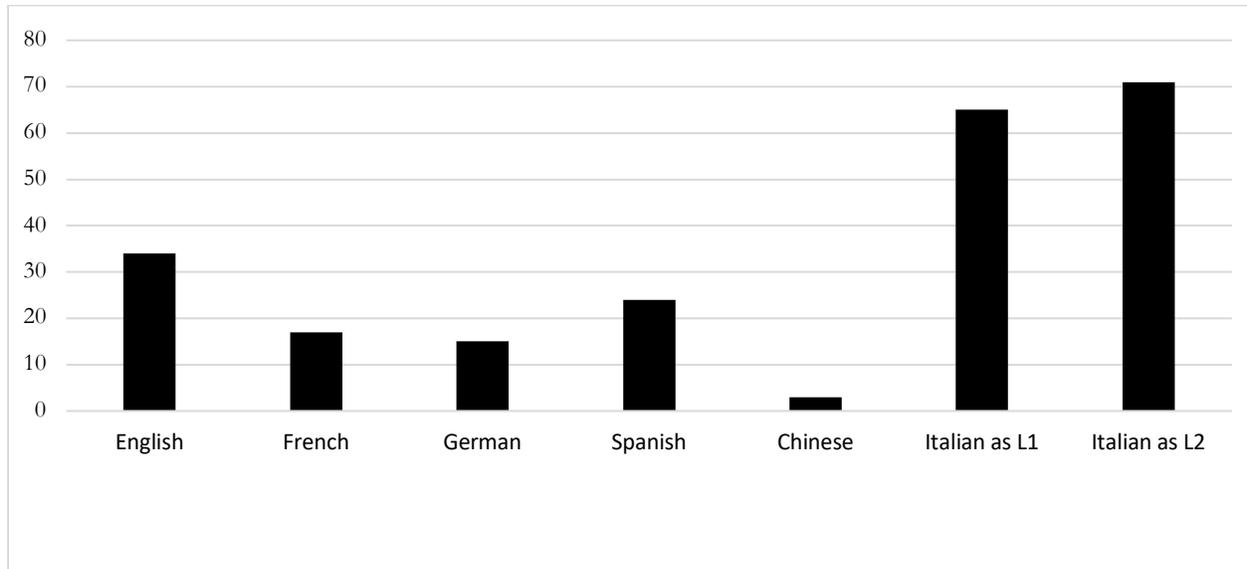
Graph 1 – The sample’s geographical distribution

Graph 1 shows the geographical distribution of the teaching staff; most of the informants who responded to the questionnaire come from central and northern Italy.



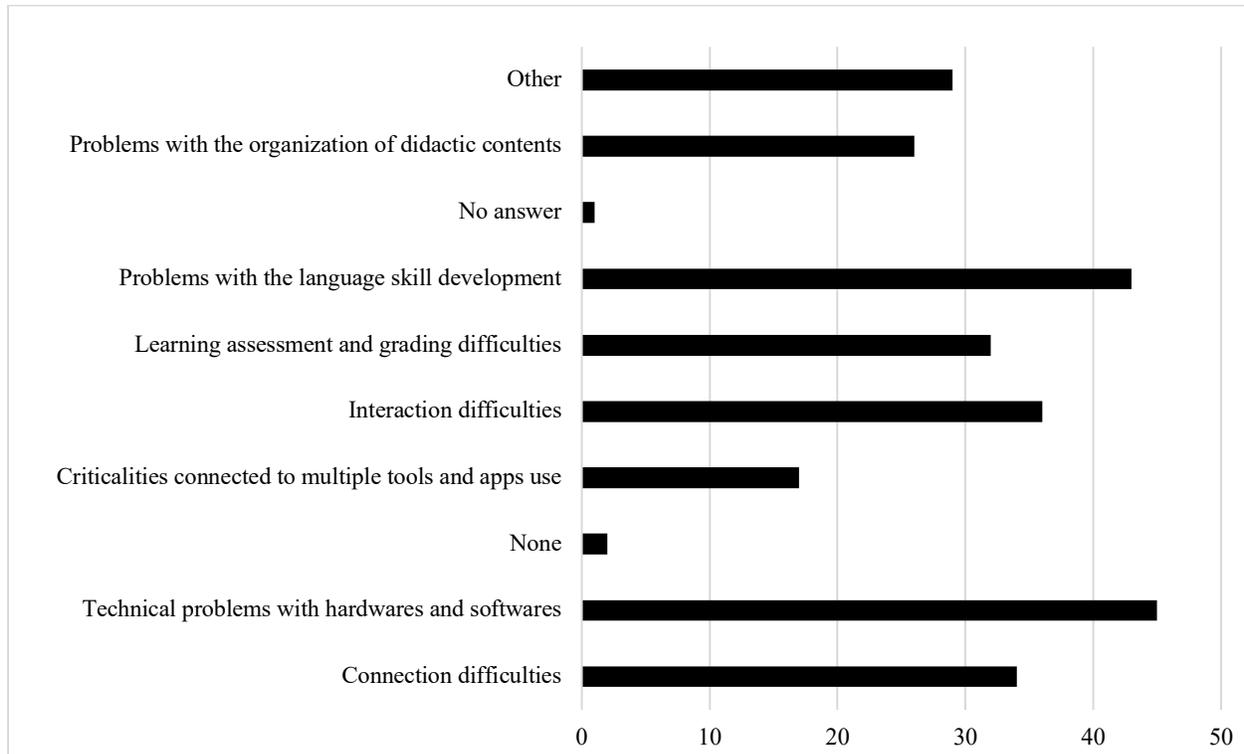
Graph 2 - The respondents’ years on the job

Graph 2, on the other hand, displays the respondents’ years on the job; these data are particularly relevant in terms of the criticalities associated with the use of platforms and the types of teaching activities privileged during remote activities.



Graph 3 - The languages taught by the respondents

Graph 3 shows the languages taught by the respondents, considering that some teach two or more foreign languages. From a methodological standpoint, we have decided to include Italian as a second language and as a mother tongue in the gamut of the examined languages, considering, however, that the type of language taught is not in correlation with either the privileged activities or the critical issues highlighted, with the exception of the teaching of Italian as L1.



Graph 4 - The criticalities connected with distance teaching, highlighted by the sample

Graph 4 shows the prevailing critical issues linked to language teaching; it is worth observing that the major problem, in addition to connection difficulties, pertains to the familiarity of both the teaching staff and the class groups with respect to glottotechnologies (Caon, Serragiotto). After all, the instability of Internet-mediated connections is one of the characteristics of distance learning, especially in case of synchronous modality. It would be useful to explain the strong and weak points of the used means to the students in order to avoid mistakes and to not create false expectations (Favaro). Preparing the class group to loss of connections, unexpected updates or other difficulties associated with the IT tools, can only facilitate the teaching conditions, by fostering the introduction of behaviour protocols. Should the context require it – as is the case for example in compulsory schooling – it would be necessary to establish an effective communication not only with the class group, but also with the families because there is no guarantee that children's and teenagers' parents are computer literate and able to support the students satisfactorily. Critical issues related to those family contexts in which parents worked and were unable to assist their children in distance activities or simply lacked the tools and skills

suitable for supporting them, are among the most serious problems highlighted by teachers (94%) during the health emergency. Another factor that would greatly improve the quality of distance learning is the management of groups and individuals with regard to the clarification of communication methods, both with the teacher and among peers: “regarding the proper use of language teaching technologies during a lesson there aren’t any universal rules and models established *a priori*; in every learning environment, common sense, training and the teacher’s experience contribute to guiding the teaching action and the choice of the quantity and quality of teaching technologies with respect to the educational purposes” (Nitti 59).

As clarified below, the most significant challenge that distance learning entails is the opportunity of going beyond traditional teaching (Vannini) based on written text: “the traditional school system is strongly based on text and, from a linguistic point of view, this choice is not an improper one, as the majority of communicative events are texts. Discrepancies with respect to real communication practices arise when the school examines some text types – few of them – which become a standard and a paradigmatic example for all the others. Text-oriented teaching allows to develop first of all reading and writing, leaving little room for understanding and speech production. One of the compensation tools used during text teaching is the construction of communicative activities starting from the text; it can become the background of a communication scenario, it can be understood as a dialogue based on a real situation, as a song, as a script for drama activities; we go from the concept of written text to that of audio text. When language teaching is directed at different text types, referred to concrete contexts which take into account both written and audio texts, a multidirectional lesson model is proposed, which is open to the varieties of the language and attentive to the sociolinguistic contributions.

In order to bring the language lesson closer to real communication contexts, it is advisable to insist more on understanding and speech production: in fact, languages have evolved first and foremost to be spoken and it is on the level of a spoken language that the competence of the speakers is primarily fulfilled” (Nitti 44).

#### **4. Communicative competence in language teaching during the health emergency**

The respondents that took part in the questionnaire, described in the previous paragraph, have pointed out that the main difficulties were in reaching some students and developing verbal interaction, considering that, as far as foreign language teaching is concerned, “the balance of

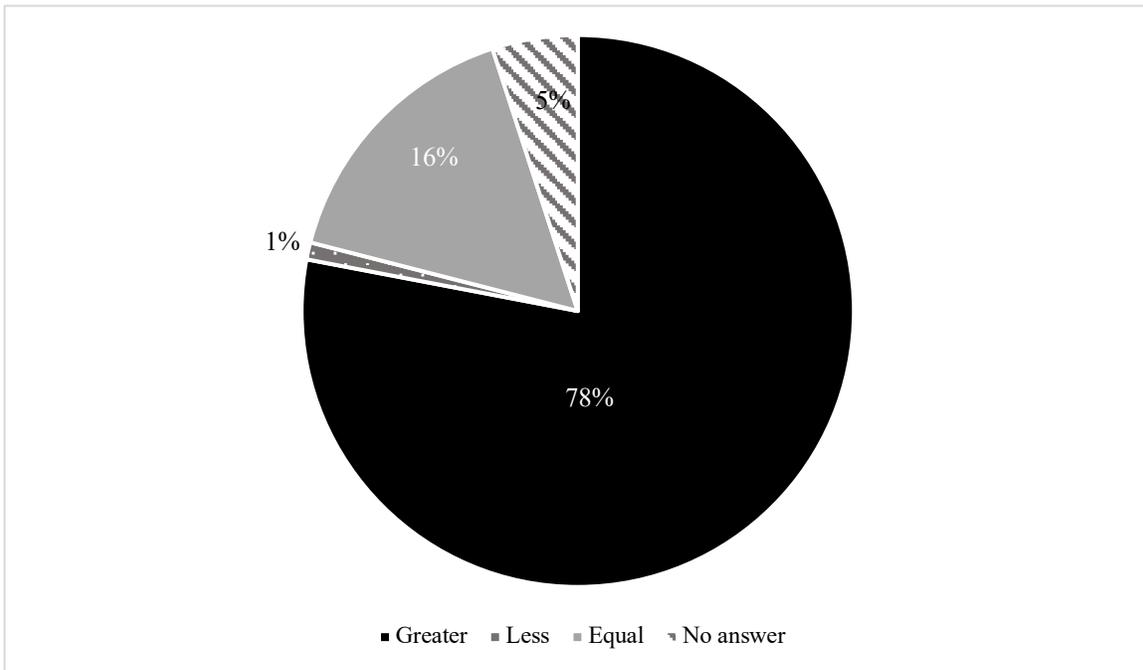
basic and integrated skills is one of the most complex aspects among those that are related to the management of a lesson and a teaching unit” (Nitti 101).

Indeed, an “[...] important characteristic of the network environment is the fact that the medium of communication is the ‘written language’ and that, given the permanent character of writing if compared to orality, this can cause shyness or resistance to take part in the debate.

Furthermore, written communication, more easily than face-to-face communication, can give rise to difficulties in understanding, since, unlike oral communication, it cannot make use of contextual and extraverbal elements: the context of the spatial and temporal situation in which communication takes place; para- and extra-linguistic elements such as glances, gestures, emphasis, pauses, laughter; even the look of the people with whom one interacts” (Ciliberti 136).

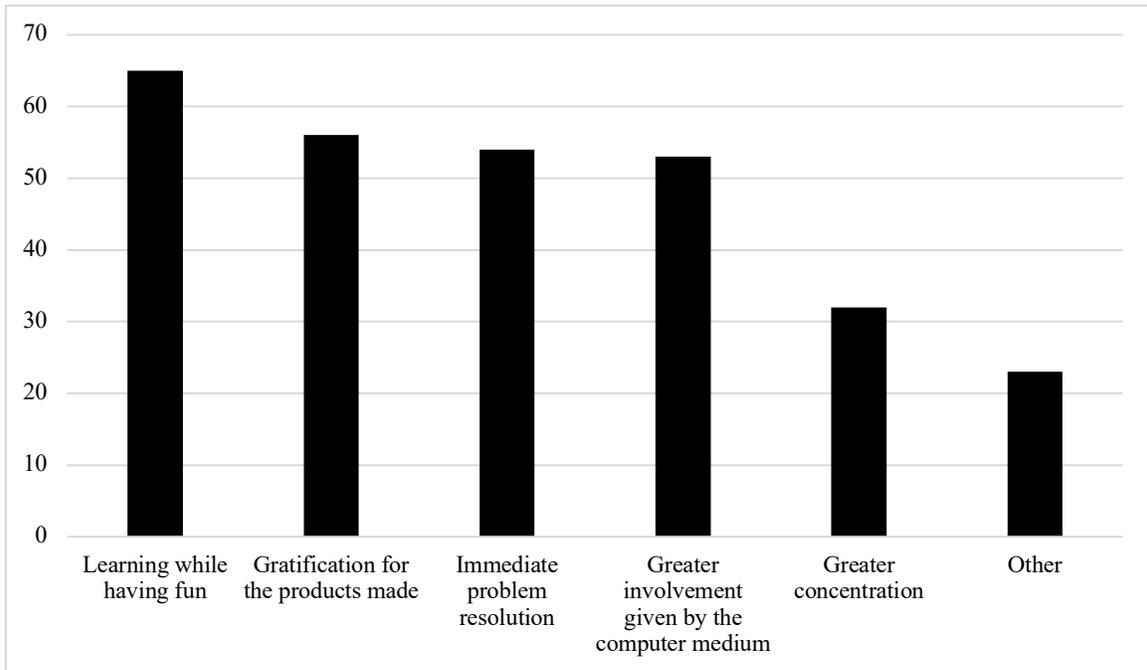
If, on the one hand, technological progress has made it possible to give more space to oral communication through platforms that allow to conduct lessons in synchronous mode, through webcam and microphone, on the other hand the difficulty for a teacher to supervise the group works is considerable (Trentin), especially in regard to the evaluation of communication activities (Coppola). In fact, “a common characteristic of media tools is the possibility of combining images, writings and audio, thus creating a stimulating environment, though at high risk of dispersion” (Baldi, Savoia 204).

It is certainly possible to ask students to perform dialogues in small groups, arranged in different rooms within the platform, but it can be problematic to control all single rooms globally, since a teacher cannot be present in every room at the same time. Face-to-face teaching, on the contrary, allows the teacher to supervise the students’ work through specific group management strategies (Nitti).



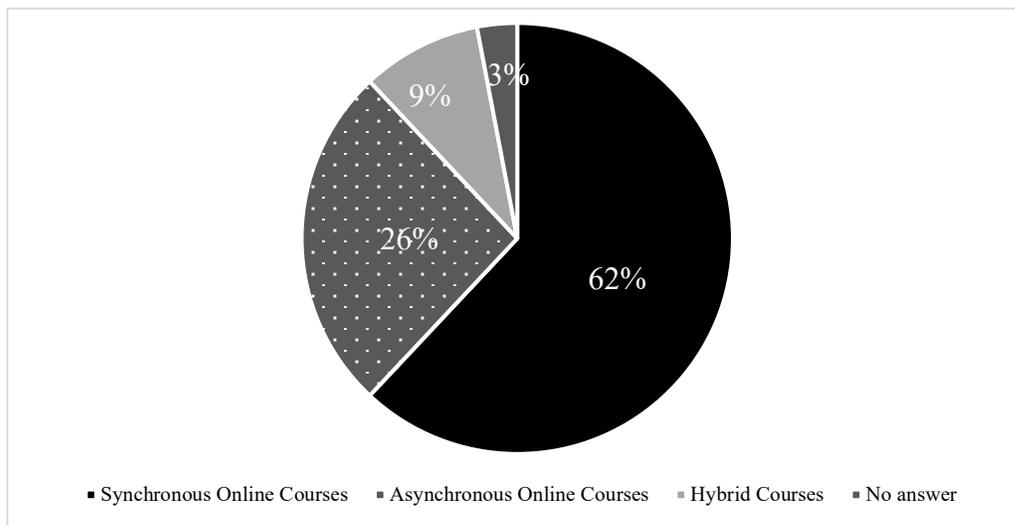
Graph 5 – Time needed to prepare a distance-learning lesson compared to a face-to-face lesson

Graph 5 shows how the absolute majority of the sample who answered the questionnaire declares to spend much more time to prepare a distance-learning language lesson rather than a face-to-face lesson. This is not particularly surprising, because, although distance learning allows teachers to save the travel time that they may need to reach their education agencies, it requires particular attention to the platforms and methods used to reach and interact with students (Maragliano).



Graph 6 – The potential benefits of distance learning for a learner

Among the main potential benefits of *online* language learning, the informants listed the increase of motivation (fun while learning, satisfaction about products, greater involvement and concentration) and the immediacy related to problem solving. These data provide significant food for thought for the development of motivation concerning face-to-face learning (Diadori);



in fact, it is worth noting that technology is only one of the means for managing the learning process (Calvani) and it is not more or less aprioristically motivating.

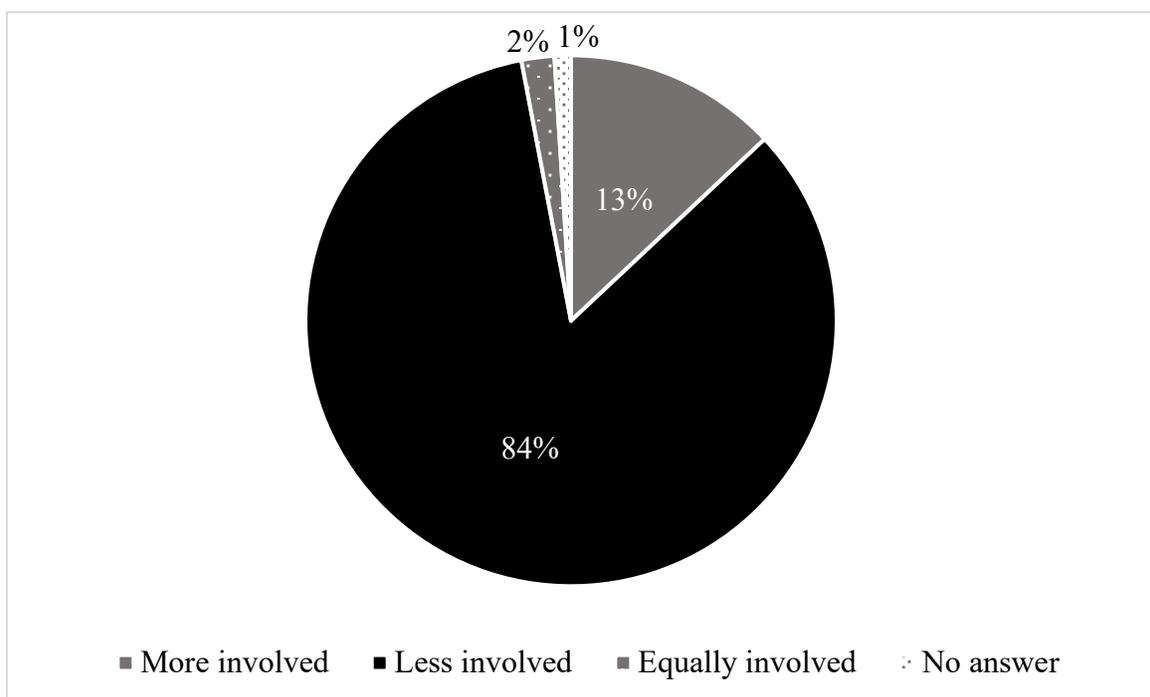
## Graph 7 –The types of lesson offered during the health emergency

Graph 7 shows the types of lesson offered during the health emergency; it clearly emerges that most informants (62%) have given preference to the synchronous mode, while fewer (26%) have given preference to the asynchronous one.

If the management of both modes (9%) does not necessarily cause problems in terms of language teaching, the preference for the sole asynchronous mode does not allow the participants to attend and interact with the teacher, to figure out possible doubts and the format seems to be similar to that of other nonlinguistic disciplines. Indeed, the figure is particularly remarkable with regard to those who teach languages in middle and high schools (76% of those who answered “asynchronous”) and seems to represent an actual school policy.

The advantage of giving a lesson in asynchronous mode is the possibility for the students to have the material at disposal at their convenience, without necessarily being connected at a scheduled time and date. In fact, this mode is particularly suitable for scarcely reachable students, with connection problems, but it's equally true that a lesson in synchronous mode can anyway be planned, recorded and used as asynchronous material, making sure of having all authorizations regarding *privacy* and data-protection (Nitti). Furthermore, most of the informants (65%) who have answered by stating that they carry on teaching in asynchronous mode, have basically focused on grammatical aspects of the taught language or on presenting critical analyses of literary texts (34%). With regard to the latter described aspect, it is worth pointing out that “the fact that some levels of education are not attentive enough to the possibilities offered by proposing drama activities to develop the integrated ability of the dialogue means that teaching is not oriented towards the increase of communication competence” (Nitti 109). As previously seen, the integrated ability of the dialogue is the pivot of the communication competence, because it involves all the subcompetences that characterize it. Regarding the planning of recorded lessons on grammar topics, to be provided in asynchronous mode, it would be appropriate to distinguish activities that are intended as a moment of reflection or of expansion of previously debated concepts from language lessons intended *de facto* as pure moments of grammar explanation, given that “a language lesson [...] should not be perceived by the student as the grammar lesson *tout court*, with all its rules to be studied, but as a moment of reflection on languages (included the student's L1, even if he or she isn't a native Italian-speaker) that are

being studied at school. In fact, for the second foreign language, the risk of being considered as something additional, sometimes as something imposed [...] is high; the proposed activities may even risk not being appreciated because considered boring or childish [...]. The opportunity of leading adolescent students, who feel already mature [...], to reflect on the functioning of the language or the reason of given teaching choices, will surely be a way to keep their attention awake and prove to them the usefulness of certain activities that are held in class” (Favata 68-69). Favata’s considerations can be referred also to teaching intended for other learner profiles (Diadori).



Graph 8 – Rate of students’ involvement according to the sample

Graph 8 shows the rate of students’ involvement according to the informants and the data apparently seem to be in contradiction with the ones shown in Graph 2, which however presents only the potential benefits and teachers’ expectations. About expectations regarding technologies for educational purposes and in confirmation of the data emerging from the survey, Ciliberti reports that “a risk, which affects rather the educational institution than the single student, is that of placing too much trust in them” (Ciliberti 139). The data in Graph 4 instead present the outcomes of educational actions carried out through distance learning and the absolute majority

of the sample reports a lower rate of involvement than in face-to-face learning. A student who avails himself of distance learning actually needs to be motivated and supported at home, especially if he or she is a kid or a teenager (Galliani). If the conditions for motivation and support are missing (Dörnyei), and if there is a lack of financial resources to resort to distance learning, a dispersion inevitably occurs (Torsani). Even those students who are in favorable conditions for distance learning, however, seem to be less involved, probably because they are not accustomed to a long-distance learning mode or because they find themselves in a situation of greater emergency, where the ways of managing the lessons have suddenly changed without any educational intervention that could facilitate the transition.

Definitely, the limits of distance learning are often recurring in the scientific literature and can be summarized on the basis of two points of criticism: “traditional language teaching has achieved great results so far, despite the unceasing critical opinions about it, which are complaints rather than actual attempts of theoretical deconstruction of the classroom procedures, and [...] E-learning approaches, such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), are proving less effective than previously thought. In this latter case, strange as it may seem, the reason is that the learners themselves ask for the physical presence of a teacher in order to address the different tasks required to learn a specific subject, in a better way” (Danesi 154).

If the first topic pointed out by Danesi leaves quite perplexed, especially in light of the interventions of the GISCEL group<sup>1</sup>, which has been active since the 1970s and aims to go beyond traditional teaching, particularly connected to the explicit and exclusive teaching of grammar and literary language, it cannot be denied that language teaching technologies “will never replace the physical-emotional impact of the teacher on the student, since this impact cannot be achieved through virtual means” (Danesi 154).

Danesi himself, in addition to the above, does not shy away from discussing the value of language teaching technologies within the scope of teaching modern languages: “obviously, new technologies offer a wide range of teaching tools that can be found in digital spaces and can be easily adapted in a bimodal way, without undermining, however, the traditional classroom lesson. Blogs, wikis, podcasts, social media, etc. allow the student to have access to authentic,

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<sup>1</sup> GISCEL – Intervention and Study Group in the Field of Linguistic Education of SLI – Linguistic Society of Italy; ref. <https://giscel.it/> (last consulted on 19/11/2020).

contextualized and often customized material. Given that today's students have a very good familiarity with this digital world, they surely won't lack for motivation" (Danesi 155).

About the motivation topic, as seen before, we wish to underscore that technology is a means that does not automatically imply a motivational increase, especially when the student or the teacher cannot fully handle it. This aspect is particularly critical for primary alphabetization courses addressed to elementary school pupils or non-native, illiterate adults, who have a low level of schooling (Nitti).

### **Conclusions**

The data obtained from the survey show how the management of language courses based on distance learning has proven extremely unsuccessful, though some teaching conditions that are potentially interesting for the future have been observed. Good practices are not missing for sure (Favaro): their learning outcomes should be taken into consideration and become models to come up with efficient teaching formats (Rastelli). We have determined that advanced-level language courses as well as literary language courses have been efficient and the linguistic autonomy of the student seems to be the *sine qua non* condition to plan courses, entirely managed on a distance learning basis (Villarini). In fact, "e-learning and m(obile)-learning represent learning modes which are based on the learner's autonomy and not anchored in a specific place and in presence" (Baldi, Savoia 204). Conversely, the possibility to integrate face-to-face courses with contents stemming from distance learning, can certainly help establish more efficient language teaching strategies (Mezzadri), also for not-autonomous language levels (lower than level B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

Another important aspect of the survey concerns the necessity of training the teaching staff to use language technologies (Facchetti, Grosso, Nitti) and to teach language for specific purposes, especially the one that is linked to computer science (Ballarin), within the scope of a wider training update related to the career (Emanuel, Nitti).

In conclusion, we finally highlight that "only by becoming culturally 'acclimated' to their new working conditions, the teachers will be able to reduce the digital distance – the *digital disconnect* – that separates them from their students. In fact, while the youths are becoming more and more accustomed to the use of new media and the services offered by the Net, many teachers

are not as favourable towards them, considering such tools a limit rather than a resource. In any case, this resource – it has to be pointed out – does not exclude the role of the traditional teaching practices, in “particular that of imparting knowledge. [...] The opinions about this topic are the most various, but before discouraging the implementation of new technologies in school practices, before ignoring the changes that they inevitably are bringing about in the life of each one of us and, notably, in the life of the youths who make extensive use of those resources, we consider it important for teachers (or future teachers) to form opinions that are reasoned rather than generated by anxieties and fear, feelings which often emerge toward any form of innovation” (Ciliberti 138-139).

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