

Self-determination, self-efficacy, and attribution in FL online learning: An exploratory survey with university students during the pandemic emergency

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Abstract

Investigating foreign language motivation is a primary concern within the field of online learning. As the COVID-19 outbreak has determined the shift from face-to-face to distance learning, the past year has seen the rapid spread of internet technologies in the academic sector. This study aims to investigate the effects that these rapid changes are having on FL motivation, especially as regards autonomous and controlled motivation, demotivation, self-efficacy, and attributions for success or failure in Foreign Language (FL) online courses. To shine new light on these issues, this study presents the data collected through an exploratory survey with 76 University students in Italy attending FL courses as part of their curriculum of studies. Results indicate that students' participation in the FL academic activities is determined by both controlled and autonomous motives. Only a minority of them experienced demotivation in online learning. As regards self-efficacy, students learning FLs online seem to experience a high sense of self-reliance, consistently with previous studies in this field. In line with this self-efficacious attitude to learning online, respondents appear to attribute their success or failure in the FL online courses mostly to dispositional factors.

Keywords

FL motivation – FL online learning – Self-efficacy – Self-determination – Attribution

1. Online language learning

Any article focussing on online learning starts with a consideration of terminology. E-learning, distance learning, and online learning are all terms used, often synonymously, to refer to the phenomenon of learning online (for a review of these terms see Whittaker 2013: 11-12). In this article, the term *FL online learning* will be used to refer to Foreign Language (FL) learning which takes place fully online, without the face-to-face component, and exclusively within the context of formal academic courses. This fully online approach determines new significant challenges, especially in terms of course development and evaluation, and teaching and learning roles.

Online tuition offered by universities in the pre-COVID era ranged from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and virtual reality laboratories to those courses initiated and prepared by individual academics (Kim 2016; Kustandi et al. 2020). Since lockdowns were imposed, universities as well as other educational institutions, have resorted to online learning, reckoned to be the panacea of the period, no longer an option but a necessity (Dhawan 2020). According to Zwain (2019), the advances in information technology have made it possible to continue the learning process during the lockdown following the COVID-19 outbreak.

The technology referred to by Zwain (2019) is known as *Learning Management System* (LMS). Throughout this paper, the term Learning Management System will refer to a learning software that “utilizes information technology equipped with internet and multimedia telecommunications facilities (graphics, audio, video) in delivering material and interaction

between instructors and learners” (Tubagus et al. 2020). LMSs can include resources and learning materials, as well as opportunities for participants’ interaction such as chats and forums. As Hockly (2015) suggests, in LMSs the *asynchronous* mode of learning (involving learners and teachers working separately at different times) is often complemented by *synchronous* classes (teachers and learners working together at the same time using the internet) for example, via a videoconferencing tool.

In this regard, Freddi (2021) reflects on the adjustments made to foreign language teaching during the health crisis in Italy, resulting in a combination of asynchronous and synchronous tools. In her case study, Freddi (2021) mentions Moodle as an LMS and Zoom as a videoconferencing component to which the University of Pavia resorted to continue the academic activities. Commenting on lesson planning and delivery, Freddi observes: “Kiro¹ is a dynamic e-learning platform that offers features such as sharing documents and links to websites, posting news to participants, assigning and correcting homework, and more generally managing the whole course” (Freddi 2021: 284). Freddi also identifies some videoconferencing tools complementing the language course, i.e., Skype for Business, Google Meet, and Zoom (Freddi 2021: 283).

In the same vein, Luporini (2020) notes that LMSs were already in use at universities before the pandemic emergency. However, the extent to which these resources had been deployed depended on the teacher’s specific needs or decisions. In her seminal article about an English Linguistics course at the University of Bologna during the health crisis in 2020, Luporini suggests that the LMS was combined with a synchronous meeting tool to compensate for the lack of interaction between the teacher and the students. Together, Freddi’s and Luporini’s studies indicate that academic courses in fully online mode have benefited from both an LMS as a repository of course materials and as a platform for asynchronous communication, and a videoconferencing component allowing for simultaneous connections.

With this context in mind, in this paper we present an exploratory study conducted with University students attending FL courses delivered fully online after the COVID-19 outbreak. We analysed FL motivation in online learning and investigated whether the pandemic emergency has negatively impacted students’ self-determination, self-efficacy, and attribution compared to previous studies before this emergency.

2. Motivation in FL online learning

Foreign language learning at university was no exception from the constraints and difficulty of reorganizing academic tuition in a fully online mode. According to Egbert (2020), teachers had little time to re-design lessons and activities to ensure efficient language learning and create a positive and engaging environment. Considering that the COVID-19 outbreak has determined an unexpected transformation of the teaching and learning process, investigating students’ motivation is a primary concern within FL research.

Motivation has long-held roots in Ryan and Deci’s Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci et al. 1991; Ryan, Deci 2000). SDT presents motivation as a multidimensional construct, encompassing self-regulation, self-determination, and autonomy. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), motivation operates on a continuum from a-motivation to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. A-motivation and intrinsic motivation constitute the two opposite ends of the continuum: a-motivation is considered as lacking the intention to act; conversely, intrinsic motivation is represented by the inherent enjoyment and satisfaction of doing an activity, deriving from an internal locus of control. In the middle of the SDT continuum stands extrinsic

¹ Kiro is a customised version of the LMS Moodle.

motivation, which is characterised by various regulatory styles (external, introjected, identified, integrated) and loci of causality (from external to internal).

Central to SDT is the distinction between two forms of motivation: autonomous and controlled (Deci, Ryan 1985b; Deci, Ryan 2000). The former could be defined as engaging in an activity because it is perceived to be consistent with personal beliefs, goals, or emanating from the self. In other words, autonomous motivation is self-determined. In contrast, controlled motivation reflects engaging in actions to gain rewards, getting approval from others, or avoiding punishment. From the characteristics of these two types of motivation, it can be deduced that individuals who are control-motivated are less likely to be self-regulated and self-determined; the opposite holds for autonomously motivated individuals. Based on these assumptions, SDT seems to suggest that fostering autonomous motivation will lead to effective self-regulation.

There exists a considerable body of literature exploring the relationship between self-regulated and self-determined behaviours in FL online learning (Barnard et al. 2009; Beaven et al. 2017; Fathali, Okada 2016; Kim et al. 2014; Zheng et al. 2018). It would happen that since online learning is mainly influenced by self-determined behaviours and self-regulated actions (Mobarhan et al. 2014; Reinders 2014), the SDT continuum could be considered the best approach to investigate motivation in online language learning.

Within this context, students' beliefs about their capabilities to control a certain task play an important role in their actions and motivation. Bandura's (1977; 1997) self-efficacy theory and Weiner's (1976; 2000) attribution theory represent two perspectives that complement Ryan and Deci's SDT, contributing to an understanding of students' motivation and achievement in their studies. Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs that individuals have about their capabilities to complete a particular task; attributions refer to the explanation individuals give for their success or failure in a particular performance. The constructs of self-efficacy and attributions are arguably interrelated and connected; as an individual's self-efficacy can be influenced by his/her performance in a task, similarly one's attributions for an outcome can also be affected by the level of confidence in doing a particular task (for a detailed study on the interrelations between SDT and personality traits in foreign language learning see Sisti 2020).

Various studies have examined the relationship between the two constructs, self-efficacy and attributions, in the field of foreign/second language learning (Holschuh et al. 2001; Hsieh, Schallert 2008; Lyden et al. 2002; Stajkovic, Sommer 2000), contributing to developing an understanding of how attributions and self-efficacy might be relevant in a learning situation. The present study is set against this theoretical backdrop, which considers the interrelations between self-determination, the sense of self-efficacy, and attributions of one's success or failure to describe FL motivation. However, a full discussion of the impact of LMSs (e.g., students' interaction with LMSs and their ability to use LMSs) on students' motivation lies beyond the scope of this study.

3. The study

The present exploratory study is based on a small-scale research project conducted with 76 University students enrolled in FL online courses during the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy. The study is part of a broader project whose overall aims are beyond the scope of the present contribution. For the aims of this contribution, suffice it to say that students responded to a self-completion questionnaire consisting of 5 items, which were published online. Data collection took place between May and September 2020.

Eligibility criteria to participate in the survey required individuals to be BA or MA degree students attending FL courses in distance mode during the COVID-19 outbreak. The

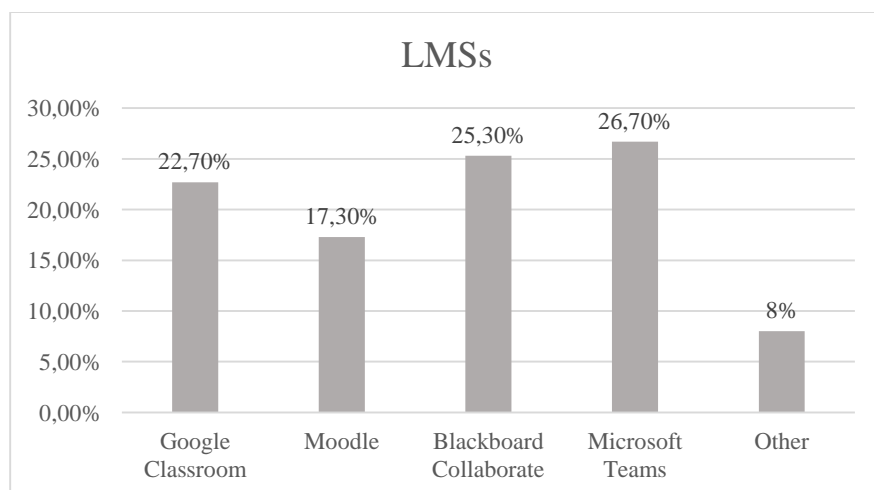
informants were attending universities all over Italy (44,7% North-Western Italy; 21,1% North-Eastern Italy; 18,4% Central Italy; 15,8% Southern Italy or the Islands). Just over two-thirds of the sample (69,7%) belonged to the 18-25 age group; 30,3% belonged to the over 25 age group. The gender of the informants was not asked in the survey. Of the initial cohort of 76 students, 62 were studying English and 14 Languages Other Than English (LOTE).

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the informants in terms of the foreign languages studied as part of their academic curriculum and the age range to which the informants belong. As seen, the primary inclusion criterion for the informants was to be attending an FL course in distance mode on the university LMS. To identify the LMSs used in FL online learning, respondents were also asked to indicate which learning platform had been adopted by their university for foreign language courses (Graph 1).

All the LMSs mentioned by the respondents include a suite of integrated tools that enable online delivery of instructional content, allow student interaction and collaboration, as well as tracking and reporting of student participation. In addition to the LMSs, participants referred the use of some synchronous meeting tools (32% Google Meet; 43% Zoom; 25% Skype) to compensate for the absence of face-to-face interaction².

Language	Number of respondents	Percentage
English	-43 in the 18-25 age range -19 in the over 25 age range	81,6%
Languages Other Than English (LOTE)	-10 in the 18-25 age range -4 in the over 25 age range	18,4%
Total	76	100%

Table 1 Foreign languages studied as part of the academic curriculum.



Graph 1 LMSs used in FL online learning by the informants

² This study is unable to encompass the entire range of activities carried out during FL courses (a significant analysis and discussion on the subject was presented by La Grassa 2021 referring in particular to Italian as L2). The reader should bear in mind that the present study is based on a preliminary analysis of students' motivation during the health crisis in Italy in online learning without considering the numerous facets of this context. This is an important issue for future research.

The assumption that FL motivation is negatively affected by distance learning and lack of face-to-face communication among the teachers and the students in the specific setting of the pandemic emergency, is the background against which this present research is set. In other words, it is hypothesised that after the disruption of the academic activities, FL students could be less autonomously motivated and less self-determined than shown in previous studies. To investigate this hypothesis in-depth, the following Research Questions (RQs) were formulated:

RQ1 Are students more influenced by autonomous or controlled motivation in FL distance learning? Do they feel demotivated?

RQ2 Do they believe in their capacity to produce specific performance attainments or does their sense of self-efficacy decrease in an LMS?

RQ3 Do students attribute their success in FL learning to internal or external causes in this setting?

As seen, data were collected through a self-completion questionnaire³, consisting of 5 items: items 1 to 3 address RQ1, item 4 focuses on RQ2, and item 5 concentrates on RQ3. Once collected, the data were elaborated through descriptive statistical analysis, using percentages. Bar graphs were used to quantify and visualise the data in a graphic form; in addition, tables were used to report data in detail.

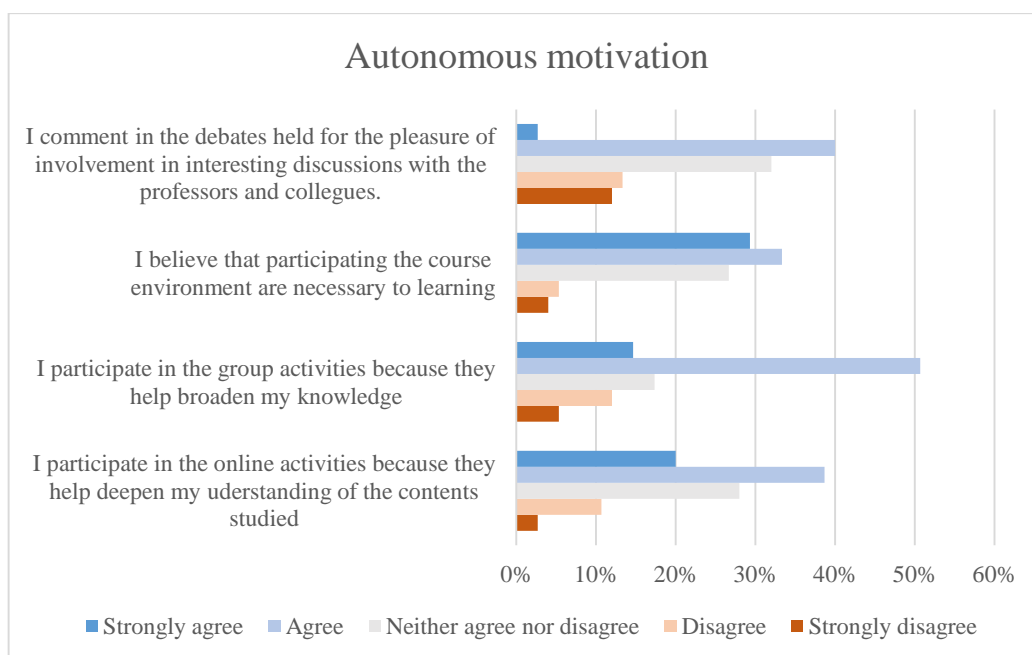
4. Results

This paragraph will give an account of the data collected, examining each research question according to the items of the questionnaire. First, a comprehensive look at the data regarding each item of the questionnaire will be offered in a graph format. Second, a detailed analysis of the data will be presented in a table format: it aims to transform raw data in percentages, considering two variables, i.e., age-range and the language studied. A further discussion will be provided in paragraph 5.

RQ1 Are students more influenced by autonomous or controlled motivation in FL distance learning? Do they feel demotivated?

Items 1, 2, and 3 of the questionnaire address this research question. Item 1 is *Autonomous motivation: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided*. This question is a five-point Likert scale intending to measure the level of students' agreement to the statements provided. 75 out of 76 respondents replied to this question. The overall results are shown in Graph 2; a more detailed view is offered in Table 2.

³ It was not possible to organise a focus group as initially planned since only one of the informants agreed to participate. Further data collection is therefore required to consolidate the findings of the current preliminary study.



Graph 2 Autonomous motivation

18-25 age range Language: English Tot: 43 students						18-25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 10 students					
Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	20%	45%	25%	10%	0%	1	20%	40%	30%	10%	0%
2	12,50%	57,50%	15%	10%	5%	2	20%	50%	20%	10%	0%
3	25%	45%	20%	7,50%	2,50%	3	40%	20%	30%	10%	0%
4	4,88%	43,90%	31,71%	12,20%	7,32%	4	0%	70%	10%	10%	10%
Over 25 age range Language: English Tot: 19 students						Over 25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 4 students					
Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	15,79%	26,32%	36,84%	10,53%	10,53%	1	50%	25%	25%	0%	0%
2	10,53%	42,11%	21,05%	15,79%	10,53%	2	50%	25%	25%	0%	0%
3	35%	20%	35%	0%	10%	3	50%	0%	25%	25%	0%
4	0%	10,53%	47,37%	26,32%	15,79%	4	0%	66,67%	33,33%	0%	0%

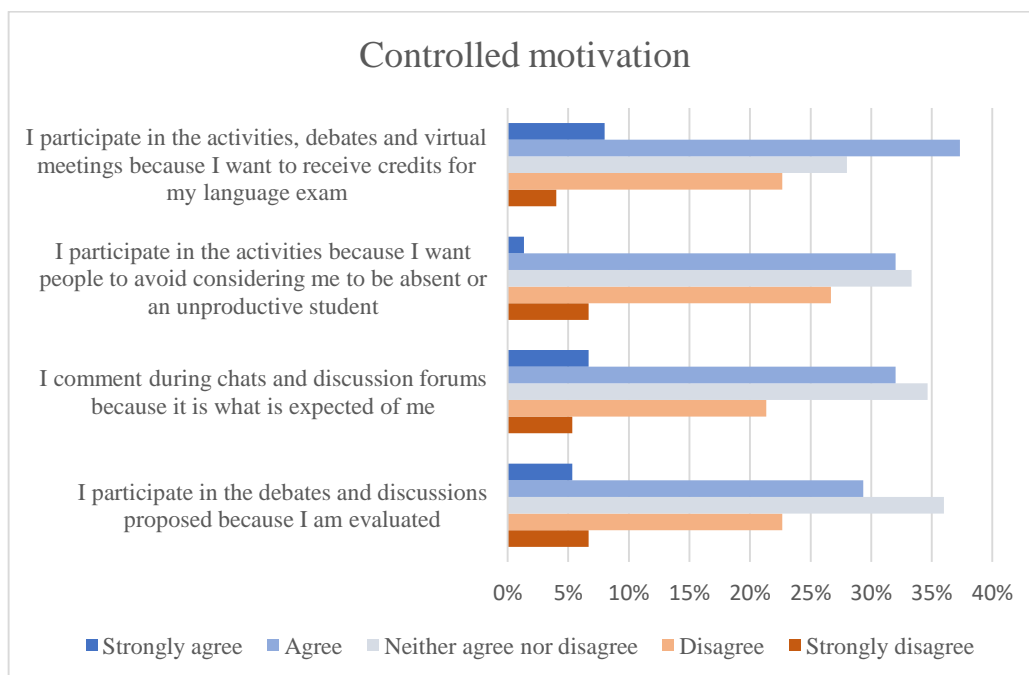
Table 2 Autonomous motivation⁴

Item 2 is *Controlled motivation*: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided. Like Item 1, this is a five-point Likert scale question requiring the respondents to express their level of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding

⁴ The description of each statement of Item 1 in the questionnaire is reported below:

1. I participate in the online activities because they help deepen my understanding of the contents studied.
2. I participate in the group activities because they help broaden my knowledge.
3. I believe that participating in and tending the course environment are necessary to learning.
4. I comment in the debates held for the pleasure of involvement in interesting discussions with professors and colleagues.

controlled motivation. 75 out of 76 respondents answered this question. The results are shown in Graph 3 below; a more detailed view is offered in Table 3.



Graph 3 Controlled motivation

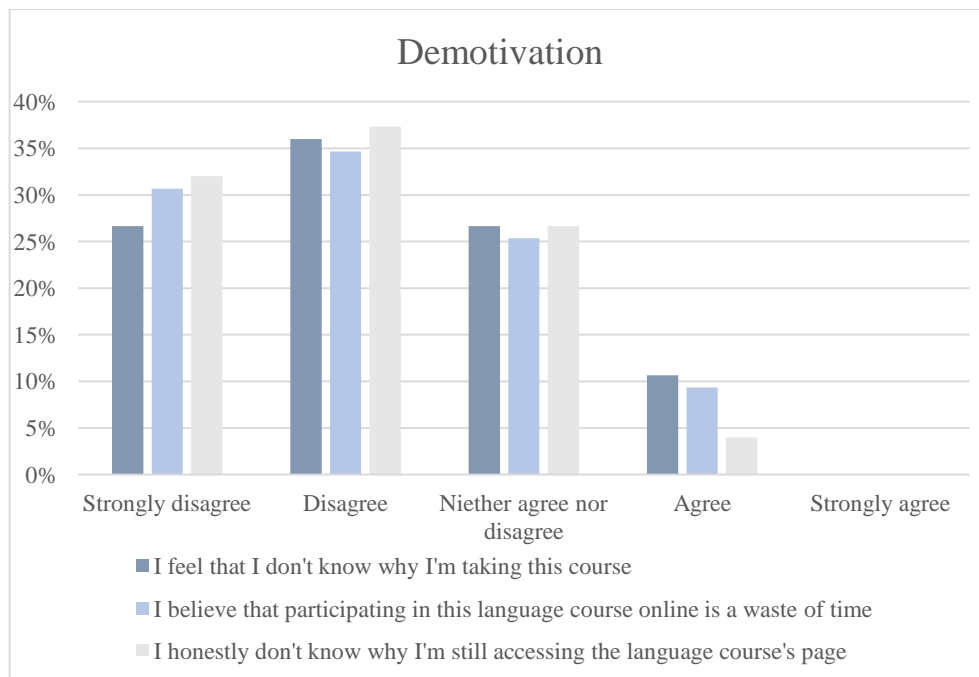
18-25 age range Language: English Tot: 43 students						18-25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 10 students					
Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	9,52%	28,57%	61,90%	0%	0%	1	0%	55,56%	44,44%	0%	0%
2	7,14%	33,33%	59,52%	0%	0%	2	22,22%	44,44%	22,22%	11,11%	0%
3	2,38%	30,95%	66,67%	0%	0%	3	0%	55,56%	22,22%	22,22%	0%
4	12,29%	40,48%	45,24%	0%	0%	4	0%	66,67%	22,22%	11,11%	0%
Over 25 age range Language: English Tot: 19 students						Over 25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 4 students					
Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	0%	27,78%	33,33%	22,22%	16,67%	1	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%
2	0%	27,78%	33,33%	27,78%	11,11%	2	0%	25%	75%	0%	0%
3	0%	22,22%	44,44%	22,22%	11,11%	3	0%	50%	25%	25%	0%
4	4,76%	14,29%	47,62%	19,05%	14,29%	4	0%	50%	25%	25%	0%

Table 3 Controlled motivation⁵

⁵ The description of each statement of Item 2 in the questionnaire is reported below:

1. I participate in the debates and discussions proposed because I am evaluated.
2. I comment during chats and discussion forums because it is what is expected of me.
3. I participate in the activities because I want to avoid people considering me to be absent or an unproductive student.
4. I participate in the activities, debates, and virtual meetings because I want to receive credits for my language exam.

Item 3 is *Demotivation*. Again, respondents are asked to express their level of agreement to three statements regarding demotivation in FL learning online. A total of 75 out of 76 respondents replied to this question. Results are shown in Graph 4; Table 4 presents an exhaustive view of the data according to the age range and the language studied by the informants.



Graph 4 Demotivation

18-25 age range Language: English Tot: 43 students						18-25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 10 students					
Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	0%	20%	22,50%	32,50%	25%	1	0%	0%	40%	30%	30%
2	0%	15%	25%	35%	25%	2	0%	0%	20%	50%	30%
3	05	7,50%	25%	37,50%	30%	3	0%	0%	20%	50%	30%
Over 25 age range Language: English Tot: 19 students						Over 25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 4 students					
Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	0%	0%	35,29%	58,82%	5,88%	1	0%	0%	25%	0%	75%
2	0%	5,56%	33,33%	27,78%	33,33%	2	0%	0%	25%	25%	50%
3	0%	0%	41,18%	35,29%	23,53%	3	0%	0%	25%	25%	50%

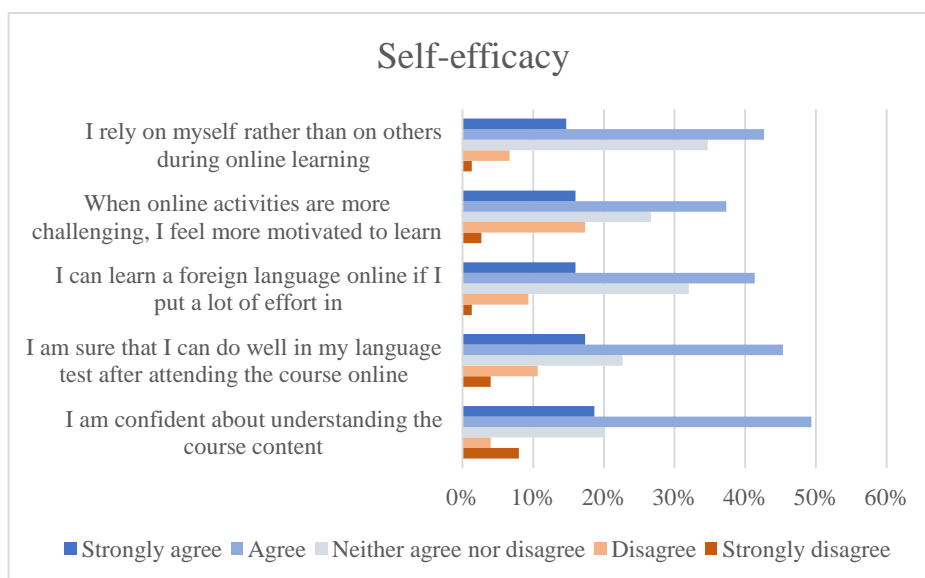
Table 4 Demotivation⁶

RQ2 Do they believe in their capacity to produce specific performance attainments or does their sense of self-efficacy decrease in an LMS?

⁶ The description of each statement of Item 3 in the questionnaire is reported below:

1. I feel that I really don't know why I am taking this course.
2. I believe that participating in this language course online is a waste of time.
3. I honestly don't know why I'm still accessing the language course's page.

Addressing this research question is Item 4 of the questionnaire. Item 4 is *Self-efficacy*: please tick only one option for each statement using the scale provided. This question is a five-point Likert scale that investigates how the sense of self-efficacy influences motivation in FL online learning. 75 out of 76 respondents replied to this question and the results are shown in Graph 5 below. Table 5 presents the data in detail.



Graph 5 Self-efficacy

18-25 age range Language: English Tot: 43 students						18-25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 10 students					
Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	17,07%	60,98%	21,95%	0	0	1	30%	30%	30%	10%	0%
2	17,07%	51,22%	31,71%	0	0	2	10%	30%	50%	10%	0%
3	17,50%	37,50%	45%	0	0	3	10%	50%	20%	20%	0%
4	16,67%	35,71%	47,62%	0	0	4	10%	50%	30%	10%	0%
5	15%	50%	35%	0	0	5	10%	40%	40%	10%	0%
Over 25 age range Language: English Tot: 19 students						Over 25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 4 students					
Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	10%	35%	30%	10%	15%	1	50%	25%	25%	0%	0%
2	20%	40%	25%	5%	10%	2	50%	25%	25%	0%	0%
3	10%	45%	30%	15%	0%	3	50%	25%	25%	0%	0%
4	15%	30%	35%	15%	5%	4	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
5	10%	25%	40%	20%	5%	5	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%

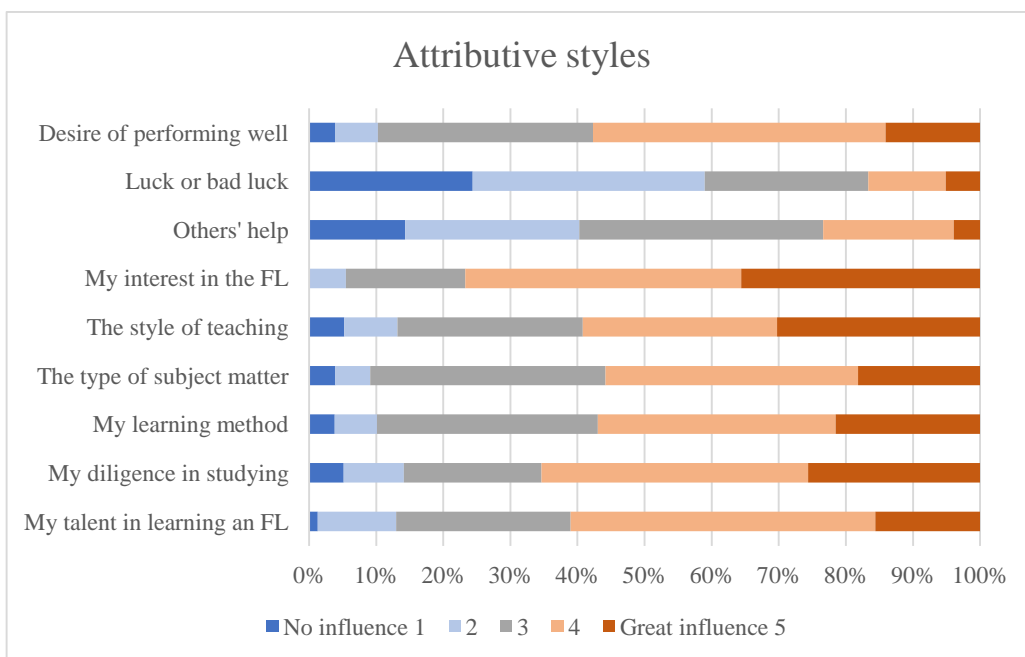
Table 5 Self-efficacy⁷

⁷ The description of each statement of Item 4 in the questionnaire is reported below:

1. I am confident about understanding the course content.
2. I am sure that I can do well in my language test after attending the online course.
3. I can learn a foreign language online if I put a lot of effort in.
4. When online activities are challenging, I feel more motivated to learn.

RQ3 Do students attribute their success in FL learning to internal or external causes in the online learning setting?

Item 5 of the questionnaire is *Attribution theory: how much is your success in the course influenced by the factors mentioned below? (rate the factors from 1 to 5 where 1 has no influence and 5 great influence)*. This question shows a five-point semantic-differential scale investigating how attributive styles influence students' motivation to participate in online activities. The scale can be read as follows: 1 *no influence*, 2 *limited influence*, 3 *moderate influence*, 4 *important influence*, and 5 *great influence*. The whole sample of the respondents (76 students) replied to this question. Results are shown in Graph 6 and Table 6 below.



Graph 6 Attributive styles

18-25 age range Language: English Tot: 43 students						18-25 age range students Language: LOTE Tot: 10					
Statements	Great influence	Important influence	Moderate influence	Limited influence	No influence	Statements	Great influence	Important influence	Moderate influence	Limited influence	No influence
1	0%	51,43%	37,14%	11,43%	0%	1	0%	50%	40%	10%	0%
2	0%	64,52%	19,35%	6,45%	9,68%	2	50%	20%	20%	10%	0%
3	0%	50%	38,24%	5,88%	5,88%	3	33,33%	44,44%	22,22%	0%	0%
4	0%	57,14%	28,57%	5,71%	8,57%	4	20%	30%	40%	10%	0%
5	0%	48,39%	29,03%	19,90%	9,68%	5	55,56%	11,11%	22,22%	11,11%	0%
6	0%	72%	16%	12%	0%	6	22,22%	55,56%	11,11%	11,11%	0%
7	0%	28,21%	33,33%	25,64%	12,82%	7	12,50%	0%	50%	37,50%	0%

5.I rely on myself rather than on others during online learning.

8	0%	15,38%	23,08%	38,46%	23,08%	8	10%	10%	20%	30%	30%
9	0%	58,33%	36,11%	0%	5,56%	9	20%	50%	20%	10%	0%
Over 25 age range Language: English Tot: 19 students						Over 25 age range Language: LOTE Tot: 4 students					
Statements	Great influence	Important influence	Moderate influence	Limited influence	No influence	Statements	Great influence	Important influence	Moderate influence	Limited influence	No influence
1	0%	53,33%	13,33%	26,67%	6,67%	1	25%	50%	25%	0%	0%
2	0%	35,71%	42,86%	14,29%	7,14%	2	0%	25%	50%	25%	0%
3	0%	21,43%	64,29%	14,29%	0%	3	25%	0%	50%	25%	0%
4	0%	29,41%	64,71%	5,88%	0%	4	50%	0%	50%	0%	0%
5	0%	33,33%	58,33%	8,33%	0%	5	25%	25%	50%	0%	0%
6	0%	27,27%	72,73%	0%	0%	6	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%
7	0%	13,33%	46,67%	26,67%	13,33%	7	0%	25%	25%	25%	25%
8	0%	6,25%	37,50%	25%	31,25%	8	25%	25%	0%	25%	25%
9	0%	28,57%	42,86%	28,57%	0%	9	0%	50%	50%	0%	0%

Table 6 Attributive styles⁸

5. Discussion

In this section, we shall consider the results of the survey and the implications of these in the context of FL online learning. In the current study, findings are generally consistent with previous literature in the field of motivation in online learning. However, one unanticipated finding concerns the role of controlled motivation which was reported as equally significant as autonomous motivation. It is interesting to note that a minority of the respondents experienced demotivation in FL online learning as a result of multiple factors. Findings regarding self-efficacy further support the idea that online learning contributes to developing a positive attitude towards one's capabilities and control over FL learning. Besides, since literature about attributive styles and FL language learning online would seem scarce, this study shed some light on this issue, highlighting the importance of dispositional factors in FL online learning.

5.1 Autonomous and controlled motivation

The initial objective of the survey was to understand if students are more affected by autonomous or controlled motivation in FL online learning. As regards autonomous motivation,

⁸ The description of each statement of Item 5 in the questionnaire is reported below:

1. My talent in learning an FL.
2. My diligence in studying.
3. My learning method.
4. The type of subject matter.
5. The style of teaching.
6. My interest in the FL.
7. Others' help.
8. Luck or bad luck.
9. Desire of performing well.

the results of the questionnaire show that the respondents demonstrate to personally value the FL online course, hence they consciously motivate themselves to participate. In line with previous studies (Mobarhan et al. 2014; Reinders 2014), these results demonstrate that online learning is highly influenced by self-determined behaviour and self-regulated actions. These findings confirm the relationship between Self-determination theory indicators (perceived autonomy, perceived competence, and perceived relatedness) and the learners' attitudes towards technology-enhanced language learning, as in previous studies (Fathali, Okada, 2017; Beaven et al. 2017; Barnard et al. 2009). However, from Table 2 we can see that students of English in the over 25 age range were divided in the view that participating in the course is an enriching experience. These results, therefore, need to be interpreted with caution.

Contrary to what was demonstrated by previous studies (Barnard et al. 2009; Kim et al. 2014; Zheng et al. 2018), in this study students of English in the 18-25 age range indicate external factors equally significant for their engagement in FL e-learning. According to the Self-determination continuum (Ryan, Deci 2000), external regulation determines students' compliance with certain norms of behaviour and regulates students' actions based on gaining rewards or avoiding punishment. Since the participants in this study are university students, it seems obvious that their participation in the activities is also determined by external motivations, such as getting credits for their exam or because this is what is expected of them. However, these findings may be somewhat limited to younger students of English, whereas the other groups of informants express some disagreement on the controlled motivations for attending the language course (as can be seen from Table 3).

There are still many unanswered questions about the relationship between age, the FL studied, gender, and motivation to learn an FL online which the present study is unable to encompass due to its exploratory nature. Therefore, further studies, which take these variables into account, will need to be undertaken.

5.2 Demotivation

Even though most of the respondents in this study expressed disagreement with the statements regarding demotivation, a worryingly high percentage of them, especially those studying English and belonging to the 18-25 age range, showed uncertainty or agreement with the lack of intentionality and personal causation experienced in online learning. Interestingly, respondents studying a Language Other than English appear to be the most motivated to attend an FL course since most of them disagree with the statements regarding demotivation. However, it is important to bear in mind the possible bias in these findings due to the small number of informants belonging to the LOTE group.

Since the intricate nature of motivation, self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-regulation, demotivation might be considered as the result of more variables, as in Yantraprakorn et al.'s study (2018). In the light of the data discussed so far, it could be argued that a minority of the participants in this study perceived a lack of intentionality in engaging in online activities. In future investigations, it might be advisable to explore the correlation between the experience of use and the level of appreciation of an LMS, and their impact on student motivation to learn an FL online. A further study with more focus on this aspect is therefore suggested.

5.3 Self-efficacy

As seen in previous studies (Bai et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2015; Su et al. 2018), there is a strong relationship between self-determined behaviour and self-efficacy, especially in online learning. However, studies seem to have not fully explored the implications of the relationship between

self-efficacy and FL e-learning, and findings in this context have produced contrasting results (Alhamami 2019; Yantraprakorn et al. 2018; Zheng et al. 2009).

The findings of the present study demonstrate that students show a high level of self-efficacy, attributing their success or failure in the FL online course to their efforts and capabilities. These results seem to confirm that a high sense of self-efficacy motivates the students to persevere learning, as in Bandura's theory (1997). Consistently with Zheng et al.'s (2009) study, the online learning context seems to influence the development of a positive sense of self-efficacy in the students who rely mostly on their abilities, their control over the learning process, and their effort to succeed in FL learning.

One unanticipated finding was that informants belonging to the over 25 group and studying English would appear to be less self-efficacious compared with the other groups (as can be seen in Table 6). However, with small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might lead to a higher variability, which, in turn, might lead to bias.

5.4 Attributive styles

According to this study's findings, students learning an FL online appear to attribute their success or failure in FL online learning to dispositional stable and unstable factors; some of them also mention the influence of the teaching style (situational stable factor) on their performance in the FL course. Situational unstable factors, such as luck or bad luck and others' help, are reported as less influential. What is striking about the figures in Table 6 is the data regarding the group of informants studying Languages Other Than English. There is a clear trend among this group of describing some factors as having "great influence"; whereas the other groups of informants seem to be more cautious in expressing such a vigorous opinion.

As seen, studies on attributive styles in the FL e-learning context and their role on motivation would appear to be scarce. Despite the impossibility of comparing results with previous studies, this study arguably demonstrates that students' engagement in online activities is positively influenced by their evaluation of success which relies mostly on dispositional factors. This assumption is consistent with the characteristics of self-determined and self-regulated students which emerge from data on controlled and autonomous motivation, and on the role of self-efficacy in the e-learning context, as seen before.

In summary, to answer the three research questions outlined in paragraph 3, studying an FL online does not appear to negatively affect the motivation to persevere learning, even during this pandemic emergency. On the contrary, students seem to develop a high sense of self-efficacy, relying on their abilities and efforts to succeed in online language learning. In line with Self-determination theory, more self-regulated and self-determined attitudes towards learning stimulate also a more autonomous and self-efficacious behaviour, typically identified in online learning. To develop a full picture of the impact of FL online learning on student motivation, additional studies will be needed that focus on the characteristics of the online context (e.g., the type of FL activities and interaction) and their influence on students' desire to persevere learning.

6. Conclusions

In this study, we have faced issues regarding FL motivation in online learning. By using a self-completion questionnaire published online, we tested the hypotheses that FL motivation could be negatively affected by the distance mode of education during the pandemic emergency in 2020. The findings of this study can be seen as an attempt to understand how FL motivation in

an academic setting can be affected by a total e-learning experience. The analysis of the results led to the conclusion that students' motivation in FL learning online is highly self-regulated and self-determined despite the impact of the health crisis on students' wellbeing. More generally, these findings are consistent with research showing that the e-learning context provides a more autonomous learning experience characterized by integrated and identified motivation. Besides, findings provide additional information about students' sense of self-efficacy and attributive styles of success or failure in FL online learning. Results indicated that students seem highly efficacious, believing in their capabilities to succeed in online learning and attributing their success in the language course mostly to constitutional stable factors.

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