



# LINGUE CULTURE MEDIAZIONI LANGUAGES CULTURES MEDIATION

10 (2023)

1

“A Terrible Beauty Is Born”: Opportunities  
and New Perspectives for Online Teaching and Assessment

“Nasce una terribile bellezza”: opportunità  
e nuove prospettive per la didattica e la valutazione online

*Edited by*

*Franca Poppi and Josef Schmied*

## EDITORIAL

“A Terrible Beauty Is Born”: Opportunities and New Perspectives 5  
for Online Teaching and Assessment  
*Franca Poppi and Josef Schmied*

A Comparison between EFL Writing Errors in Computer-Based 17  
and Paper-Based Assignments  
*Paola-Maria Caleffi*

Students’ Voices from the Pandemic: The Use of Modal 45  
and Semi-Modal Verbs for Expressing Subjectivity in a Local  
Academic Learner Corpus  
*Emanuela Tenca*

Il ruolo della funzione ‘Feedback’ nelle attività di Moodle 69  
*Alessandra Pettinelli e Dalila Rauch*

Apprendimento digitale dell’italiano L2. Un approccio ludico 99  
*Silvia Gilardoni e Alessandra Cerizza*

Buone pratiche per la didattica digitale dell’italiano L2 121  
*Marialuisa Sepe*

Valutazione e nuove tecnologie nell'ambito del Progetto Marco Polo - Turandot <i>Dimo Dimov e Mara Mutti</i>	139
Spazi di apprendimento virtuali per la didattica della lingua tedesca <i>Antonella Catone</i>	161
Un salto nel mondo digitale. Un progetto condiviso e multimediale per l'apprendimento della lingua tedesca <i>Carla Christiany e Julia Heumann</i>	185
Emergency Remote Teaching: Student Responses to Intensive versus Extensive Course Modalities during the Pandemic <i>Michael Joseph Ennis, Dietmar Unterkofler, and Elena Bonetto</i>	203
Online ELT during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study on Students' Perspectives <i>Ilaria Iori</i>	231
Authors	257

# Online ELT during the Covid-19 Pandemic

## A Case Study on Students' Perspectives

*Ilaria Iori*

*Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/lcm-2023-001-iori>

### ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised interest within many interdisciplinary fields. Researchers in the field of education were particularly interested in reporting teachers' and students' experiences (e.g., Hoti, Dragusha, and Ndou 2022) during the period of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges *et al.* 2020) and Sustained Remote Teaching (SRT) (Stewart, Baek, and Lowenthal 2022). This article aims to provide a further contribution to education studies by exploring students' experiences in an English language course organised by an Italian University Language Centre during the 2020/21 academic year. More specifically, it focuses on how interactions were accomplished in foreign language virtual classrooms and whether students' perceptions on online teaching have changed with SRT. Results showed that although students still preferred face-to-face lessons, they highly appreciated specific tools of online teaching (e.g., recordings) and wished they could be implemented in traditional lessons. The data also confirmed the importance of interactions in modern foreign language virtual classrooms and found that most students who had an overall negative experience with online teaching were also students who had more difficulties in interacting during classes.

*Keywords:* Covid-19; digital learning; emergency remote teaching; English language teaching; online language learning.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic, physical gatherings were forbidden in many parts of the world causing lectures to be delivered online (Daniel 2020). Thus, technological tools became essential alternatives or supports to more traditional teaching methods (Poppi in press). The study of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges *et al.* 2020) has raised interest among education scholars at different levels. More specifically, many researchers have focused on the unexpectedness of this shift and investigated the sudden universities' responses to Covid-19 around the world (see Radic *et al.* 2021), and educators' level of readiness for this abrupt digital move (e.g. Bolliger and Halupa 2022).

After the first semester of 2020, the use of online digital tools has become the 'new normal' in higher education. In the 2020/21 academic year, the number of online teaching tools has increased, and the already existing devices have been updated to their users' needs. Furthermore, given educators' previous experiences with such tools, their level of expertise has likely increased. For these reasons, education scholars suggested that ERT in the 2020/21 academic year shared more characteristics with regular online learning and should be addressed as Sustained Remote Teaching (SRT) (Stewart, Baek, and Lowenthal 2022). Despite these aspects, most studies in the field of education focused on the first semester of 2020.

Thus, this study aims to provide a case study on students' experiences with SRT during the whole academic year 2020/21. In this article, the term SRT specifically refers to the whole academic year 2020/21, a timeframe in which ERT became the 'new normal' teaching delivery and thus, students' and educators' skills with online learning were expected to have improved. Since little attention was paid to the experiences of Italian University Language Centres during the pandemic, this article explores the English courses organised by the Language Centre of the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia. More specifically, it investigates the courses delivered in the first year of the bachelor's degree in European Languages and Cultures at the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia during the academic year 2020/21. These lessons are usually less crowded<sup>1</sup> and more interactive than traditional lectures and thus, offer

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, during the 2020/21 academic year, the Language University Centre at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia offered English language courses to first-year students enrolled in the bachelor's degree in European Languages and Cultures.

an interesting research sample, since the lecturers probably had to resort to different functionalities to maintain meaningful interactions in virtual classrooms.

## 2. ONLINE TEACHING AND EMERGENCY ONLINE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The term Web 2.0 is often used to refer to the new generation of digital tools in which users' participation can determine the interface and functionalities of the software itself in the future (e.g., websites, blogs, etc.). O'Reilly (2007, 17) defines the software of Web 2.0 applications "as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it". The development of new interactive Web 2.0 applications has raised interest in how these devices are being implemented in higher education (e.g. Isaías, Miranda, and Pífano 2021). More specifically, these tools can perform a wide variety of functions in education, ranging from the creation of online meetings, surveys, videos, presentations, and files storage and sharing in virtual classrooms (Arabaci and Akilli 2021, 116). Before the pandemic, universities were already implementing online Web 2.0 tools in conventional lessons, even though some of their functionalities (e.g., online meetings) became particularly popular only after the pandemic. Despite their benefits such as the flexibility of time, place and interaction (Ally 2008), the use of online digital devices before the pandemic was still quite limited (Bond *et al.* 2018) and heterogeneous (Formiconi 2016).

Unsurprisingly, the use of online Web 2.0 tools in higher education increased with the spread of Covid-19. This period has often been referred to as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) to emphasise its "tentativeness" (Poppi in press). Scholars showed that the sudden shift to online delivery did not give sufficient time for educators to re-examine traditional activities before they moved online (Li *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, according to recent investigations, virtual classes were characterised by more superficial interactions (Alwaheebi and Al-Qahtani 2022), and internet accessibility was an issue for many students in several countries (Nkemleke 2021; Mohamed Amin and Paiman 2022).

---

These courses were divided into eight different classes, while the corresponding traditional English lectures only had two different classes for the same group of students.

Despite the drawbacks of ERT, studies also found that it made students develop “digital and learning strategies” (Schmied 2021, 367) because they had to rely on their own technological skills. Additionally, investigations on students’ and teachers’ experiences revealed positive attitudes toward online devices (Akram *et al.* 2021; Rossetini *et al.* 2021). Students seemed to have normalised the use of teaching platforms (Fořtová, Sedláčková, and Tůma 2021), and although most of them still preferred a combination of in-person and online activities rather than a fully online course (Ashkanani *et al.* 2022), the demand for online courses is likely to increase in the future (McKenzie 2021).

### 3. ENGLISH LANGUAGE REMOTE TEACHING: THE CASE OF ITALIAN UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE CENTRES

The rise of Web 2.0 tools and new technologies enhanced mediated communication around the world, making it particularly crucial to become competent language users (see Poppi 2012). English Language Teaching (ELT) and more broadly, modern foreign language teaching “was particularly affected by the Covid-19 emergency since it is not a content subject: it is a medium that requires action and collaboration together with meaningful opportunities for communication” (Noel *et al.* 2022, 10).

The need for meaningful communication is particularly crucial in the lessons organised by University Language Centres in that they do not only organise lessons for students but also for teaching staff (Long, Poppi, and Radighieri 2019) and learners outside university (Rossi 2019) and their main goal is to improve language competence, a task that indeed requires a considerable degree of interactions in the classroom. For this reason, classes have usually fewer students compared to other university lectures.

Studies on ERT in higher education have highlighted the importance of interactions in online English language lessons (e.g., Freddi 2021; Mohamed Amin and Paiman 2022). On the one hand, scholars found that the shift to online courses fostered the use of “already existing good educational practices (e.g. enhanced feedback, collaborative work, task-based learning, additional learning objectives, assessment)” (Freddi 2021, 291). On the other hand, they also uncovered the urgency to create more engaging lessons and pay particular attention to

“students who decide not to interact online, who risk being invisible and thus feeling isolated” (Luporini 2020, 11).

Despite the fundamental role of interactions in online English language teaching, there has been no systematic attempt to examine how interactions developed in virtual classrooms. Additionally, the necessity to enhance interactions with students inevitably posed a significant challenge for the lecturers during the ERT period. Notably, University Language Centres offer a particularly compelling context for investigation due to the typically interactive nature of their lessons. Thus, this article aims to explore students’ experiences during the 2020/21 academic year, which remains a relatively under-researched period, particularly when compared to the first semester of 2020. More specifically, this investigation focuses on English language courses organised by the Language Centre of the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia and seeks to address the following questions:

- How were the overall students’ experiences with the online English language courses organised by the University Language Centres in the 2020/21 academic year?
- How has online delivery changed interactions in virtual classes?
- How have students’ attitudes toward online teaching changed with SRT?

#### 4. THE STUDY

The course under inquiry is the English course delivered in the 2020/21 academic year to first-year students enrolled in the bachelor’s degree European Languages and Cultures offered by the Language Centre of the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia. As already mentioned, these kinds of lessons tend to be more interactive, making them particularly suitable for an investigation of online interactions in modern foreign language classes. Furthermore, focusing on the 2020/21 academic year seems highly beneficial for several reasons. First, the English language course under investigation was fully delivered online during that entire academic year, and thus, can provide a considerable amount of data. Moreover, since the emergency period persisted also in 2020/21, at that time, online teaching was no longer a sudden unexpected shift but rather ‘the new normal’. As general requirement for the English course, students take an initial test before the beginning of the lessons to assess

their linguistic competence with reference to CEFR (Council of Europe 2020) and are divided into groups accordingly. By the end of the year, all students need to achieve at least a B1 level of competence in English.

#### 4.1. Methodology

To collect the data, a survey seemed the most appropriate choice for several reasons. First, it was possible to conduct the investigation on more students, providing more quantitative data. Furthermore, the survey was delivered online and thus, could be completed at any time. This seemed especially convenient for students who for several reasons could not personally come to the Language Centre to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire included factual, behavioural and attitudinal questions (see Dörnyei 2010, 5) to respectively define a general profile of the respondents, understand what they did in the past and uncover their attitudes and opinions toward the online course.

The formulation of those questions was considered particularly important in that good surveys should ask unambiguous questions. Brown and Rodgers (2010, 143) provided a full list of things to avoid when creating surveys. To summarise some of the key items from that list, double barrelled, ambiguous, and negative items were particularly avoided. To enhance clarity and reduce possible language misinterpretations and hence, invalid data, the questionnaire was delivered in Italian, most students' native language.

A copy of the original survey in Italian can be found in Appendix 1, whereas *Table 1* shows its English version. As can be noted from the table, the questionnaire comprised 24 questions and was divided into four parts. The first part was designed to gather factual and behavioural information about the respondents. The second part integrated behavioural and attitudinal questions to detect students' experiences with Web 2.0 tools for education. The third section was composed of behavioural and attitudinal questions aimed to explore how interactions took place in the virtual classroom, whereas the last part mainly included attitudinal questions to detect students' overall experiences.

Since "closed-ended" items usually create more "professional" surveys (Dörnyei 2007, 17), most questions were closed-ended. However, some open-ended questions were also included. More specifically, four "guided" (Dörnyei 2010, 37) short questions were added.

Table 1. – English version of the survey.

PART 1: GENERAL INFORMATION	
1. Please indicate your age.	Short answer
2. From which city/place did you attend lessons in the 2020/21 academic year?	Short answer
3. Which devices have you most frequently used to access lessons? (More than one option is allowed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Computer</li> <li>• Smartphone</li> <li>• Tablet</li> </ul>
4. Did you have connection issues during the lessons?	Always/Never (4-points scale)
5. Have you ever attended online courses before the Covid-19 emergency period?	Yes/No
PART 2: EXPERIENCES WITH WEB 2.0 TOOLS FOR EDUCATION	
6. Which of the following video conferencing platforms online have you found the most intuitive? (More than one option is allowed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Google Meet</li> <li>• Collaborate</li> <li>• Microsoft Teams</li> <li>• Big Blue Button</li> <li>• Zoom</li> </ul>
7. Which of the functionalities of video conferencing platforms online have you most appreciated? (More than one option is allowed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breakout rooms</li> <li>• Chat</li> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• Screen sharing</li> <li>• Recording</li> <li>• None of them</li> </ul>
8. Why have you most appreciated those functionalities?	Short answer
PART 3: INTERACTIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS	
9. Did you have your camera on during the lessons?	Always/Never (4-points scale)
10. If you had your camera off, why did you do that?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To protect my privacy</li> <li>• I felt uneasy with the camera on</li> <li>• I was doing other things</li> <li>• I always had it on</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>
11. To communicate with the teacher during the lesson (More than one option is allowed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I turned on the microphone to talk in the virtual classroom</li> <li>• I turned on the microphone to talk in breakout rooms</li> <li>• I wrote a public message in the chat of the lesson</li> <li>• I wrote a private message in the chat of the lesson I used a WhatsApp or other chat platforms unrelated to the lesson</li> </ul>

12. To communicate with my classmates during the lesson (More than one option is allowed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I turned on the microphone to talk in the virtual classroom</li> <li>• I turned on the microphone to talk in breakout rooms</li> <li>• I wrote a public message in the chat of the lesson</li> <li>• I wrote a private message in the chat of the lesson</li> <li>• I used WhatsApp or other chat platforms unrelated to the lesson</li> </ul>
13. The functionalities of video conferencing platforms online (e.g., chat, breakout rooms) offer more opportunities for interactions compared to face-to-face lessons.	Strongly agree / Strongly disagree (5-points scale)
PART 4: OVERALL EXPERIENCE	
14. During the lessons, I felt involved.	Strongly agree / Strongly disagree (5-points scale)
15. My attention level was lower with online lessons when compared to face-to-face lessons.	Strongly agree / Strongly disagree (5-points scale)
16. Attending online lessons in the 2020/21 academic year has been easier compared to the second semester of 2020.	Strongly agree / Strongly disagree (5-points scale)
17. My skills with online education tools have improved.	Strongly agree / Strongly disagree (5-points scale)
18. Attending lessons online has made me feel more stressed out.	Strongly agree / Strongly disagree (5-points scale)
19. During the lessons I felt lonely and isolated.	Very much / Not at all (4-points scale)
20. In general, how would you rate your experience with online lessons?	Very positive / Very negative (5-points scale)
21. Why did you give this evaluation?	Short answer
22. In your opinion, what are the advantages of online lessons?	Open question
23. In your opinion, what are the disadvantages of online lessons?	Open question
24. Which online education tools would you like to see integrated into face-to-face lessons? Why?	Open question

Two of them asked to clarify and motivate previously given answers. Lastly, three completely open questions were added at the end of the survey when according to Dörnyei (2007, 112), the respondents might

find “more acceptable to put in the necessary work” to write an articulated answer because they already spent time with the previous parts of the questionnaire. However, in order not to discourage students from completing and sending the questionnaire and to foster meaningful replies, these last three open questions were left optional.

The survey was created using Google Forms because it allowed to create a large number of questions for free and it could easily be sent via email to the respondents. The emails with the link to the survey were sent to the 135 students enrolled in the first-year English course in the 2020/21 academic year<sup>2</sup>. The total number of replies was 47, and thus, the replies could not be regarded as representative for the whole group. Nevertheless, they still provided valuable insights into the experiences of a subset of these students and how they evaluated their online academic journey. The result section is divided into four parts based on the four sections of the survey presented in *Table 1*.

## 4.2. Results of the survey

### 4.2.1. General information

In this part of the survey, factual questions were asked to uncover general aspects that might have influenced respondents’ online learning experiences. Most of the respondents’ age was between 20/23 years old with just one exception of a 40-year-old respondent. Thus, most respondents could be considered ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001). Cillers (2017) found that Gen Z students were particularly satisfied when digital tools were implemented in courses. However, as it will be shown in the next sections this was not really clear-cut in the responses received about SRT. As regards the devices used to attend classes, 97.9% students used the computer, 17% smartphone and 12.8% tablets. A small number of students already attended online courses before the pandemic (25.5%). However, most of them (74.5%) never had previous experiences with online courses. Many scholars found that both students and teachers

---

<sup>2</sup> The survey was sent during the first semester of the 2022/23 academic year. This time gap between the e-lessons and the data collection could be considered too long. However, since by the time of collection of the data, lessons had returned face-to-face, this study could offer a quite interesting perspective on students’ perceptions after the ERT period.

had issues with their internet connection (e.g. Hoti, Dragusha, and Ndou 2022). However, when the respondents were asked how often they experienced connection issues, most of them said that they either *Sometimes* (72.3%) or *Never* (10.6%) had connection problems. Only 17% of them replied they *Often* experienced such issues. Thus, overall, the frequency with which students have experienced connection problems seems to be quite restricted in this sample of respondents.

#### 4.2.2. Students' experiences with Web 2.0 tools

In this part of the survey, students were asked to evaluate online teaching platforms and their functionalities. First, they had to choose the online teaching platforms they found more intuitive (Statement 6). The most preferred option was Google Meet (78.8%), followed by Collaborate (51.1%), Microsoft Teams (25.5%) and Zoom (6.4%).

Then students selected the functionalities of such platforms they most appreciated (Statement 7) and had to motivate their answers (Statement 8). The graph (Fig. 1) shows the responses to the first Statement. *Chat* (34%) and *Surveys* (31.9%) were their least favourite options, whereas *Recordings* were their most preferred feature (78.7%) Respondents valued recordings mainly because they allowed them to rewatch missed parts of the lessons due to reasons such as illness, short breaks or overlapping classes. Moreover, students believed that rewatching parts of the lessons improved their comprehension skills, a competence considered particularly relevant in English language courses.

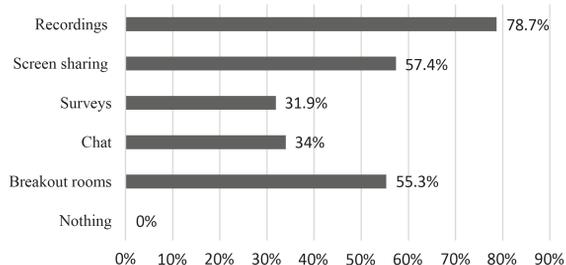


Figure 1. – Which of the following functionalities of video conferencing platforms online have you most appreciated? (More than one option is allowed).

Learners who selected *Breakout rooms* (55.3%) provided quite diversified answers to motivate their choices. First, they found that breakout rooms

enhanced interactions with both classmates and teachers. Respondents also highlighted that they felt more at ease or freer to talk in smaller groups. Quite interestingly, a student also stated that breakout rooms would recreate usual interactions that normally take place in face-to-face classrooms. Students also felt that breakout rooms fostered interactions, and hence, provided them with the opportunity to improve their language skills, especially their speaking skills.

Lastly, although *Screen sharing* (57.4%) was unexpectedly highly appreciated, the motivations provided by students for that choice were quite vague and did not provide exhaustive explanations for this result.

#### 4.2.3. Interactions in English language virtual classrooms

This section of the survey aimed to examine how interactions were accomplished in online ELT. Non-verbal interactions in ELT are widely acknowledged as playing a crucial role in enhancing learners' comprehension and motivation (see Negi 2010). Furthermore, students' reactions and facial expressions can help lecturers to better direct and monitor the lessons. Thus, Statement 9 investigated non-verbal interactions, that in remote teaching mainly depended on participants' cameras. For this reason, students were first asked to rate how often they had their cameras on during the lessons. The pie chart (*Fig. 2*) shows students' responses to that issue. Although the number of respondents who either *Always* (10.6%) or *Often* (40.4%) had their cameras on was slightly higher than that of those who either *Sometimes* (38.3%) or *Never* (10.6%) had it on, there was no significant difference between the two.

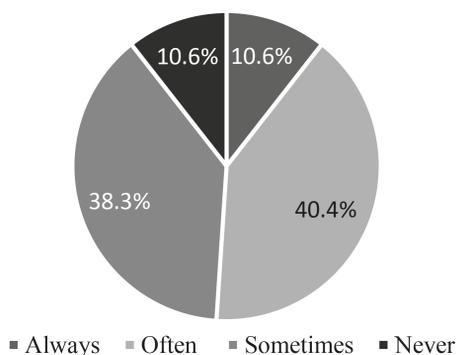


Figure 2. – Did you have your camera on during classes?

The pie chart on the right (*Fig. 3*) displays the reasons why students had their cameras off (Statement 10). Most respondents (68.1%) revealed they felt uneasy with their cameras on, whereas a small number of them stated they were doing other things (8.5%), or they wanted to protect their privacy (4.3%). A small part of participants (10.6%) also chose *Other* and typed a short answer. In their responses, they explained that they did not turn their cameras on because they were not explicitly asked to do it, or because they saw classmates with their cameras off.

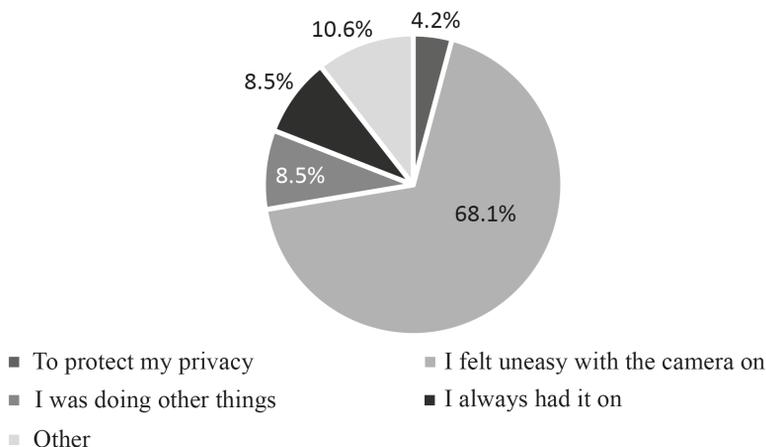


Figure 3. – *When you had your camera off, why did you do that?*

To investigate how interactions took place with both lecturers or classmates, students were asked (Statements 11 and 12) to complete the following sentence by choosing from a range of different options: *To communicate with the [teacher/classmates] during the lesson.* Figure 4 graphically represents their responses. To communicate with the teacher, most respondents (83%) chose to send a public message in the chat or just turned the microphone on to talk in the virtual classroom. On the contrary, the most preferred means of communication among students during the lecture was using WhatsApp or other chat platforms unrelated with the lesson (72.3%). Nonetheless, this option was understandably the least preferred method for contacting teachers (2.1%). Communicating with classmates in front of the whole class in the virtual classroom was quite unpopular (8.5%). However, the number of respondents who interacted with classmates in smaller breakout

rooms was significantly higher (57.4%). This was not surprising, since it had already emerged in previous parts of the survey that the more informal and intimate environment of breakout rooms fostered interactions among classmates. Interactions with the teachers within breakout rooms seemed quite limited (21.3%), and private messages in the chat of the lessons were not so common for communicating with both the lecturers (4.30%) and classmates (10.6%).

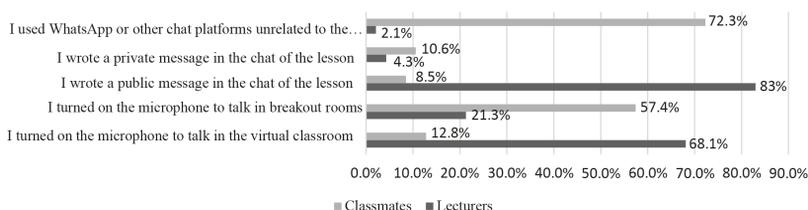


Figure 4. – To communicate with the teacher/classmates during the lesson.

Although from this section it emerged that chats and breakout rooms were frequently used to communicate during the lessons, when students were asked whether these functionalities offered more opportunities for interactions when compared to face-to-face lessons (Statement 13), no one *Strongly agreed* with the statement, 42.6% of respondents *Disagreed*, and 17% *Strongly disagreed*. This might suggest that, although students appreciated these functionalities, they still preferred face-to-face interactions.

#### 4.2.4. The overall experience

This last section of the questionnaire aimed at making students draw possible conclusions on their overall experience by asking a set of attitudinal questions. *Table 2* shows a summary of the results for this part of the survey. As regards the first Statement (a), a considerable number of respondents (46.8%) were unsure whether they felt involved during the lessons. However, a comfortable 29.8% *Agreed* with the statement and 6.4% *Strongly agreed*. Thus, a large part of students seemed to have felt involved also during e-lessons.

Statement (b) drew on Luporini (2020, 8) who found that most of her respondents had lower attention levels in e-lessons. The present data confirmed that belief in that most respondents either *Agreed* (36.2%) or *Strongly agreed* (27.7%) with the statement.

*Table 2. – Response summary.*

STATEMENTS	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	UNCERTAIN	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
a. During the lessons, I felt involved.	2.1%	14.9%	46.8%	29.8%	6.4%
b. My attention level was lower with online lessons when compared to face-to-face lessons.	4.3%	17%	14.9%	36.2%	27.7%
c. Attending online lessons in the 2020/21 academic year has been easier compared to the second semester of 2020.	4.2%	10.6%	44.7%	34%	6.4%
d. My skills with online education tools have improved.	2.1%	2.1%	14.9%	48.9%	31.9%
e. Attending lessons online has made me feel more stressed out.	12.8%	40.4%	21.3%	12.8%	12.8%

Statement (c) compared the 2020/21 academic year to the first six months of 2020. Most students felt *Uncertain* (44.7%) with the statement, showing that they did not perceive significant improvements between the beginning of the ERT period and the ‘new normal’ phase. However, a considerable part of them *Agreed* (34%) or *Strongly agreed* (6.4%) with the statement, indicating that despite the uncertainties, there was a considerable number of students who believed that attending online lessons in 2020/21 had indeed been easier.

Hoti, Dragusha, and Ndou (2022) found that teachers felt more confident with online teaching tools after the emergency period and as the responses to Statement (d) showed, this seemed to apply also to students in that they either *Agreed* (48.9%) or *Strongly agreed* (31.9%) with the statement.

According to Gewalt *et al.* (2022) university students registered high levels of stress during the ERT period. However, responses to Statement (e) would suggest that the surveyed students did not feel particularly stressed out during the 2020/21 academic year. A comfortable 40.4% *Disagreed* with the statement and 12.8% *Strongly disagreed*. A 21.3% felt *Uncertain* and only 12.8% either *Agreed* or *Strongly agreed*. This result was partly explained by students’ responses to the last three open questions, in which it emerged that students highly appreciated e-lessons because they did not have to commute to university, an aspect typical of face-to-face lessons that was considered quite stressful by students. Moreover, at the time in which the survey was sent, students were attending face-to-face lectures, and might have experienced difficulties in returning to their pre-pandemic lifestyles.

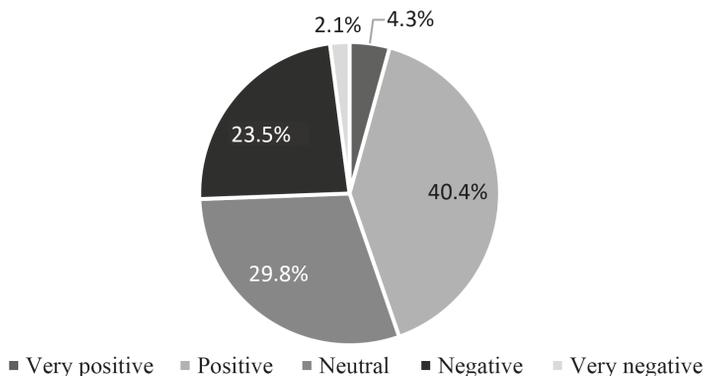
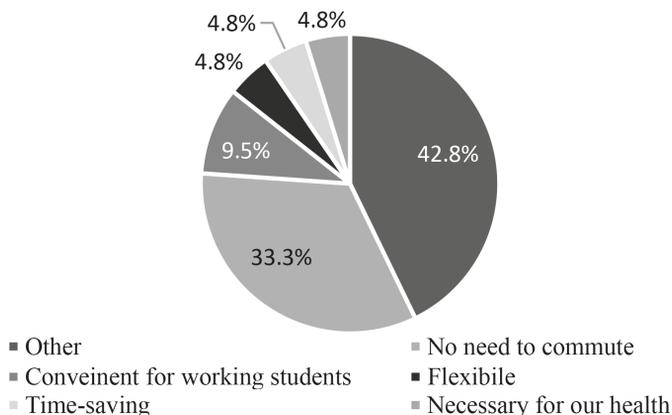


Figure 5. – In general, how would you rate your experience with online lessons?

Statement (20) prompted the respondents to rate their overall experience with online teaching on a scale from *Very positive* to *Very negative* and to motivate their choices. As shown in *Figure 5*, most respondents rated their experience as *Positive* (40.4%) or *Very positive* (4.3%). However, a part of them (29.5%) gave a *Neutral* rating, while a smaller portion evaluated the experience as *Negative* (23.5%) or *Very negative* (2.1%).

To further understand the reasons behind these ratings, Statement (21) asked respondents to provide motivations for their evaluations. Their short answers were qualitatively analysed and classified according to the reasons they gave. Any responses that were too vague to be categorised were marked as *Other*. *Figures 6* and *7* display the categories of answers given by respondents who had selected respectively positive and negative evaluations in Statement (20). One of the main reasons for positive evaluations was the advantage of not having to commute to university (42.8%) which also implied saving time (4.8%) for other activities (e.g., individual study, work, or hobbies). Additionally, online lectures were also considered quite convenient for working students (8.3%) given their flexibility (4.8%) and necessary to protect our health during the pandemic (4.8%). A cross-check of the answers revealed that students who had prior experiences with online teaching were more likely to rate their new online learning commitment positively or very positively (58%), indicating that previous experiences with online teaching may have positively influenced students' attitudes toward ERT, which was generally regarded as an imposition by students (Hodges *et al.* 2020).



*Figure 6. – Why did you give this evaluation?  
(Short answers for positive and very positive evaluations).*

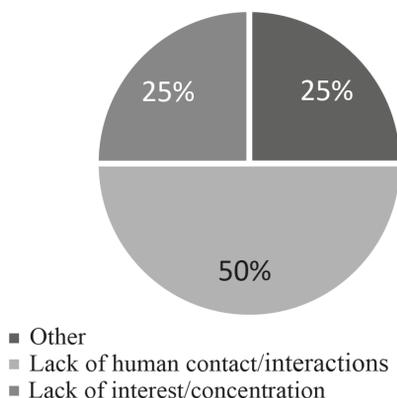


Figure 7. – Why did you give this evaluation?  
(Short answers for negative and very negative evaluations).

Respondents who chose *Negative* or *Very negative* motivated their choice mainly with a lack of social interactions and human contact (50%) as well as a lack of interest and concentration (25%). When students were asked whether they had felt lonely or isolated during the lessons (Statement 19), most of them selected either *Not really* (42.6%) or *Not at all* (8.5%), and *Quite a lot* (31.9%) and *Very much* (17%). From a cross-check of the answers, it emerged that 75% of those who gave an overall *Negative* evaluation to online lessons also felt *Very much* lonely and isolated during the lessons. Furthermore, 80% of students who negatively rated online lessons *Always* kept their cameras off during the lessons, suggesting that difficulties in engaging with the online environment, such as turning on cameras, had a negative impact on their overall experience with online learning.

As regards respondents who evaluated the experience as *Neutral*, they seemed to have difficulties in clearly evaluating their experiences. Some of them referred to having found equal amounts of benefits and disadvantages in online teaching. Nonetheless, most responses were quite vague and did not provide articulated answers.

Lastly, 34 students tried to list the advantages/disadvantages of online teaching. Concerning the advantages, many respondents referred once again to the possibility of not commuting (23.5%) and the comfort and flexibility of online lessons (23.5%). For instance, students appreciated the possibility of “Watching them [online lessons] anywhere without necessarily physically coming to university” [*Vederle (lezioni online) in*

*qualsiasi luogo senza necessariamente venire fisicamente in università*]<sup>3</sup> and the consequent “Saving of time for studying / other personal activities” [*Risparmio di tempo per lo studio / altre attività personali*]. Furthermore, the option of rewatching recordings was widely appreciated, and when the respondents were asked what functionalities they would like to integrate into traditional lessons (Statement 24), 80% of the 30 replies received mentioned recordings. Regarding the disadvantages, respondents found e-lessons to be distracting and reported having lower attention levels (38.2%). Another disadvantage was a lack of human contact and interactions (44.1%). More specifically, students stated that “It is easy to get distracted by doing other things” [*È facile distrarsi facendo altro*], and the main disadvantage was “The feeling of isolation and not being able to talk directly with someone” [*Il sentimento di isolamento e di non poter parlare direttamente con qualcuno*].

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Online digital tools had already been partly implemented in higher education before the pandemic, however, their use was still quite limited. The spread of Covid-19 accelerated the digital shift in universities and online teaching became the only option available for universities to continue didactic activities during 2020 and 2021.

As already mentioned, the term ERT highlighted the provisional nature of online teaching during the pandemic. However, since the emergency period was protracted for a considerable amount of time, this teaching modality, which was once thought to be just a provisional measure, became a more structured way of teaching during the 2020/21 academic year.

This study reported on students’ experiences with online teaching in an English course provided by the Language Centre of the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia. These lessons tended to be quite interactive in face-to-face lessons and, from what emerged from the questionnaire, they seemed to have maintained their overall interactive nature also with the online delivery. More specifically, a focus on online interactions revealed their crucial role in online ELT. Students highlighted the need

---

<sup>3</sup> Literal translations of students’ answers are provided to allow all readers to understand the examples. The original Italian examples are provided in square brackets.

for more interactive virtual spaces (e.g., breakout rooms) when learning online. Furthermore, negative experiences with online teaching seemed to have been influenced by a lack of virtual interactions (e.g., students' reluctance to turn their cameras on). For this reason, as Freddi (2021) noted, particular attention should be paid to students who have difficulties getting involved with online teaching in that they risk feeling isolated and less stimulated.

The return to face-to-face lessons has possibly made students more aware of the perceived advantages of online teaching. Some students complained about a lack of human contact with online lectures, and overall, face-to-face lessons seemed to be still preferred among students. As noted by Poppi (in press), person-to-person interactions may diminish in online teaching and therefore, educators should enhance and promote communications in virtual classrooms. Despite these complaints, the overall students' attitudes toward online teaching seemed to be positive and many respondents recognised the advantages of e-learning, such as not commuting to university or the possibility to rewatch parts of the lessons through recordings.

This study is limited in its respondents' size and methodological approach. To have a more comprehensive picture also teachers should be surveyed. Moreover, open questions in the questionnaire aimed to gather more detailed explanations of students' perspectives. Quite surprisingly, a considerable part of them did provide detailed answers. However, because of the quantitative nature of surveys and the usually superficial answers found in open questions, more qualitative interviews could be implemented to have a complete overview of students' perspectives. Future studies can expand this field of investigation by implementing focus groups to add qualitative insights to the study of ERT and SRT and could combine the study of students' experiences with teachers' perspectives to have a more comprehensive view of what this emergency period has left in terms of future teaching opportunities.

APPENDIX 1

---

PARTE 1: INFORMAZIONI GENERALI	
1. Indicare l'età.	Risposta breve
2. Da quale città/paese hai seguito le lezioni nell'a.a. 2020/21?	Risposta breve
3. Quali sono gli strumenti che hai utilizzato più frequentemente per accedere alle lezioni? (Più di un'alternativa consentita)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Computer</li><li>• Smartphone</li><li>• Tablet</li></ul>
4. Hai avuto problemi di connessione durante le lezioni?	Sempre/Mai (scala a 4 punti)
5. Hai seguito dei corsi online prima del periodo di emergenza Covid-19?	Sì/No
PARTE 2: ESPERIENZE CON LE PIATTAFORME WEB 2.0 PER L'EDUCAZIONE	
6. Quali piattaforme di videoconferencing online hai trovato più intuitive per accedere alle lezioni? (Più di un'alternativa consentita)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Google Meet</li><li>• Collaborate</li><li>• Microsoft Teams</li><li>• Big Blue Button</li><li>• Zoom</li></ul>
7. Quali funzionalità delle piattaforme di videoconferencing online hai apprezzato di più? (Più di un'alternativa consentita)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Breakout rooms</li><li>• Chat</li><li>• Sondaggi</li><li>• Condivisione schermo</li><li>• Registrazione</li><li>• Nessuna</li></ul>
8. Perché hai apprezzato quella/e funzionalità?	Risposta breve
PARTE 3: INTERAZIONI NELLE CLASSI VIRTUALI DI LINGUA INGLESE	
9. Hai tenuto la videocamera accesa durante le lezioni?	Sempre/Mai (scala a 4 punti)
10. Quelle volte in cui hai tenuto la videocamera spenta, perché lo hai fatto?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Per tutelare la mia privacy</li><li>• Mi sentivo a disagio con la telecamera accesa</li><li>• Stavo facendo altre cose</li><li>• L'ho sempre tenuta accesa</li><li>• Altro: _____</li></ul>
11. Per comunicare con l'insegnante durante la lezione (Più di un'alternativa consentita)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• accendevo il microfono per parlare nella classe virtuale</li><li>• accendevo il microfono per parlare in una breakout room</li><li>• scrivevo un messaggio pubblico nella chat della lezione</li><li>• scrivevo un messaggio privato nella chat della lezione</li><li>• usavo WhatsApp o altre piattaforme di messaggistica scollegate dalla lezione</li></ul>

---

---

12. Per comunicare con i miei compagni di corso durante la lezione (Più di un'alternativa consentita)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• accendevo il microfono per parlare nella classe virtuale</li><li>• accendevo il microfono per parlare in una breakout room</li><li>• scrivevo un messaggio pubblico nella chat della lezione</li><li>• scrivevo un messaggio privato nella chat della lezione</li><li>• usavo WhatsApp o altre piattaforme di messaggistica scollegate dalla lezione</li></ul>
13. Le funzionalità delle piattaforme di videoconferencing online (per esempio chat, breakout rooms) offrono un'opportunità di interazione in più rispetto alle lezioni in presenza.	Completamente d'accordo / In completo disaccordo (scala a 5 punti)
PARTE 4: ESPERIENZA GENERALE	
14. Mi sono sentito coinvolto durante le lezioni.	Completamente d'accordo / In completo disaccordo (scala a 5 punti)
15. Il mio livello di attenzione nelle lezioni online era più basso rispetto alle lezioni in presenza.	Completamente d'accordo / In completo disaccordo (scala a 5 punti)
16. Seguire le lezioni online nell'anno accademico 2020/21 è stato più semplice rispetto al secondo semestre del 2020.	Completamente d'accordo / In completo disaccordo (scala a 5 punti)
17. Le mie competenze con gli strumenti di didattica online sono migliorate.	Completamente d'accordo / In completo disaccordo (scala a 5 punti)
18. Seguire le lezioni online mi ha fatto sentire più stressato rispetto a seguire le lezioni in presenza.	Completamente d'accordo / In completo disaccordo (scala a 5 punti)
19. Durante lo svolgimento delle lezioni mi sono sentito solo e isolato.	Molto / Per niente (scala a 4 punti)
20. In generale, come valuteresti l'esperienza delle lezioni online?	Molto positiva / Molto negativa (scala a 5 punti)
21. Perché hai dato questa valutazione?	Risposta breve
22. Secondo te quali sono i vantaggi delle lezioni online?	Domanda aperta
23. Secondo te quali sono gli svantaggi delle lezioni online?	Domanda aperta
24. Quali strumenti di didattica online vorresti che fossero integrati nelle lezioni tradizionali? Perché?	Domanda aperta

---

REFERENCES

- Akram, Huma, Sarfraz Aslam, Atif Saleem, and Khalida Parveen. 2021. "The Challenges of Online Teaching in Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Public Universities in Karachi, Pakistan". *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research* 20: 263-282. doi: 10.28945/4784.
- Ally, Mohamed. 2008. "Foundations of Educational Theory for Online Learning". In *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*. 2nd ed., edited by Therry Anderson, 15-45. Edmonton: AU Press.
- Alwaheebi, Ebtisam W., and Fatma M. Al-Qahtani. 2022. "EFL Instructors' and Students' Perceptions of Online Writing Instruction during the Covid-19 Pandemic". *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 13 (4): 809-819. doi: 10.17507/jltr.1304.14.
- Arabaci, Imam Bakir, and Ceyda Akilli. 2021. "English Teachers' Views on the Use of Web 2.0 Tools in Educational Environments". *Asian Journal of Education and Training* 7 (2): 115-125. doi: 10.20448/journal.522.2021.72.115.125.
- Ashkanani, Alia, Ghalya Ashkanani, Nuran Bayraktar, Esha Subhash, and Ali Chaari. 2022. "Converting a Formerly in Person Biochemistry Course Based Undergraduate Research Experience to Online Teaching during the Covid-19 Pandemic". *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education* 50 (1): 104-113. doi: 10.1002/bmb.21597.
- Bolliger, Doris U., and Colleen Halupa. 2022. "An Investigation of Instructors' Online Teaching Readiness". *TechTrends* 66 (2): 185-195. doi: 10.1007/s11528-021-00654-0.
- Bond, Melissa, Victoria I. Marín, Carina Dolch, Svenja Bedenlier, and Olaf Zawacki-Richter. 2018. "Digital Transformation in German Higher Education: Student and Teacher Perceptions and Usage of Digital Media". *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 15 (1): 48. doi: 10.1186/s41239-0180130-1.
- Brown, James Dean, and Theodore S. Rodgers. 2010. *Doing Second Language Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cilliers, Elizelle Juaneé. 2017. "The Challenge of Teaching to Generation Z". *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences* 3 (1): 188-198. doi: 10.20319/pijss.2017.31.188198.
- Council of Europe, ed. 2020. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion Volume*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing. [www.coe.int/lang-cefr](http://www.coe.int/lang-cefr)
- Daniel, Sir John. 2020. "Education and the Covid-19 Pandemic". *Prospects* 49 (1-2): 91-96. doi: 10.1007/s1125020-09464-3.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán. 2007. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methodologies*. Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press.

- Dörnyei, Zoltán. 2010. *Questionnaires in Second Language Research: Construction, Administration, and Processing*. 2nd ed. New York - London: Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group.
- Forťová, Nicola, Jitka Sedláčková, and František Tůma. 2021. “‘And My Screen Wouldn’t Share’: Student-Teachers’ Perceptions of ICT in Online Teaching Practice and Online Teaching”. *Īkala* 26 (3): 513-29. doi: 10.17533/udea.ikala.v26n3a03.
- Freddi, Maria. 2021. “Reflection on Digital Language Teaching, Learning, and Assessment in Times of Crisis: A View from Italy”. In *The World Universities’ Response to Covid-19: Remote Online Language Teaching*. 1st ed., edited by Nebojša Radić, Anastasia Atabekova, Maria Freddi, and Josef Schmied, 279-93. Research publishing.net. doi: 10.14705/rpnet.2021.52.1278.
- Gewalt, Sandra Claudia, Sarah Berger, Regina Krisam, and Markus Breuer. 2022. “Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on University Students’ Physical Health, Mental Health and Learning, a Cross-Sectional Study Including 917 Students from Eight Universities in Germany”. *PLoS ONE* 17 (8): e0273928. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0273928.
- Hodges, Charles, Stephanie Moore, Barb Lockee, Torrey Trust, and Aaron Bond. 2020. “The Difference between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning”. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Hoti, Irida, Blerita Dragusha, and Valentina Ndou. 2022. “Online Teaching during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Albania”. *Administrative Sciences* 12 (3): 116. doi: 10.3390/admsci12030116.
- Isaiás, Pedro, Paula Miranda, and Sara Pifano. 2021. “Framework for Web 2.0 Implementation in Higher Education: Experts’ Validation”. *Higher Education Quarterly* 75 (4): 648-66. doi: 10.1111/hequ.12295.
- Long, Elizabeth Ruth, Franca Poppi, and Sara Radighieri. 2019. “English as a Lingua Franca in the Academic Context: The Role of University Language Centres”. *Linguae & – Rivista di lingue e culture moderne* 18 (1): 4. doi: 10.7358/ling-2019-001-long.
- Luporini, Antonella. 2020. “Implementing an Online English Linguistics Course during the Covid-19 Emergency in Italy: Teacher’s and Students’ Perspectives”. *ASp, la revue du GERAS* 78: 75-88. doi: 10.4000/asp.6682.
- McKenzie, Lindsay. 2021. “Students Want Online Learning Options Post-Pandemic”. *Inside Higher Ed*, April 27. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/04/27/survey-reveals-positive-outlook-online-instruction-post-pandemic>
- Mohamed Amin, Maryam, and Norazha Paiman. 2022. “University English Language Teachers’ Use of Digital Platforms for Online Teaching”. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning – IJET* 17 (20): 134-48. doi: 10.3991/ijet.v17i20.31421.

- Negi, Janak Singh. 2010. "The Role of Teachers' Non-Verbal Communication in ELT Classroom". *Journal of NELTA* 14 (1): 101-110. doi: 10.3126/nelta.v14i1.3096.
- Nkemleke, Daniel A. 2021. "Going Virtual, Staying Face-to-Face: Trajectory of ELT Classes during the Pandemic". In *The World Universities' Response to Covid-19: Remote Online Language Teaching*. 1st ed., edited by Nebojša Radić, Anastasia Atabekova, Maria Freddi, and Josef Schmied, 49-61. Research-publishing.net. doi: 10.14705/rpnet.2021.52.1263.
- Noel, Karam, Rebecca Schmor, Andre Scholze, and Enrica Piccardo. 2022. "Supporting Online Language Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Insights into Language Teachers' Use of Action-Oriented, Plurilingual Scenarios in Northern Italy". *TESL Ontario* 48 (1): 9-18.
- O'Reilly, Tim. 2007. "What Is Web 2.0, Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software". *Communication & Strategies* 1: 17-37.
- Poppi, Franca. 2012. *Global Interactions in English as a Lingua Franca: How Written Communication Is Changing under the Influence of Electronic Media and New Contexts of Use*. Bern: Peter Lang.  
[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1008839](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1008839)
- Poppi, Franca. In press. "Can We Reconcile ERT (Emergency Remote Teaching) and Best Practices in Language Learning/Teaching?". *Iperstoria*.
- Prensky, Marc. 2001. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants". *On the Horizon* 5 (9).  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424843>.
- Radic, Nebojša, Anastasia Atabekova, Maria Freddi, and Josef Schmied, eds. 2021. *The World Universities' Response to Covid-19: Remote Online Language Teaching*. Research-publishing.net.
- Rossettini, Giacomo, Tommaso Geri, Andrea Turolla, Antonello Viceconti, Cristina Scumà, Mattia Mirandola, Andrea Dell'Isola, Silvia Gianola, Filippo Maselli, and Alvisa Palese. 2021. "Online Teaching in Physiotherapy Education during Covid-19 Pandemic in Italy: A Retrospective Case-Control Study on Students' Satisfaction and Performance". *BMC Medical Education* 21 (1): 456. doi: 10.1186/s12909-021-02896-1.
- Rossi, Enrica. 2019. "I CLA per una moderna glottodidattica. Nuovi approcci, strategie innovative e best practice". *Linguae & - Rivista di lingue e culture moderne* 18 (1): 11-16. doi: 10.7358/ling-2019-001-ross.
- Schmied, Josef. 2021. "Remote Online Teaching in Modern Languages in Germany: Responses According to Audiences and Teaching Objectives". In *The World Universities' Response to Covid-19: Remote Online Language Teaching*, edited by Nebojša Radić, Anastasia Atabekova, Maria Freddi, and Josef Schmied, 353-368. Research-publishing.net. doi: 10.14705/rpnet.2021.52.1283.
- Stewart, William H., Youngkyun Baek, and Patrick R. Lowenthal. 2022. "From Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) to Sustained Remote Teaching (SRT): A Comparative Semester Analysis of Exchange Students' Experiences and

Perceptions of Learning Online During Covid-19". *Online Learning Journal* 26 (2): 170-197.

<https://olj.onlinelearningconsortium.org/index.php/olj/article/view/2661>

Copyright (©) 2023 Ilaria Iori

Editorial format and graphical layout: copyright (©) LED Edizioni Universitarie



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives – 4.0 International License

*How to cite this paper:*

Iori, Ilaria. 2023. "Online ELT during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study on Students' Perspectives". *Lingue Culture Mediazioni / Languages Cultures Mediation – LCM* 10 (1): 231-255. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/lcm-2023-001-iori>