



Distance Education in Italy: Investigating Foreign Language Distance Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools During COVID-19 Lockdown

ARTICLE – ITALIAN

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects on education in Italy of the unexpected shift from proximate to distance learning after the COVID-19 outbreak and consequent closure of schools across the country. The study is grounded on the premise that online learning can make education more accessible all over the world: in fact, an increasing number of universities and institutions are turning to blended and distance learning in order to increase participation. Moreover, distance education and technology may help to promote collaboration across many institutions and offer a wider choice of classes. On these premises, the following study intends to trace an overview of the current situation in Italy and outline limits and solutions to a new type of education which could lead to innovative and effective teaching practices. Specifically, the study will explore how teachers and schools have managed the unexpected circumstances, how quickly they have switched to online teaching and with what consequences and limits, and to what extent distance education's success or failure correlates with the sudden COVID-19 emergency (meaning that there was insufficient time to reorganize the teaching and learning environment), or whether it simply depends on a lack of other objective requisites (teachers' or students' digital competences, online resources, and so forth). The project will contribute to discussions of the impact that this exceptional time may have in terms of eliciting new educational practices, and how it can stimulate self-reflection on future teaching strategies, as well as produce educational literature. As this is the first study on distance education during COVID-19, and because of the timing, no empirical or case study research has been done yet.

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On 5 March 2020, the Italian Government decided to shut all schools and universities. With more than 2,000 cases of COVID-19 diagnosed and seventy-nine deaths, Italy was one of the first countries after China to have a large number of Coronavirus cases. At first, the closure was due until 15 March, but after the situation got more complicated, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte decided to extend the closure to 3 April, and subsequently until the end of the school year in June. Restaurants, bars, and other services were closed as well, and authorities imposed travel restrictions and quarantine in all towns. All these drastic measures were taken to stem the spread of the virus.

Teachers were asked to experiment with teaching remotely, even if not all schools were equipped for this circumstance: in the light of lifelong learning and the right to education, they had to ensure other ways to keep the opportunity to study during the lockdown.

1.1 KEY COMPETENCIES: AN OVERVIEW

With the onset of the Internet and its extension, the education system and approaches to learning have changed and continue to develop in significant ways. The generation born in this digital and modern age is known as “digital natives” or the “Net-gen” (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives are the generation that spontaneously learns to use the new technologies. This assumption led to the myth that being born digital means being more competent in using technology (Engen *et al.*, 2014). However, these ‘digital speakers’ are used to getting information quickly, they do not like to ‘dive’ into a text and prefer to ‘surf’ through hyperlinks. Horrigan (2007) found that students tend to consume rather than produce in digital learning contexts, meaning that their digital competence and use of technology are not so advanced, despite the digital tools and resources at their disposal. Therefore, the acquisition of effective digital competence in this generation is an educational challenge when focusing on learning systems as it requires a set of cognitive and metacognitive capacities.

In 1997 the OECD launched a project called “Definition and Selection of Competencies” (DeSeCo), with the purpose of providing a framework of competencies that individuals need for a successful life in such a complex and globalized world.

The DeSeCo Project’s conceptual framework for key competencies classifies such competencies in three broad categories. First, individuals need to be able to use a wide range of tools for interacting effectively with the environment: both physical ones such as information technology and socio-cultural ones such as the use of language. They need to understand such tools well enough to adapt them for their own purposes—to use tools interactively. Second, in an increasingly interdependent world, individuals need to be able to engage with others, and since they will encounter people from a range of backgrounds, it is important that they are able to interact in heterogeneous groups. Third, individuals need to be able to take responsibility for managing their own lives, situate their lives in the broader social context and act autonomously. (5)

According to the DeSeCo project, a favourable learning environment is important to acquire a competency. Moreover, the core of the core of the key competencies framework is “the ability of individuals to think for themselves as an expression of moral and intellectual maturity, and to take responsibility for their learning and for their actions” (8) (OECD, 2005).

However, when considering a learning environment, we also have to take into account certain variables determined by social, family, and personal contexts other than the learning setting, which can influence it too. *Figure 1*, which was retrieved from the DeSeCo document, provides an overview of how the three competencies, namely ‘Using Tools Interactively’, ‘Interacting in Heterogeneous Groups’, and ‘Acting Autonomously’, can interrelate and create combinations depending on the different situations people live in (for example, technological access, social and power relations, family and cultural background).

In 2006 the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union identified “digital competence” as one of eight key competences for lifelong learning (Recommendation 2006). Competences are defined by what “all individuals need for personal fulfilment and

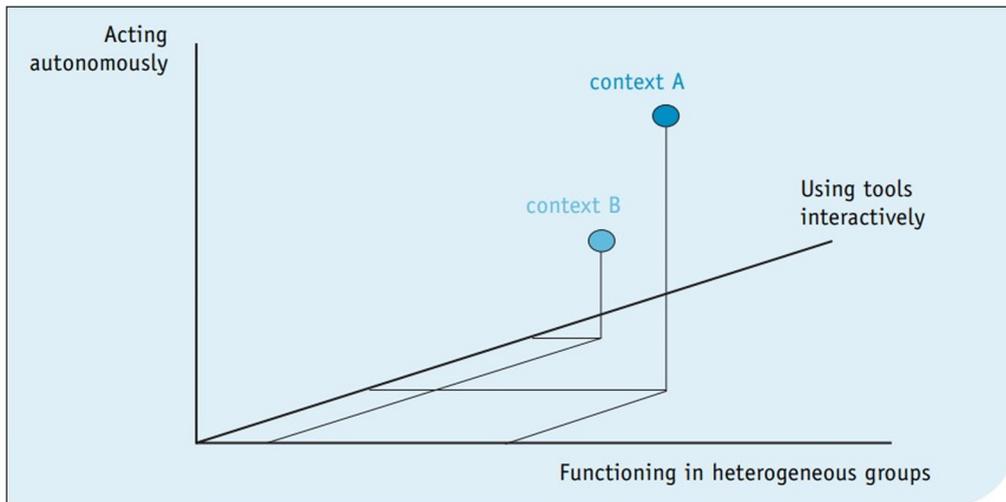


Figure 1 Key competencies are employed in different combinations in varying contexts.

development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment” (EU Parliament 2006: 13). In particular, digital competence is described as “confident and critical usage of information and communications technology for work, leisure and communication”. In addition, these competences include “communication in a foreign language” and “learning to learn”, the ability to effectively manage one’s own learning process, either individually or in groups.

Not only had the European Union promoted a broader usage of the eight key competences in education and training systems, but the following year the Italian government itself developed a new version of these competences, the so-called ‘*Competenze di cittadinanza*’ (Citizenship competencies) which students should acquire by the end of compulsory education “to a level that equips them for adult life, and which forms a basis for further learning and working life” (Recommendation 2006/962/EC, paragraph 13).¹

All eight competences, especially those listed above, mostly refer to the ordinary schooling environment and compulsory education, but can be used for general learning and in particular with online language learning, as potential learners need to develop appropriate digital literacies (digital competence) to study a foreign language effectively (communication in a foreign language) using technology. Furthermore, learning (how) to learn is the key to develop learning autonomy and responsibility.

In conclusion, in order to effectively learn in an online setting, the Italian Government has to ensure the constitutional right to education by developing policies on distance education, so that institutions can provide measures for inclusive access to all students. Moreover, all stakeholders must create a favourable learning environment, and students need to acquire competencies such as autonomy and responsibility. All actors (school, teachers, family, and pupils) must work towards this same goal.

1.2 DISTANCE EDUCATION

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, distance education (DE), also called distance/online/e- learning, is defined as a

form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student–teacher and student–student communication (Berg, 2016).

DE comprises both distance learning (activity performed by the student) and distance teaching (activity performed by the teacher). The difference from general online learning is that it is not a self-study context; instead, it is carried out through institutions (schools, universities).

¹ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning.

Simonson et al. (2011) divide the 150-year-old distance education historical path into three phases:

first, correspondence study, with its use of print-based instructional and communication media; second, the rise of the distance teaching universities and the use of analog mass media; and third, the widespread integration of distance education elements into most forms of education, and characterized by the use of digital instructional and communication technologies. (130)

Thus, DE appears to have an extensive background, but still it remains uncertain as to how it should be most effectively applied. Bates (in Foley, 2003) suggested twelve rules for the use of technology in education, which offer guidance in the field of DE. First, they include the importance of teamworking among the actors involved in the process of learning and teaching, as well as the quality of teaching through a good and professional design of learning activities and tasks. In light of what is known as lifelong learning and professional development, what makes teaching successful is related to teachers' competencies and skills to use technology, which can be achieved through training. Finally, we must not forget that technology itself is merely a tool, but the ultimate goal remains "how and what we want the learners to learn" (833).

1.2.1 Roles of teachers and students in online educational settings

The affective filter (Krashen 1988), anxiety, and other factors which usually affect language acquisition in a general classroom setting, do not influence the learning process in online mode (Huang 2013, Leach 2012). However, the lack of actual social interaction can create a sense of isolation which does not normally occur in a general face-to-face setting. In order to overcome this feeling of isolation (Paulus and Scherff 2008), students need to form an online learning community where they can share information as well as meet each other and exchange different views.

Furthermore, language instructors should stimulate and foster learners' autonomy and online interaction through the introduction of different tools, tasks, and technological assistance in an online learning environment. The roles of foreign language teachers are redefined as moderators and guides (Meskill and Ranglova, 2000).

1.3 THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

Italy was the first European country to impose national lockdown restrictions and the closure of schools on 10 March 2020. The Italian Government promptly announced measures to equip schools with digital devices and online platforms, and to train teachers for distance learning (Republic of Italy, 2020), without corresponding instructions on how to proceed, as the unknown pandemic situation led to short-term and in-progress measures which created an uncertain climate.

The COVID-19 emergency demonstrated how many countries "were not ready for the world of digital learning opportunities" (OECD, 2020: 16). Regarding Italy, as stated by OECD reports, there are certain elements that prefigured the lack of preparation of both schools and the government to the sudden switch to DE. For instance, school principals in Italy, among other OECD countries, believe that shortages in or inadequacy of digital technology can impede quality learning (OECD, 2019), and therefore were not "aware of the opportunities for instruction that modern technology can provide" (16). Additionally, according to OECD (2019), not only does Italy spend a lot less on education, about 3.6% of its GDP compared to 4.9% on average across other OECD countries, but it also "has the largest share of teachers over the age of 50 across OECD countries (59%) and will have to renew half of its teaching workforce in the next decade or so" (1), which means less generational preparation and inclination to technology.

Many journalists expressed public concerns about DE in Italy through articles and reports questioning the lack of preparation by the government in giving clear guidelines, rather than blaming schools, teachers, and students for negligence in using technology and digital tools. Arnaldo Pellini, Research Associate at the Overseas Development Institute in London, wrote on his blog about how "the Italian education system is weak. Resources are scarce but teachers have been very resilient during this crisis" (Pellini, 2020). Although the Ministry of Education

has helped schools with financial resources for the allocation of digital tools and devices for vulnerable groups of students, “some of the guidelines were slightly vague, in particular about end-of-year assessments” (Pellini, 2020).

In an article titled “Schools in Italy in Covid-19 time” dated 30 March 2020, Principal Pinella Giuffrida, representative of the ANP (Italian Principals Association) stated that, despite the fact that “many schools were ready to face the distance teaching [...], the Government indications were not immediately followed by specific notes from our Ministry” (Giuffrida, 2020).

The perceptions of distance learning in Italian students have already been investigated (Ferraro et al. 2020), whereas the teachers’ point of view has not been considered yet. Starting from these data, the following study will try to give evidence for hypotheses raised from several articles and informal teachers’ opinions.

2. METHOD

2.1 PROCEDURE

This study used qualitative questionnaires in order to understand the research problem more completely. Our knowledge of the effects of the unexpected shift from proximate to distance learning in education in Italy after the COVID-19 outbreak and consequent closure of schools across the country is largely based on very limited data. The aim of the research was thus to trace an overview of the current situation in Italy and detect limits and solutions to a new type of education which could lead to innovative and effective teaching practices. Hence, the research included open-ended questions that helped to better explain and interpret the data and their validity and reliability. Because of the use of the Internet as a means of interaction and communication, and the need to reach a national and varied sample, the questionnaire was self-administered through survey software in accordance with the IT/Legal Services advice to ensure Data Protection Act compliance. All participants were asked to provide consent to use their data by ticking a box.

2.2 PARTICIPANTS

The participants are secondary school foreign language teachers working in Italy and who have switched to DE mode due to COVID-19. The total number of respondents who gave consent to the study was nineteen, and twelve answered all the questions. They are all 18+, with Italian as their first language.

All participants were recruited through previous contacts, online search, and contact with relevant Italian schools and institution/Society for Italian Studies mailing list.

2.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire was administered between June and July 2020, at the end of the Italian school year. The first part of the questionnaire gathered personal information on the participants, such as age, teacher status, and geographical region of work.

The age range varied from 29 to 62. Of the participants, 85.71% are tenured teachers, and 57.14% teach in “*Scuola secondaria di II grado*”.² Most of the participants teach in Puglia (7), then Veneto (2), Sardinia (1), Emilia (1), Marche (1), Basilicata (1), and Torino (1). A dozen participants teach English, two are teachers of French.

The second part of the questionnaire was composed of open-ended questions aimed to evaluate teaching experience in DE during the COVID-19 emergency.

Participants were unanimous in believing that the lack of clear guidelines and transparency from the government and the Ministry of Education have had an impact on the application of DE during COVID-19.

Teachers were then questioned about the schools’ management of the sudden switch from classroom to online teaching, and if they provided guidelines, suggested online tools and platforms, and support for teachers, students, and families. Some schools “suggested tools

² Students from 14 to 19 years old.

and platforms that had already been used”, such as “the use of Google classroom” or “Zoom Meeting”. Some schools were not ready to quickly operate, providing “at first no clear guidelines, then more accurate instructions support for all”. As one teacher reported, “the school did not provide [many] guidelines. They only created a professional account to every teacher and students on G Suite but the use of this platform was not compulsory. Also, the DE delivery was not compulsory nor for teachers or for students.”

It is clear, from this and other answers, that schools were unable to provide sufficient guidelines, as the Minister of Education herself did not give clear instructions on how to proceed. One teacher understands that this was due to the unprecedented circumstances and states that, with no official protocol, schools took charge of the situation, providing some ideas on how to proceed, but teachers were mainly free to choose among a huge range of platforms and tools. Some schools found a solution by leaving teachers “quite free to choose the most suitable tool and strategies”, and then “made a survey about what [we] have found to be the best tool/platform and so all teachers should use same platform”. Evidently, with no help from the government, the coordination and reorganization online largely relied on each school’s competence and preparation, and the communication among teachers, staff, and school head.

Because of the late intervention in giving guidelines (“the first courses and guidelines for teachers started in May: too late”), teachers “started trying different platforms, methods and ideas and sharing them on WhatsApp chats. We did the same with the families. The institution came in when we had already arranged the most of it.” It is interesting to note that families are mentioned as part of the DE reorganization, with teachers “sharing” platforms and methods with them. In this sudden new learning ecology, with students at home, using personal devices and Internet connection, the families’ involvement was inevitable. Nonetheless, it demonstrates how delocalizing the educational environment and distancing from the main “components” of the educational process (teachers and classmates) may destabilize all interlocutors, so a natural instinct to involve other actors is indispensable.

Families were included in the discussion later when teachers were asked if, in their opinion, there is more role balance and cooperation among teachers, family, and community in online learning than in a classroom context. The answers were quite equal, with a slight majority (58.33%) believing that there is no balance in respecting the roles. There was not an unequivocal explanation for this answer, but rather different reasons to justify the response, from families not collaborating with the teachers, to parents who were very engaged in helping their children—but mainly there was no clarification of the roles and duties of each part. This leads us to consider the idea that families are made of people with diverse attitudes and approaches towards their children learning and individual relationships with teachers (and vice versa). Furthermore, we need to remember that families can be supportive and facilitate students’ learning online, but they are not expert of the subject(s), nor qualified in teaching. Thus, expectations about cooperation among families and teachers must remain limited to a certain extent.

The most used online tools and platforms include Google Classroom, Zoom Meeting, Gsuite, Google Meet, WeSchool, Edmodo, and WhatsApp to communicate with students and quickly receive their feedback. A participant teacher has created a YouTube channel to upload 10-minute videos to be shared with students.

To the question “do you think you have a good command of digital technologies? To what extent has your digital competence helped you in this situation?” all participants commented they have good command of digital technologies, which have helped in this situation.

Teachers were then asked to reflect on the differences between their teaching within the classroom and teaching online, considering some factors such as timing, tools, methodology, material, evaluation, and contents of the lesson. Almost all the participants cited the duration of the lesson and evaluation as the main difference with an online class. Regarding timing, teachers argue that “online classes were shorter than classroom lessons”, “the lesson lasts about 30 minutes, less than at school”, or “Zoom provides time limited videocalls- 40 minutes” and happens “once a week instead of twice” therefore reducing the amount of teaching time available. On the other hand, a teacher explained the use of a “flipped classroom, where [I] left students free to discover a new topic, to be studied and explained in a subsequent video-lesson”. This would appear to indicate that the limitation of time actually gave teachers the

chance to experiment with new pedagogical approaches to teaching, which were not taken readily feasible in classroom settings, where blended and hybrid learning might have been considered unnecessary compared to in-person learning. As for evaluation, for one teacher “they were mainly based on oral interview”, perhaps because, as some others claim, “if given written tests, at home they (students) can have help”; consequently, “you cannot be sure 100% the students are working by themselves”. Cheating is therefore considered a factor during online assessment, but as for time limitation, it could give an opportunity to alter the way teachers and students conceive the learning process, and it can be a challenge to improve some essential skills and competences such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity.

If it is difficult to assess knowledge in a written and oral tests, because students may get help from the Internet or books, the solution may involve a change in the way knowledge is employed, for example by giving students a problem or a task which requires the use of their knowledge, or testing knowledge through reality tasks, or challenged-based and content-based projects, to mention just a few. Other differences and concerns were related to interaction (“no human connection [...] interaction was reduced”, “interaction is also problematic”) and the absence of “paraverbal communication [facial expressions and gestures], which are essential for capturing and maintaining students’ attention”. Three teachers do not see differences between online and proximate teaching, and one in particular states: “I plan the same activities of a classroom lesson and I would say that to a certain extent online class is more productive because I don’t waste time on telling annoying pupils off. At the same time, I can provide extra materials for my pupils avoiding photocopies: I just send them by email or on the platform and pupils can always find them (in this way they can also find my explanations if they have missed them)”.

These findings surely meet the premise of this study about the advantages of online learning and teaching in making education more accessible all over the world. The issue concerns the good command and availability of a certain technology, the joint and active participation of all interlocutors (teachers, school staff, students, families), innovative pedagogical approaches, and finally the guidance of both national and local governments. All these components and circumstances need to occur in order to make DE and online learning an added value to the educational system.

When asked about the limits and problems encountered during an online lesson, and whether they differ from those of a classroom lesson, the majority of respondents felt that bad connection and technical problems were the main limits during their online classes, followed by lack of interaction with students, “since most of them turn the camera off”, which creates misunderstandings as “some pupils often turn off their cameras and microphones and you are not able to understand if they are having technical problems or they are just hiding themselves to do other things”. Some teachers introduced a problem related with social differences, stating that DE “is not inclusive for all students. There are some who do not have many possibilities.” For instance, as other teachers better explained, “pupils with disabilities who can’t have the support of their teachers” particularly “lack of digital devices and good Internet connection for students and families, especially those in deprived socio-economic contexts”. Hence, DE appears to be less inclusive and less accessible than previously thought. Many learners are excluded because they do not have appropriate access to technological equipment or skills, or they need the presence of a teacher to support the learning. Two teachers talked about inclusion and DE, and commented that “online teaching is not inclusive if students don’t have the same access to technology. Plus, learning styles are different and only teaching in person can help students”, and “[it] is accessible for everyone, but it is not inclusive”. As a matter of fact, inclusion has always been one of the main issues in school debates. Again, the new learning ecology surrounding DE imposes the active participation of families, who are asked to become tutors, technology facilitators, support teachers, with no specific pedagogical and educational skills to perform such roles. Moreover, the socio-economic situation of families and parents played a crucial part in helping students during DE, and this in fact created a gap between those who have the ability to support their children and those who do not have proper digital skills to enable their children’s learning.

Despite the highlighted limitations, some teachers agreed that there are also advantages of an online lesson compared to a classroom-based context, concerning educational methods and the access to authentic foreign language material and tools which can facilitate students’ learning. Other teachers refer to practical matters, as “students who used to forget their

homework were immediately spotted” and “you can mute your students more promptly than in a classroom—pair working and group working are more effective as far as speaking activities are concerned”. Yet other teachers do not see any advantages, one explaining that “the advantages of an online lesson could be that students do not need to travel to go to school but I personally do not see any other advantages”.

Even though all participants expressed some concerns about DE, all answered “yes” to the question “will you adopt DE in future teaching practices?”, although limiting its use to certain activities such as rapidly sharing materials and information, small group language activities, online speaking classes with native speakers abroad. Briefly, all teachers will not exclude the possibility of adopting DE in future teaching practices, but only to complement classroom teaching.

Participants were then asked to reflect on the sudden COVID-19 emergency and how it may have had a (positive or negative) role in the success or failure of DE practices in Italy. Among the positive outcomes, teachers commented on the use of technologies and new educational practices, which they could not avoid in DE and therefore led to professional improvement in terms of technology usage and innovation in teaching practice.

On the other hand, some teachers still think that “online lessons cannot substitute traditional lessons” and “school has to be done physically. Gestures, [tone of] voice, and eye [contact]” which are types of non-verbal communication and body language, are essential interpersonal elements within a classroom.

Finally, some teachers believe that the sudden COVID-19 emergency has had a negative role in the success of DE practices in Italy, because of a lack of preparation among teachers and schools in dealing with DE, and because teachers had to spend many hours on the computer both for delivering classes and for additional bureaucratic work (reports, new evaluation standards), which also generated a situation where there was “no division between working time and personal time”. Teachers felt aware also of the need for getting prepared for a second wave, and a following renewed closure of schools.

The final question related to participants’ perception of students’ digital competence, and answers have been collected through a Likert scale from 1 (‘strongly agree’) to 5 (‘strongly disagree’). The statement teachers had to give their opinion on, was:

The generation born in this digital and modern age is known as “digital natives” or the “Net-gen” (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives are the generation that spontaneously learns to use the new technologies. However, these ‘digital speakers’ are used to getting information really fast, they don’t like to ‘dive’ into a text and prefer to ‘surf’ through hyperlinks.

The majority of respondents strongly agreed with the idea of “digital natives” in reference to their students, described as superficial when searching for information, therefore excluding the action of “thinking about the process” of learning and deepening their absorption of information, in a rapid attempt to get to the point.

#	ANSWER	%	COUNT
1	Strongly agree	53.85%	7
2	Somewhat agree	38.46%	5
3	Neither agree nor disagree	7.69%	1
4	Somewhat disagree	0.00%	0
5	Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	13

3. RESULTS

All participants are unanimous in believing that the lack of clear guidelines and transparency from the Italian Government and the Ministry of Education have had an impact on the application of DE during COVID-19. Schools were unable to provide guidelines, as the Ministry of Education itself did not give clear instructions on how to proceed. However, the sudden switch to DE has given teachers the possibility to use new technologies and improve their digital competence.

All teachers think they will use DE practices in their future teaching, despite the limitations observed in teaching online, such as the reduced length of the lessons and the challenges in remote assessment and evaluation. Participants believe DE is not inclusive for all—due to the economic means for some families, to cases of students with special needs who require the support of a facilitator in their learning.

All teachers believe that to have a good command of digital technologies has helped in this situation, but state that, when it comes to using technologies for educational purposes, students as ‘digital natives’ are not prepared enough to make a full use of online and digital tools.

4. CONCLUSION

As far as we know, this is the first time that DE in Italy during the COVID-19 emergency has been investigated from teachers’ point of view.

A limitation of the study is that investigations have only been on a small scale, due to the fact that many teachers were involved in students’ final exams and teaching duties at the end of the school year. The pandemic situation might also have had an impact on participation, as many teachers were dissatisfied for many reasons. Nevertheless, we can still state that the results were useful in offering a description of the situation, and to start a discussion.

This study could be used in future research on DE and COVID-19 in distinct periods of time, to better outline the context about developments of DE during the pandemic and beyond, or to compare different methodologies and approaches from other countries. This study focuses on teachers’ perceptions of DE, but for the purposes of a thorough picture of DE during COVID-19 in Italy, further studies might also be conducted looking at students’ or families’ perspectives.

The findings would seem to show how the lack of clear guidelines and transparency from the government and the Ministry of Education have had an impact on the application of DE during the pandemic. In fact, the data highlighted that DE is still far from being applied properly in Italian schools, despite teachers’ good command of technology, and the objective of digital competence, among others, developed by the Italian Government itself in 2007, which students should acquire by the end of compulsory school “to a level that equips them for adult life, and which forms a basis for further learning and working life” (Recommendation 2006/962/EC, paragraph 13). This study was conducted at the end of the school year, in June 2020, soon after the end of the lockdown. On 30 October 2020, the Regional Governor of Puglia, Michele Emiliano, announced the closure of schools in all regions and the switch to DE. A subsequent closure was imposed in April 2021 across the entire country.

This underlines just how important is the debate on DE and how the need for further improvements remains open for future consideration.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Participants’ open-ended answers to the questionnaire. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.388.s1>

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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