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COMBINING SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION IN A TRANSNATIONAL E-LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Sommario
Questo studio vuole valutare l'efficacia delle attività online implementate durante un corso transnazionale blended *di italiano come lingua straniera in un ambiente di apprendimento virtuale. L'articolo esplora dapprima la letteratura sui vari approcci* blended learning*, e in secondo luogo illustra i vantaggi e le difficoltà riscontrate nel combinare forme di comunicazione sincrona e asincrona. Il caso studio proposto esamina il coinvolgimento degli studenti con gli strumenti digitali a/sincroni attraverso la prospettiva degli insegnanti. Dopo un'analisi dei questionari individuali sottomessi alla fine di ogni incontro online dai tutor, la ricerca confronta questi dati con le opinioni degli studenti per osservare corrispondenze o divergenze nelle percezioni. Le conclusioni delineano i benefici pedagogici e i limiti derivanti da un approccio a/sincrono congiunto, e offrono degli spunti per ricerche future in contesti di* e-language learning *simili a quello analizzato.*

Keywords: Hybrid online environment, computer-mediated communication, Italian language and culture, a/synchronous learning, digital tools.

Introduction

Online education is a fast-growing phenomenon that provides Internet users with a range of flexible solutions such as distance courses, online training and virtual learning platforms for both formal and

informal education. A traditional face-to-face educational process offers many benefits; as a result, online education urges instructors to implement an *effective learning* environment that consolidates the link between interaction and participation, and supports students in achieving objectives and outcomes (Watkins *et al*., 2002; McCloskey *et al*., 2009; Perveen, 2016).

This paper discusses the pedagogical possibilities offered by a combination of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning modes in a computer-mediated environment. The following contribution originates from the blended project "Let's go digital! Contemporary Italy 'surfs' to Monash: discovering literature, culture and language" (see Carloni & Zuccala, 2017 & 2018; Bassani, Bezzi & Mă, 2018; Virga, 2018), a course aimed at blending the teaching of Italian as a foreign language (FL), which was implemented between the University of Urbino (Italy) and Monash University (Melbourne, Australia) in 2017[1].

In the following sections, after an examination of diverse discourse features generated from a/synchronous e-learning modes (Romiszowski & Mason, 2004), the study explores how asynchronous limitations have been scaffolded by synchronous sessions (Perveen, 2016) in the above-mentioned project. Furthermore, data collected through an online questionnaire will be presented and analysed. The purpose of this study is to look deeper into learners' level of engagement with a/synchronous digital tools through instructors' perspectives. Finally, the contribution explores the benefits and limitations of a joint a/synchronous approach within an online blended context. The conclusions that follow will provide insight on e-language learning research involving international projects in higher education.

[1] A second edition of the blended project between Monash University and the University of Urbino was implemented the following year, from March to May 2018.

1. Combining Synchronous and Asynchronous E-Learning: A Literature Review

Considering the research on pedagogical affordances enhanced by online language learning and technology-mediated communication, there is an ongoing debate addressing comparison and assessment of two methods through which e-learning takes place. Defined as an online teaching and learning process, which occurs through the implementation of network technologies (Hrastinski, 2008), *e-learning* can be developed through synchronous communication**,** and an asynchronous, non-simultaneous one.

In recent years, asynchronous learning and teaching modes have been a preponderant method for online education. As most research has shown (Bonk *et al*., 1998; Davidson-Shivers, Muilenburg & Tanner, 2001; Hrastinski, 2008; Parsad & Lewis, 2008; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Perveen, 2016) asynchronous e-learning is commonly regarded as "more suitable for reflection and discussion of complex ideas" (Hrastinski, Keller & Carlsson, 2010:652). Non-simultaneous forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as email and discussion boards, are widely adopted because they pursue a student-centred approach. In fact, asynchronous communication incorporates a high level of flexibility, reduces stress levels and fosters students' independent learning (Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares & Barbour, 2011).

Asynchronous flexibility lies in the possibility of adjusting task completion to students' learning times. Virtual platforms such as Course Management System (CMS) and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) have been made available by most institutions in higher education and universities. Through these asynchronous tools, lecturers and educators enable access to different forms of material, from handouts to PowerPoint presentations and audio-video recordings. Based on work and family commitments, students are able to "log in to e-learning environment at any time and download documents or send messages to teachers or peers" (Hrastinski, 2008:52).

During non-simultaneous *e-tivities* (online activities) (Salmon, 2002) learners usually have more time to process information. Time

enables the development of critical thinking through the scaffolding of previous knowledge. Huang and Hsiao (2012) noticed that such an opportunity to focus on written activities allows learners to manage time better in order to structure their answers. Tasks involving sharing opinions and posting comments in forums and blogs support deep learning and improve writing skills as well as reading comprehension. Asynchronous activities create conditions for a didactic context devoid of time restrictions, which usually characterises traditional modes of delivery. To some extent, non-simultaneity circumvents time-bound activities, making online environments much more attractive and approachable to some types of learners. Also, the absence of real-time interaction with the instructor and peers results in a significant decrease of the learner's stress levels and frustration associated to foreign language interaction, thus leading to a consequent reduction of foreign language anxiety (FLA) (McNeil, 2014). However, whereas the lack of interaction can promote students' self-learning, the absence of a simultaneous exchange in a FL withholds the participatory dimension of teaching and the pedagogical possibilities enabled by social negotiation. As a result, many studies have highlighted how asynchronous learning fails to offer sufficient opportunities for social interaction, including among its limitations delayed feedback and students' isolation (Ory & Bullock, 1997; Branon & Essex, 2001; Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2002).

At a time when high-speed broadband services have become more accessible, synchronous CMC has started to gain popularity as an alternative delivery mode. Initially, this form of e-learning has mainly been used for distance education thanks to the support of a range of digital tools, from chat rooms to instant messaging, up to web-conferencing software (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Empirical studies on e-language learning have demonstrated, over time, that the support of synchronous activities represents an optimal solution to overcoming constraints posed by asynchronous CMC. In particular, their combination is crucial for tackling poor FL fluency, delayed feedback, and shortcomings related to socialisation and cooperative learning (Chou, 2002; Schullo *et al*., 2005; Hrastinski, Keller & Carlsson, 2010).

Blending synchronous and asynchronous modes is deemed fundamental to support effective learning in technology-mediated environments. Literature and past research have thoroughly analysed affordances and constraints of synchronous and asynchronous e-learning. Sotillo observes that these two types of communication can be "exploited for different pedagogical purposes" (2000:77), especially considering that they promote diverse participation among learners, namely the *cognitive* and the *social dimension* of e-learning (Hrastinski, 2008). The two forms complement each other, in fact, reasons for choosing an e-learning mode over another depend on the type of task (Brannon & Essex, 2001). On the one hand, asynchronous communication is more suitable for encouraging learners' cognitive participation, like analytical skills, in-depth discussions and writing abilities. On the other hand, the synchronous mode is beneficial in terms of motivation, speech fluency as well as for the participatory dimension of learning (Hrastinski, 2008). The idea that a hybrid online environment represents an effective strategy to maximise students' support and to address multiple needs has already emerged across different areas of research in e-language learning (Haythornthwaite, 2000, 2001; Hrastinski, 2007; Giesbers *et al*., 2013; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). In addition, its implementation could also intervene in limiting frustration originating from technological problems (Pérez, 2003), thus acting on the cognitive dimension through a social one.

The hybridisation of a/synchronous CMC shares the same theoretical framework with other learning strategies that fall within blended learning. Among these, the flipped approach (Lage, Platt & Treglia, 2000; Bergmann & Sams, 2012) overturns traditional formats of classroom-based courses by displacing "the students' […] exposure to new learning" (Mehring, 2018:2) outside the class and before face-to-face class time. Although the use of technology, videos and online activities is not required, nor it is essential to 'flip' a classroom, such an approach now largely draws on discussion boards, forums and online quizzes that students carry out in pre-class time. As the case study will shortly illustrate, the asynchronous-synchronous structure of the Monash-Urbino project methodologically draws on such a flipped pattern. Aware of the advantages brought by flipped

pedagogy and student-centred education, the next section will also briefly describe how the project managed to adapt such benefits to a hybrid online environment.

It is interesting to note that few case studies thus far have explored the experience of educators and their perceptions of online communication with students, especially in the case of hybrid approaches (to name a few: Brannon & Essex, 2001; Choi & Park, 2006; Botts & Ryan, 2007; Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares & Barbour, 2011; Huang & Hsiao, 2012). As reported by Huang and Hsiao, "understanding instructors' experiences and perceptions is important because […] instructors' attitude and acceptance of technology to a large degree determines how successful the use of technology is in teaching and learning" (2012:16). Furthermore, case studies adopting educators' perspectives prove to be useful, as they make available to teachers and researchers a range of facilitation strategies employed to overcome challenges that emerge during online communication.

Having considered the educational potential supported by hybrid e-learning, this study aims to research: (1) what the most effective strategy is when adopting a hybrid approach; and therefore (2), how to combine a/synchronous tools and activities in order to promote an optimal e-language learning and teaching experience; finally (3), whether and how the Monash-Urbino transnational project managed to deal with difficulties through a hybrid environment.

After examining benefits and limitations of the different communication approaches and the discourses around the pedagogical objectives pursued by them, it was decided to direct the empirical part of this study towards an analysis of teachers' perceptions. The sections that follow will examine a case study on the teaching of Italian as a FL in an anglophone context. Examples of a/synchronous communication strategies and tools adopted, their functions and the way in which these were blended together will be outlined. Subsequently, the study analyses data deriving from the combined use of a/synchronous e-learning through online questionnaires, submitted by instructors within the above-mentioned international project.

2. Context of the Monash-Urbino Blended Project

The project aimed to expand the contents of the syllabus for the undergraduate course 'Italian Studies Advanced' held during the autumn semester of 2017. The primary objective was to reinforce an authentic link between Italian language and literature, by reducing the distance between learners studying contemporary Italian culture and society in a non-Italian speaking context. The first part of the project took place in a traditional face-to-face mode at Monash University, and mainly focused on teaching canonical texts of Italian literature to students with a language proficiency equal to a B1-B2 level of the Common European Framework (CEFR)[2]. The second part was blended, thus articulated in online meetings which sought to adapt the literary topics through eight self-contained lessons that enabled the students to approach the Italianness with a critical conscience.

Eight native Italian instructors designed and taught individual lessons to eighteen Australian-based learners, on a weekly basis, resorting to a dedicated *Weebly*-generated web page[3] and to lessons on *Skype*[4]. Each online meeting consisted of two moments, an asynchronous and a synchronous one. E-tivities revolved around tasks of comprehension, analysis and synthesis of authentic audio-visual input[5]. According to the present study, the feature of combining two paradigms is one of the most interesting dimensions offered by this international project.

2.1 *Hybrid online communication within the blended project*

During the first implementation of the Monash-Urbino project, self-paced online learning through asynchronous technology was carefully woven into instructor-led synchronous training. This operative model

[2] Among these literary texts Italian authors such as Ugo Foscolo, Giacomo Leopardi, and Alessandro Manzoni can be mentioned.

[3] *Weebly*, <https://www.weebly.com/>, accessed 5/2018.

[4] *Skype*, <https://www.skype.com/>, accessed 5/2018.

[5] All the videos used are available on *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/>, accessed 5/2019.

was shaped on the flipped approach and provided the rationale for every meeting. Two key moments within every single lesson were represented by the asynchronous viewing of a video – integrated by comprehension e-tivities, and followed by a simultaneous interaction with a tutor. Respectively, two pivotal digital tools with which the learner interacted were *Weebly* and *Skype*. The first is a VLE that acted as a 'container' mostly for asynchronous activities; the latter served as a synchronous interface for real-time interaction with an Italian instructor. During the *Skype* lesson, student and teacher revisited the input to receive oral feedback and to critically analyse the cultural content through spoken Italian.

The pattern of the hybrid learning environment mirrored the two-step process of a flipped lesson where the asynchronous practice on *Weebly* stood as "student's first exposure" (Mehring, 2018:2), and "face-to-face class time" (2) was replaced by the *Skype* lesson. At first, asynchronous digital tools were used for warming up and in preparation of the student's viewing of the digital content. Asynchronous tasks were carried out independently by the learner outside 'class time' a few days before the scheduled meeting. They incorporated three e-tivities: a brainstorming, matching activity and a video comprehension. For the brainstorming, *MindMeister* was employed, an interactive tool that enables the creation of digital mind maps around a core topic[6]. Learners were prompted with written or visual clues – carefully designed and assembled by instructors – which activated their previous knowledge and fostered written communication in a creative way. The construction of the concept map involved a bottom-up process without the presence of an outside observer. Furthermore, the absence of time constraints (in the task completion) reduced any distress associated to time management and allowed each learner "more time to reflect, comprehend, construct responses and use outside sources" (McNeil, 2014:142).

Padlet, a digital noticeboard, was used to create pre-viewing matching activities aimed at introducing new vocabulary and at compensating for any gaps of knowledge that the authentic video

6 *MindMeister*, <https://www.mindmeister.com/>, accessed 5/2018.

could have entailed[7]. Its most used feature has been that of posting and "[matching] vocabulary items with definitions and/or images presented alongside in sticky notes on the noticeboard" (Carloni & Zuccala, 2017:126). In this case, a top-down process, which comprised interpreting textual or visual clues and guessing the meaning of words, contributed to the development of the content knowledge (Saville-Troike, 2008). Learners' prior knowledge served as a 'scaffold' to new language acquisition, which avoided any fragmentation of understanding and supported the integration of newly learned skills in a coherent context.

The streaming of audio-visual inputs and comprehension activities were implemented through *Google Forms*, a web-based application designed to create digital surveys and questionnaires with appealing graphics[8]. Throughout the eight lessons, the form incorporated a wide set of e-tivities in a quiz mode, such as multiple choice, checkboxes, true/false and text-image matching questions. The tasks were designed to encourage video comprehension through self-regulated learning and to further develop students' metacognitive skills. When asked to answer while watching, learners adopted comprehension strategies that best suited their learning styles. Moreover, visualising the score-feedback after the submission of the answers prompted their self-correction and enhanced their abilities to recontextualise previously activated lexicon. It is also worth noting that in a flipped learning perspective, immediate corrective feedback enables the student's future access to new information (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000:59), "scaffolding the learning from the pre-class assignments before class" (Mehring, 2018:3) and allowing instructors to efficiently address learning gaps in face-to-face meetings.

As a result, in the Italo-Australian blended project, asynchronous and synchronous activities are not to be considered as merely linked in a linear sequence but as mutually related in the promotion of cognitive and personal participation (Hrastinski, 2008). The initial asynchronous stage laid the groundwork for the upcoming synchronous session and led the students to speculate about

7 *Padlet*, <https://padlet.com/>, accessed 5/2018.

8 *Google Forms*, <https://www.google.com/forms/about>, accessed 5/2018.

prospective developments of the online meeting, anticipating language and topics of discussion. Indeed, asynchronous activities enabled the sharing of an initial vocabulary between learner and instructor, which was extremely functional in view of the subsequent phases of analysis and synthesis incorporated in the synchronous meeting.

Access to all pre- and post-viewing activities was ensured through *Weebly* which acted as a link between asynchronous and synchronous CMC. The website was divided into as many sections as the scheduled blended lessons. Each section presented a dedicated comic strip or a visual element, followed by useful information on both individual and face-to-face activities to be completed, whereas operating instructions were stated immediately before each task.

Two synchronous post-viewing activities were the core of the *Skype* meeting that lasted about thirty minutes[9]. The first post-viewing activity took place simultaneously on *Weebly* and via the web conference application. The learner collaborated with the instructor to analyse the audio-visual text through a series of questions, previously published on the website. The choice to enclose all the oral questions in a written form fell within the scope of facilitating equal opportunities to participate and of overcoming the limitations posed by real-time interaction, such as FLA and issues related to Internet speed.

After having explored, revised and clarified the contents of the video in Italian, the student carried out the second post-viewing activity. This final moment involved a recontextualisation of the topic from an individual perspective and it was implemented through *Utellstory*, a multimedia storytelling platform[10]. The tool allows users to create and share audio slideshows by uploading pictures, videos, soundtracks and adding text captions and audio narrations to each slide. Within our e-language learning environment, such an application was used to provide a familiar context that encouraged the

9 With the prior agreement of the Italian advanced 1 Unit cohort, all online sessions were video-recorded and archived using the digital tool *Screencast-o-Matic* <https://www.screencast-o-matic.com/>, accessed 6/2019.

10 *Utellstory*, <https://www.utellstory.com>, accessed 5/2018.

student to perform a series of role-play and problem-solving tasks on the given topic. As for the previous synchronous activity, textual and visual cues incorporated in the slideshow were used to motivate and to prompt learners with different abilities during the storytelling task.

Although synchronous communication is usually deemed to be more teacher-centred (Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares & Barbour, 2011), *Skype* lessons relied on a learner-centred approach. Instructors acted as facilitators (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; Carloni & Zuccala, 2017), provided guidance with scaffolding strategies, and helped the students stay motivated while moving through their linguistic comfort zone. Synchronous moments gave students the opportunity to clarify any doubts arising during the independent study phase, and to share the difficulties encountered. As expected by this type of communication, learners received immediate feedback on their oral performance, sometimes even through instant messaging services which were used to track specific language-related errors and, simultaneously, to type in new words without disrupting the learner's speech flow (Cardona, 2010).

Besides 'adding texture' to each e-learning unit, the combined approach was consciously aimed at enhancing the benefits and at overcoming the challenges posed by diverse types of communication throughout the blended course. The findings emerged at the end of the transnational project will highlight positive outcomes achieved in terms of effective learning and motivation, but also weaknesses and useful insights aimed at improving the hybrid online environment for future editions.

3. An analysis of teachers' perceptions

In this section, data collected by means of an online survey will be discussed in order to expand the research framework relating to instructors' perspectives. The dataset will be examined in the light of the existing literature linking students' motivation, teachers' scaffolding strategies and hybrid e-tivities. Finally, data provided by teachers' questionnaires will be compared to students' preferences through the analysis of a similar set of questions. The article will, therefore, consider possible variations in the perceptions of the use of

a combined a/synchronous approach. The conclusions drawn will provide information for further research as well as enrich the repertoire of case studies for similar e-language learning transcultural projects.

3.1 *Questionnaire for teachers*

The aim of having weekly questionnaires completed at the end of each *Skype*-mediated lesson was both to keep track of the overall performance of the online learning environment and to collect first impressions both from native speaker instructors and their learners. Instructors' opinions were tendentially collected immediately after each *Skype* session. Instructors were asked to fill in two questionnaires by submitting their comments through *Google Forms*. The two questionnaires consisted of: (a) *Questionnaire for teachers*, on perceptions regarding the progress of the lesson; and (b) *Assessment*, an informal assessment of the student's online performance based on six different criteria. The following paragraphs will focus solely on questionnaire (a), as the focus of the article does not place emphasis on learner's linguistic performance.

3.2 *Research questions*

The research questions that drove the analysis of the questionnaires on teachers' perceptions aim at evaluating the usefulness of a hybrid implementation of synchronous and asynchronous activities in terms of motivation and engagement. In particular, the study investigates the following: (1) According to the instructor, which activities proved to be most motivating and useful for the students? (2) Have these activities been carried out in a synchronous or an asynchronous mode? (3) Do these perceptions coincide with those of the students? (4) Is it possible to derive from these data, affordances and constraints regarding a separate or joint use of a/synchronous CMC?

3.3 *Participants*

As for the participants involved in the survey, it was possible to include one instructor and her perceptions concerning the interaction with two learners. During the project implemented in 2017, each Italian teacher had an average of two students from the 'Italian Studies Advanced' cohort, with few exceptions. A total of fifteen questionnaires, submitted in relation to eight computer-mediated lessons, with two Australian learners were analysed, taking into consideration that one lesson with a student during the sixth meeting was not held.

3.4 *Method*

The *Questionnaire for teachers* included a total of forty questions composed of a set of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to stimulate the instructor's active reflection on the hybrid lesson which had just taken place, to record good practices that worked well, and to assess those needing adjustments.

In addition to the first set of questions aimed at collecting personal data on the respondent, on the student and on the title of the lesson (Questions 1-4), the questionnaire can be broken down into six macro areas. A set focusing on the overall usefulness of the online meeting in pedagogical, cultural and motivational terms (Questions 5-11); teacher's impressions on the usefulness of each of the five a/synchronous activities carried out (Questions 12-16); reflections on the use of the foreign language by the respondent and perceptions regarding the student's level of understanding, involvement and emotions (Questions 17-26); reflections on the effectiveness of each of the five a/synchronous activities carried out (Questions 28-32); post-lesson comments and feedback regarding activities to be modified, instructor's general experience of online teaching (Question 27 and Questions 33-40).

For the purpose of answering the research questions outlined above, the following survey questions are taken into consideration: "In my opinion, my student found the following activities most

motivating" (Question 10); "Why? Explain your answer to the question above" (Question 11); "I think that the activities below were effective to the degree indicated" (Questions 28-32).

Finally, with the intent of providing a comprehensive overview of the hybrid approach and its effectiveness, data obtained from teachers' questionnaires will be cross-checked with those of the students. The intention is to assess differences and affinities in perceptions. A *Questionnaire for students* was submitted by learners at the end of each online meeting. It contained thirty questions similar to the *Questionnaire for teachers*, with the exception of post-lesson comments on activities to be modified.

3.5 *Analysis and discussion*

3.5.1 Is hybrid e-learning motivating?

At first glance, the data gathered confirm that synchronous communication supports increased motivation (Hrastinski, 2007; Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares & Barbour, 2011). According to the native speaking instructor, the most motivating activities were those carried out in synchronous modes, namely the first and second post-viewing tasks. Interestingly, the third most motivating activity was the brainstorming task, implemented in an asynchronous form by the student before the online meeting.

Online activity	**Most motivating activity (n. of answers)**	**Most motivating activity (%)**	**Communication mode**
The brain-storming activity	3	12	Asynchronous
The pre-viewing activity	-	-	Asynchronous

The while-viewing activity	-	-	Asynchronous
The first post-viewing activity	9	36	Synchronous
The second post-viewing activity	13	52	Synchronous

Table 1 - Most motivating activities (Question 10) – Teacher

Answers to the first question considered "In my opinion, my student found the following activities most motivating" (Questions 10) clearly show that, for the teacher, two synchronous activities plus one asynchronous task were able to stimulate students' motivation better. As Table 1 displays, simultaneous post-viewing activities are deemed to be motivating for 88% - respectively 36% for the first and 52% for the second post-viewing activity. Asynchronous brainstorming activities account for 12% of total choice. Conversely, the two remaining asynchronous tasks were never considered the most motivating of the five, by the instructor.

When asked "Why? Explain your answer to the question above" (Question 11), the instructor often mentioned that during the synchronous communication "the activities gave [the students] the possibility to elaborate [their] thoughts and to analyse the phenomenon from different perspectives". It is interesting to note that the teacher detected a greater cognitive effort during the synchronous interaction, rather than in the asynchronous one, as usually occurs (Hrastinski, 2008). The instructor writes that throughout the final role-play the student had "time to engage with previous knowledge" and to maximise FL exposure thanks to the "use of examples to support thoughts". As other studies on teachers' perceptions have mentioned (Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares & Barbour, 2011; Huang & Hsiao, 2012), besides time to process information and extra

vocabulary, the first three activities provided *real opportunities for communication*, which was probably one of the main motivating factors. As the teacher explained: "The brainstorming provided lots of useful information to develop further the conversation during the lesson. The first post-viewing activity enabled to deep [sic] the analysis and clarify some expressions of the video. The second post-viewing activity has been both funny, motivating and effective".

By contrast, in addressing the issue of why some activities were not motivating enough, the instructor often referred to increased communication barriers such as miscommunication and the learners' sense of social disconnection (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). For example, the instructor believes that students felt "confused and frustrated" as a result of the challenges of FL comprehension, which were further compromised by misinterpretation and technical problems occurring during the implementations of the tasks. Although learners often tend to feel more confident and reassured during synchronous moments, because of the "decreased ambiguity" (Hrastinski, 2007:45), communication barriers still constitute an obstacle to increased motivation.

3.5.2 Is hybrid e-learning effective?

Upon initial analysis of the data emerging from questions 28-32 "I think that the activities below were effective to the degree indicated", teacher's statements remain consistent with the dataset previously considered. The activities that received a greater rate of "very" and "extremely useful" have been, once more, the brainstorming and both post-viewing activities. As illustrated by Table 2, when examining the "very useful" column, the four activities considered most effective, in order of relevance, are the second post-viewing activity (69.23%), the first post-viewing activity (53.84 %), the brainstorming (46.15%) and the while-viewing activity (30.76%). This time, reflecting on effectiveness rather than on motivation, the relationship between synchronous and asynchronous communication appears more balanced. According to the instructor, on many occasions, these four activities combined offered a greater learning impact, as opposed to considering their individual motivational force.

This might suggest that the affordances presented by real-time interaction such as oral fluency, motivation and personal participation would not have been as effective without the scaffolding strategies activated by asynchronous tasks.

Online activity	**Not useful (%) and n. of answers**	**A bit useful (%) and n. of answers**	**Useful (%) and n. of answers**	**Very useful (%) and n. of answers**	**Extremely useful (%) and n. of answers**
The brain-storming activity	7.69 (1 ans.)	23.1 (3 ans.)	15.4 (2 ans.)	46.15 (6 ans.)	7.69 (1 ans.)
The pre-viewing activity	-	23.1 (3 ans.)	61.53 (8 ans.)	15.4 (2 ans.)	-
The while-viewing activity	-	7.69 (1 ans.)	61.53 (8 ans.)	30.76 (4 ans.)	-
The first post-viewing activity	-	23.1 (3 ans.)	7.69 (1 ans.)	53.84 (7 ans.)	15.4 (2 ans.)
The second post-viewing activity	-	-	23.1 (3 ans.)	69.23 (9 ans.)	7.69 (1 ans.)

Table 2 - Effectiveness of online activities (Questions 28-32)

The present study demonstrates that effective learning and student's motivation are not induced exclusively through synchronous communication. Such responses should be considered the outcome of a set of activities that precede the synchronous moment, hence the importance of their combination.

3.5.3 Teacher' perceptions VS/and students' preferences

Interesting insights emerge when one cross-references the data with the *Questionnaire for students*; in part, these confirm the teacher's opinions and, at the same time, they open up new opportunities for reflection and improvement.

Online activity	**Most motivating activity (n. of answers)**	**Most motivating activity (%)**	**Communication mode**
The brainstorming activity	2	25	Asynchronous
The pre-viewing activity	2	25	Asynchronous
The while-viewing activity	2	25	Asynchronous
The first post-viewing activity	7	87.5	Synchronous
The second post-viewing activity	8	100	Synchronous

Table 3 - Most motivating activities (Question 8) – Students

As far as motivation is concerned, the overall preference of synchronous activities over the others is maintained, as illustrated by Table 3. Two Australian students who took part in the questionnaire deemed the synchronous activities the most motivating in the majority

of cases (87.5% the video analysis and 100% the role-play). When comparing these responses with teachers' perceptions, one can observe that students tend to prefer synchronous activities, confirming previous studies in the literature regarding the interaction between synchronous communication and motivation (Hrastinski, 2008).

When asked to justify their choices (Question 9), students commented that they favoured synchronous communication because "it involved opinions and ideas" and "allowed for deeper thinking"; first and second post-viewing activities also stimulated "face to face discussion" and "[they] really [liked] engaging with [their] instructor"; finally, the *Skype* lesson "forced [them] to answer on the spot", providing them with "a chance to speak Italian". The respondents are therefore likely to prefer synchronous activities because of in-depth discussions, the human and social dimension of interaction, and for the opportunities to communicate in Italian. In this case, most of the reasons provided by students coincide with the teachers' opinions.

Regarding asynchronous CMC, it was not uncommon for the students to provide feedback on activities that 'didn't work' for them. For example, on the brainstorming map, one learner wrote: "[…] not quite sure what we are supposed to be writing" and "I do not understand the purpose of the first activity". They also mentioned problems related to the visualisation of the video "usually the 'while-viewing activity' is helpful, but the background music was too loud and […] I had trouble distinguishing the Italian"; as well as comments on the matching task: "I really enjoy the vocabulary exercises". Most of the challenges of synchronous tasks that the learners mentioned were not detected in the teacher's statements. Synchronous communication proved, once again, to be very motivating, even when combined with non-simultaneous activities. However, this comparative analysis suggests that further monitoring and support in the asynchronous phase could be beneficial in overcoming any technical problems, preventing misunderstandings relating to the tasks' instructions, and consolidating the teacher's online presence.

Online activity	**Not useful (%) and n. of answers**	**A bit useful (%) and n. of answers**	**Useful (%) and n. of answers**	**Very useful (%) and n. of answers**	**Extremely useful (%) and n. of answers**
The brain-storming activity	25 (2 ans.)	12.5 (1 ans.)	37.5 (3 ans.)	12.5 (1 ans.)	12.5 (1 ans.)
The pre-viewing activity	-	25 (2 ans.)	25 (2 ans.)	50 (4 ans.)	-
The while-viewing activity	-	12.5 (1 ans.)	50 (4 ans.)	37.5 (3 ans.)	-
The first post-viewing activity	-	-	12.5 (1 ans.)	50 (4 ans.)	37.5 (3 ans.)
The second post-viewing activity	-	-	-	62.5 (5 ans.)	37.5 (3 ans.)

Table 4 – Usefulness of online activities (Questions 10-14) – Students

The answers to the set of questions 10-14 "How useful were the following activities?" (Table 4) show that the brainstorming and the two post-viewing activities were the only ones to achieve "extremely useful". Interestingly, when considering the e-tivities that turned out "very useful", the balance between asynchronous and synchronous e-learning can still be observed. In particular, the second post-viewing activity scored 62.5% of the total; the pre-viewing activity (*Padlet*)

and the first post-viewing both obtained 50%; the video viewing activity reached 37.5%, whereas the brainstorming task was considered "very useful" only once (12.5%).

The questions regarding motivation introduce new reflections on asynchronous communication, either within the VLE and between teacher and student. In terms of effectiveness, perceptions between the tutor and the learners appear more similar, as it seems that the students have experienced a greater appreciation of the hybrid online environment.

4. Conclusions

The study reported in this paper was limited to an e-language teaching experience designed for a higher education context. Previous research has proved very valuable for its theoretical framework (Lage, Platt & Treglia, 2000; Hrastinski, 2007 and 2008; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014; Perveen, 2016; Carloni & Zuccala, 2017); however, many of the empirical studies mentioned refer to teaching experiences in secondary education (Brannon & Essex, 2001; Botts & Ryan, 2007; Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares & Barbour, 2011).

The questionnaires revealed that a hybrid e-learning approach generates, most of the time, high levels of motivation and adequate levels of effectiveness within a single learning unit. None of the activities alone resulted as *the most* motivating or effective in absolute terms, but the lessons' success, according to both teachers and students, could be attributable to their combination. In particular, the video analysis and the role-play have always been successful and positively appreciated, especially when combined with one or two asynchronous pre-viewing tasks. The latter usually aimed at activating previous notions, introducing specific lexicon and at stimulating critical thinking through independent learning. The Monash-Urbino blended course demonstrated that one of the advantages of a hybrid approach originates from the combination of autonomous cognitive participation, negotiation of meanings and its social dimension. The flipped dimension of the project, which is rooted in blended learning, restructures the priorities of the pedagogical intervention around the

learners' responsibility, analytical and creative skills, hence, defining its student-centred orientation.

4.1 *Limitations and future research*

The small number of respondents and interviews analysed could constitute one of the limitations of this study. It is hoped that new empirical studies aimed at exploring teachers' perceptions in similar contexts would integrate and broaden the research questions of this paper.

Data cross-referenced with the students' preferences revealed some discrepancies that the adoption of the instructor's perspective alone would not have highlighted. The analysis of students' questionnaires showed that asynchronous communication may sometimes present more limitations than benefits. In general terms, this limitation intersects with the learners' emotional sphere, language control and eventually, students' agency. As emerged with respect to the second (*Padlet*) and the third (*Google Forms*) asynchronous activities, the frustration generated by the misinterpretation of the task's instructions can be amplified by the absence of the Italian tutor.

The *Skype* call certainly stimulated students' personal engagement and encouraged the convergence of meanings through FL. The teacher's ability to establish and to maintain a 'relaxed' atmosphere was key to the perception of the online meeting as a protected environment. This point emerged from both students' and the teacher's sides. Failing this component, if the ability to process information is jeopardised, the student will feel "confused and frustrated". Comments such as "I do not understand the purpose of the first activity or what it wants" and "[...] not quite sure what we are supposed to be writing" may suggest that either some instructions were ambiguously formulated, and/or that the level of communication at an initial stage was not student-centred enough. Such findings are indeed consistent with previous research resulting from the same blended project (Carloni & Zuccala, 2017; Bassani, Bezzi & Mă, 2018) which did reveal that, in the students' view, some pre-viewing activities could have been revised.

Previous studies have suggested strategies to facilitate online communication in hybrid environments. Some of these could easily be applied to the limitations arising from the study considered. To "decrease [the] ambiguity" (Hrastinski, 2007:42) during the asynchronous phase instructors could adopt a clearer communication protocol (Brannon & Essex, 2001) and provide explicit examples for online and offline discussions (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Research on the flipped approach advises combining a gradual increase in the number of assignments with the use of discussion forums and practical demonstrations to overcome concerns on pre-class preparation (Mehring, 2015 & 2018). Brannon and Essex (2001) also mentioned the choice of tools that provide posting notifications. Finally, a balanced online presence of the instructor in the initial phase of the project (Huang & Hsiao, 2012), could be a further dimension of a/synchronous e-learning contexts that would be worth investigating.

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