

# “QUANDO PARLO ITALIANO SENTO DI ESSERE ABBRACCIATO SPESSO” – “WHEN I SPEAK ITALIAN, I FEEL LIKE I’M BEING HUGGED”. A JOURNEY ACROSS LOTE MOTIVATION AND PERSISTENCE

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*Così alla fine di questo percorso culturale vorrei dire che queste persone care, luoghi carissimi, specialmente una città come Venezia mi hanno fatto volare su in alto che, se prima, come un contadino seduto sotto un albero, ascoltavo senza capire i canti degli uccelli, ora mi sento un uccello che vola di ramo in ramo e di cima in cima per vedere i villaggi e il mondo dall’alto.*  
(Riflessione Gholam, Pos 25)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Second language learning (SLA) is often a long-term endeavor that requires character strength and persistence to achieve (Henry, 2024). In SLA research this dimension has received little research attention (Dörnyei 2020; Henry, 2024; Dörnyei & Henry 2022; Feng & Papi, 2020). At the same time, a growing number of empirical studies has highlighted the role of cognate qualities such as resilience (Kim & Kim, 2017) or grit (Oxford & Khajavy, 2021) to support learners in a journey often marked by setbacks and varying degrees of challenge.

This study investigates the more than 20-year-long journey of the second author in learning Italian as an L2. Gholam came to Italy in 2006, as an unaccompanied minor with no social connections and limited written literacy skills. He had left Afghanistan six years earlier, following the death of his parents during the civil war. In Italy, he attended literacy and middle school courses at a local center for adult education and later graduated from a catering high school and went to university to study Arab and Persian. After two and a half years spent in a group home run by social services, he was placed with a local family who de facto adopted him. In addition to working in a hotel, Gholam - who obtained Italian citizenship in September 2023 - is also writer, poet, journalist and continuously engaged in the process of multiple language learning.

Considering his initial vulnerability (Gabielli *et al.*, 2022; Sidaway, 2024), Gholam’s language learning achievement required a great deal of effort and commitment. His trajectory – widely regarded as exceptional – offers valuable personal insights into the psychological and contextual factors (Douglas Fir Group, 2016) involved in his ability to cope with minor and major setbacks in his ongoing language learning journey.

To add to recent research on such topics, this study adopts a qualitative, person-in-context relational view of motivation (Ushioda, 2009). This view integrates different theoretical perspectives to «enrich our understanding of how motivation shapes and is

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shaped through engagement in L2-related activity and the engagement of identities and engagement with possible selves» (*Ivi*: 225).

Narrative inquiry (Pavlenko, 2007) is a well-suited methodology to explore the subject reality of the participants, and their language learning experiences. More recently, in positive psychology, Colla and Kurz (2024), have proposed Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) as a democratized approach to study wellbeing by involving participants in the interpretative process of the research. For this study, we employed PNI to validate the findings by involving the second author not only in the data generation phase, but also in the interpretation and writing phase of this article.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Among the many theories on L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021), three are particularly prominent and, as McEown *et al.* (2014) have stressed, can be regarded as complementary. In the following section, we will outline the main features of these three theories and give a brief overview on the concept of persistence and possible cognate constructs.

### 2.1. Three complementary frameworks of L2 motivation

Defining motivation towards learning an additional language is challenging. Despite its complexity, as pointed out by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021), researchers would agree on the existence of three core dimensions of motivation: «why people decide to do something; how long they are willing to sustain the activity and how hard they are going to pursue it.» (*ivi*: 4). The first dimension is related to the orientation and the type of goal, being for example instrumental, rather than integrative (Gardner, 2010; 2020). The second has to do with persistence and durability and the third with the magnitude of the effort invested.

#### 2.2.1. Socio-Educational Model (SEM)

Gardner’s (1985; 2010) SEM has been widely influential to describe motivation, even outside the North American context (Dörnyei & Clément, 2001) and especially in L2 settings, where the attitude towards the L2 community has been crucial in describing L2 learning behavior and success. In particular, the notion of *integrativeness*, the «general openness to adopting characteristics of other cultural communities» (Gardner, 2010: 85), has been associated to second language achievement (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: 159). It includes a positive attitude towards the target language community, an interest in foreign languages, and an integrative orientation. According to SEM, orientation corresponds to second language goals that can be either integrative or instrumental. Integrative orientation has been defined as the «willingness to be like valued members of the language community» (Gardner & Lambert, 1959: 271). Instrumental orientation refers to the utilitarian goals of learning an additional language, like a higher salary or a better job. L2 motivation, according to Gardner’s model (1985) is influenced by three variables: *Integrativeness*, attitudes towards the learning situation, and language anxiety.

Even though the notion of *integrativeness* may fail to describe the attitudes to learn English as a global language, it is still important to investigate the dynamics of

motivational behavior in LOTE settings (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017). For example, recently Liu (2023) found that the motivation to learn Chinese among a sample of L2 university students interacted dynamically with their learning experiences and their learning goals. Over the course of one semester, their initial instrumental motivation developed into an integrative one, due to the impact of their learning experience on their L2 goals and vision.

### 2.2.2. L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS)

Deeply rooted in the social psychological tradition, the L2MSS developed by Dörnyei in 2005 is a comprehensive model of motivation with a focus on the self. In continuity with Gardner and Lambert’s (1959) idea of *integrativeness*, Dörnyei’s model integrates Markus and Nurius (1986) notion of possible self and Higgin’s notion of self-discrepancy (1987). Motivation to learn an additional language has been conceived of by this model as dependent on one’s urge or desire to fulfill one’s vision for the future in relation to an additional language. The model has three components: the Ideal L2 self, which corresponds to the L2-speaking future self-image. The ought-to self encompasses the attributes one believes one ought to possess to meet others’ expectations and avoid possible negative consequences. The last component, the language learning experience, refers to executive, situated motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience. The motivational capacity of vision-based future self-guides strongly depends on certain conditions, such as the existence of a discrepancy between the present and the ideal self, the fact that one should possess an ideal future self-guide, and that it should be sufficiently elaborate. These conditions offer the basis for vision-enhancing motivational strategies in formal settings (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021).

As Claro (2020) and Dörnyei (2020) point out, the notions of ideal L2 self and *integrativeness* are complementary and in some cases might overlap. The former is based on a process of identification with a projected future vision of the self, whereas the latter is based on the identification with an external (real or imagined) L2 community.

A particularly relevant finding for this study is presented by Ortiz Cobo, Kralik and Bianco (2020), who conducted an ethnography to explore the types of motivation to learn Italian of a group of refugees in Italy. Their results show the complex and multifaceted nature of *integrativeness*. Some participants reported a substantial overlap between *integrativeness* and ideal L2 self, others were more influenced by external factors such as lack of job or opportunities and intended time of permanence in the host country. This study also stresses the strong impact of the learning experience and ought-to L2 self (see also Sidaway, 2022), especially the various facets of the ought-to L2 self- dimensions (see also Feng & Papi, 2020; Papi *et al.*, 2019). For instance, family influence, in this specific learning situation seems to constitute a promotional factor, and be more linked to the Ideal L2 self, rather than an external pressure to learn a language, as often the case in FL contexts.

### 2.2.3. Self-Determination theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) has also been highly influential in second language motivation research. This theory posits that well-being depends on the fulfillment of three basic human needs, namely autonomy, relatedness and competence. It places different kinds of motivation on a continuum according to the degree of self-

endorsement of a certain action, ranging from *extrinsic* or controlled regulation to *intrinsic* motivation, where behavior is completely autonomous and rises from pleasure or enjoyment inherent to the activity. *Extrinsic motivation*, very common in socialized life, is not generated by passion or interest. SDT assumes that there are different kinds of extrinsic motivation based on the degree to which the motivation is internalized in relation to one’s self-concept. *External regulation* refers to the behavior motivated by the anticipation of external reward or avoidance of punishment. When learning an additional language is associated to an external pressure that is partially internalized in one’s sense of the self, because it is regarded as generally important and valuable for example by significant others, it is termed *introjected regulation*. If learning an additional language is related to the fulfillment of other goals important to us, such as communicating with significant others, then it is called *identified regulation*. The most internalized type of extrinsic motivation is called *integrated* and comes to play when learning a language is consistent with one’s value and sense of the self. Empirical evidence has shown that intrinsic and extrinsic integrated kinds of regulation have a positive impact on achievement and performance (see for instance Alamer, 2021 and Noels, 2023 for a recent literature review). Other relevant studies have investigated the impact of basic needs support, such as relatedness, on motivation and engagement (Dincer *et al.*, 2019; Hasanzadeh *et al.*, 2024).

As stressed by McEown *et al.* (2014), these three frameworks share some similarities. In their investigation on the relationships between the main constructs of these three models and their affective and behavioral implications, findings revealed that intrinsic motivation and ideal L2 self positively predicted engagement and persistence.

#### 2.2.4. Persistence

Drawing on L2MSS Theory (Dörnyei, 2009) and on the theory of Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs) (Dörnyei *et al.*, 2016), Dörnyei developed a five-component model of long-term motivation that links persistence to *self-concordant goals*, i.e. goals that correspond to one’s intrinsic values, passion and personality. These goals are therefore easily to be envisioned and activated; and are likely to sustain long-term effort. Henry *et al.* (Thorsen, 2023) have found for instance that quality self-concordant goals had positive effects on engagement and academic buoyancy on teacher students in Turkey. A second important component in Dörnyei’s model are *actions and routines* to spare energy in the everyday life, and the *self-control capacity* to inhibit distractors and conjure positive emotions and visions about one’s L2 long-term goal. The fourth dimension are *positive emotions*, in particular passion, that can be also found in the conceptualization of *grit* (Duckworth *et al.*, 2007; Oxford & Khajavy, 2021). The fifth factor linked to persistence both in formal and informal contexts, is setting *short-term, incremental goals* and receiving *positive feedback* from teachers or other L2-speakers.

One definition of persistence is provided by Kruglanski *et al.* (2018) and quoted by Henry (2023): «Persistence is understood as an enhanced awareness of and concern for the future, decision-making that consistently benefits future selves, and a preoccupation with goal-focused action that “entails moving from one’s current (less desirable) state to a future state that is more desirable”» (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2018: 406).

Henry (2024) further distinguishes the notion of persistence from *academic buoyancy* (Martin & Marsh, 2009) and *grit*. In this respect, he emphasizes that the component of self-regulation in Dörnyei’s conceptualization of long-term motivation is different from *grit*, that involves the ability to persevere for a long-term goal in the face of challenging

tasks, rather than of more attractive competing tasks in school or in the academic environment. *Academic buoyancy* describes the capacity to deal with ordinary ups and downs of the academic life. Both constructs differ from *academic resilience*, which refers to the «capacity to overcome acute and chronic adversities that are seen as major assaults on educational process» (Martin & Marsh, 2009: 353), namely major risk factors, like chronic underachievement, depression, deprivation, truancy...

Henry (2023) also extended Dörnyei’s model to persistence in multiple language learning, where becoming multilingual is set as a self-concordant goal and represents the long-term vision of an ideal (or ought-to) multilingual self.

A few studies are focused on L2 persistence and mainly use quantitative methods (see for example Kim & Kim, 2017; Feng & Papi, 2020). Two exceptions are Awad *et al.* (2014), who examined personal narratives to elicit the main aspects influencing college foreign language learners to persist in language learning also beyond program requirements. Support from family and teachers and early exposure to foreign language are among the most relevant findings. Almon (2015) collected interview data among ESL community college learners. According to the participants, the main reasons that undermine persistence among these participants are associated to external obstacles, such as job or family obligations, or to identity legitimation (Norton, 2013).

The studies reviewed underscore the dynamic character of motivation and its complex ecology. Given the lack of research into the dimension of persistence, the current study attempts to offer an in-depth exploration of Gholam’s motivation to learn Italian from 2006 to present, by answering the following research questions:

1. What has characterized Gholam’s sustained motivation toward learning Italian?
2. How did his motivation change across time?

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study takes a person-in-context relational view of researching motivation to capture the uniqueness (Ushioda, 2009: 220) of the LL experience of one single participant and retrospectively shed light on the dynamics of his motivation to learn Italian.

We adopted the methodology of participative narrative inquiry, PNI (Kurtz, 2014), which involves participants both in the data collection and in the data interpretation to ensure validity. In fact, PNI «can enhance research quality and rigor through the mutually reinforcing partnership formed by the participants’ real-world knowledge and experience with the researchers’ theoretical and methodological expertise» (Colla & Kurtz, 2024: 7). It is described as a blend between traditional narrative inquiry and participative action research.

#### 3.1. *Instruments and analysis*

PNI projects follow three phases: collection, sense making, and return. For this study, data were generated from multiple sources: three semi-structured biographical interviews, Gholam’s self-written reflection on his language learning (LL) history (Mercer, 2013) and our written and oral exchanges via WhatsApp providing further clarifications and expansions.

Table 1. *Project phases*

Phase	Data collection method/Activity	Word count	Time	Objective	Parties involved
Story collection	1 <sup>st</sup> interview	5661	2022-10-28	Eliciting Gholam’s Italian learning history	Elvira Gholam
Story collection	2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	10427	2023-05-31	Eliciting Gholam’s Italian learning history	Elvira Gholam
Catalysis	Transcription and coding with MAXQDA		2023-06 until 2024-03	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	Elvira
Sense-making	Written analysis		2023-06 until 2024-03	Grouping of themes and condensation of the story in a «coherent story whole» (Barkhuizen, 2019:195)	Elvira
Sense-making	3 <sup>rd</sup> interview	26245	2024-03-22	Interactive sense making and exploring what the story means to the participant	Elvira Gholam
Sense-making	Written reflection and clarifications via Whatsapp and phone calls	2396	2024-08	Interactive sense making	Elvira Gholam
Sense-making	Draft of the findings		2024-09	Interactive sense making	Elvira Gholam
Return	Final paper		2024-09	Communications of the central themes to guide future action or further inquiry	Elvira Gholam

The interview protocol included questions on Gholam’s relationship with Italian and the other languages of his repertoire, his educational trajectory, possible difficulties encountered, and his learning experiences in different contexts, like his group home, his foster family, school and work. The reflection prompt was designed to answer the research questions of this paper and required Gholam to write about his language learning journey, with a primary focus on Italian. At this stage, only the general notion of language learning goal was used to help the co-author think back of his objectives and also reflect on the different degrees of intensity of his efforts to learn Italian across time. He was also asked to remember his difficulties and the favorable factors involved in his academic and linguistic achievement.

The story collection phase started after signing the informed consent. The interviews were held in a quiet space at a time to our convenience and Gholam was encouraged to include quotes from his own publications, if related to the topics and expand whatever aspect he wished to add to the research.

The second phase involved data familiarization and interpretation first by Elvira to formulate hypotheses to answer the RQ. Using qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, the data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) both inductively and deductively, and this process allowed to identify patterns across the story-set. The “storied data” (Barkhuizen, 2019: 194) were condensed into a coherent narrative, which was reviewed and discussed during the third interview and follow-up conversations via WhatsApp.

The written reflection was aimed to gain further data and interpretation, especially to encourage Gholam to reflect on the meaning and impact of his story, which is a crucial component in PNI. Once this additional data was coded and analyzed thematically, Elvira wrote a draft of the findings section of the paper, which was shared with Gholam via email. The findings are organized as a «coherent storied whole» (Barkhuizen, 2019: 195), where themes and subthemes are presented in chronological order.

The third phase of PNI involves returning to the community for action. Nevertheless, generating a Theory of Change, namely a new perspective (Colla & Kurtz, 2024) was beyond the scope of this article. We collaborated on drafting the findings, discussion, and conclusion chapters, sharing ideas on possible pedagogical implications for the teaching practice.

### 3.2. *Ethics*

This research responds to the growing call to empower participants as co-researchers (Sidaway, 2024). This approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability for the research outcomes and promotes a more inclusive research culture. The decision to ask for Gholam’s cooperation was based on Gholam’s high level of linguistic ability and capacity for critical reflection, demonstrated by his previous autobiographical publications. His contribution was therefore invaluable in deeply exploring a long-term language learning journey in a LOTE context and in interpreting its significance.

Both methodological and interpretative choices align with a non-essentialist view of languages (Ortega, 2019). Success, like language learning is «socially constructed» (Ortega, 2019: 25) and should be freed from monolingual and native speaker bias. This view also demands greater attention and sensitivity to power imbalances in research on multilingualism. This unique opportunity to involve the participant in all research phases and public dissemination enhances the reliability of our findings and reflects our shared concern for social justice in language education.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. *Initial instrumental orientation*

At the very beginning of his LL history, Gholam’s orientation to learn Italian was mainly instrumental (Gardner & Lampert, 1985; Gardner, 2010; Gardner, 2020), namely finding a job to support himself and renew his residence permit, once he would have turned 18 and had to leave the group home:

Io all’epoca iniziavo a capire che se io non imparo la lingua italiana, io non posso trovare il lavoro, se io non trovo lavoro non posso avere permesso di soggiorno, se io non ho permesso di soggiorno, non posso avere lavoro, quindi erano le cose che già all’epoca io collegavo tra di loro (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos. 108).

[At the time, I was starting to understand that, if I don’t learn the Italian language, I can’t find a job, if I don’t find a job, I can’t have a residence permit, if I don’t have a residence permit, I can’t have a job, so these were the things that I already connected with each other at the time (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos. 108)].

At this stage, he was also influenced by the discourse of some friends from his L1 community, who also lived in his group home and shared his instrumental orientation:

All’inizio ascoltavo i ragazzi afghani e loro mi dicevano: ‘Ah ma noi siamo qui per lavorare e non per studiare’. E così ho perso un anno e poi andavo a giocare al parco con loro. Andavo sempre con i miei connazionali (Intervista 1 Gholam, Pos 121).

[At first, I listened to the Afghan guys and they told me: ‘We are here to work and not to study’. And that’s why I lost one year playing in the park with them. I always went with my compatriots (Interview 1 Gholam, Pos 121)].

#### 4.2. *Development of a sense of gratitude towards the Italian community*

Gholam describes his early impact with the new environment of his group home for minors by stressing his sense of gratitude (Oxford, 2016: 58) and optimism for the material and affective support received by the educators, who helped him overcome his initial fears and confusion:

Le persone che ci aveva accolto dopo la comunità sicuramente mi ha aiutato a una seconda fase del mio forte decadimento perché non ero ancora pronto ad affrontare la vita da solo trovandomi in un posto completamente diverso e sconosciuto, mi rendevo conto che non ero solo orfano da genitori ma anche dagli amici e dalla lingua però la vita andava avanti essendo aiutato di qua e di là c’era sempre qualcuno che era disposto ad aiutarmi e io avrei voluto in un giorno altrettanto (follow up 24.09.24, Pos 8).

[The people in the group home certainly helped me in a second phase of my strong decay, because I was not yet ready to face life alone finding myself in a completely different and unknown place. I realized that I was not only an orphan from parents, but also from friends and from the language, but life went on and being helped here and there, there was always someone who was willing to help me, and I hoped I could one day give back (follow up 24.09.24, Pos 8)].

The group home represented for Gholam a safe place, where he could forget about his suffering, think about the future with optimism and focus on learning Italian:

[a]vevo bisogno di pace e tranquillità per concentrarmi [...]. Qui a Venezia era un dono poter studiare in pace nella mia stanza, avere un quaderno, una scrivania (follow up 24.09.24, Pos 8).

[I needed peace and quiet to concentrate [...]. Here in Venice it was a gift to be able to study in peace in my room, to have a notebook, a desk (follow up 24.09.24, Pos 8)].

#### 4.3. *Emergence of an integrative orientation*

His instrumental orientation was soon combined by his early decision to consider Italy his new home and by the desire to get to know it: «conoscere questa nuova casa» (Intervista 1 Gholam, Pos 37) [«getting to know this new home» (Interview 1 Gholam, Pos 37)], goals more in line with an integrative orientation.

Poi, piano piano, ho capito che non era quella la cosa giusta per me [...]. E quello è il nostro nuovo paese, il nostro nuovo padre, madre, fratello, tutti e *bisogna* imparare a convivere con altre persone e senza dimenticare ovviamente la propria cultura, la propria provenienza, da dove provieni ovviamente. *Devi* studiare quella, ma *devi* anche aggrapparti fortemente alla tua nuova cultura (Intervista 1 Gholam, Pos 121).

[Then, slowly, I understood that it wasn’t the right thing for me [...]. And that this is our new country, our new father, mother, brother, everyone and you *have to* learn to live with other people, without forgetting your own culture, your origins, where you come from, obviously. You *have to* study that, but you also *have to* hold on tightly to your new culture (Interview 1 Gholam, Pos)].

It is important to note that Gholam’s acculturative drive and *integrativeness* are not the result of an intentional «identification with an external reference group such as the L2 community» (Dörnyei, 2020: 126) or the desire to be like «valued members» of the L2 community. At that time, the L2 culture was unknown to him and his *integrativeness*, i.e. «a general openness to adopting characteristics of other cultural communities» (Gardner, 2010: 85) was not yet the result of a particular “love” or “interest” in the Italian culture or lifestyle; it stemmed from his necessity to feel more socially accepted and make friends in the new L2 community and fulfil his basic need of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In SDT terms, the repetition of the verb *bisogna* and *dovere* shows an extrinsic integrated kind of regulation. For Gholam, the second language and culture did not have an intrinsic appeal (yet), but were already integrated with his sense of the self, and to the «attainment of goals important to him, such as improving his occupational performance or interaction with people he cherished» (Noels *et al.*, 2019: 3) in the group home and later in his foster family. This type of regulation is very close to what Wang *et al.* (2021: 430) call *humanistic orientation*, where L2 learning is regarded as a means of «self-cultivation» and «self-transformation».

#### 4.4. *Formal education as an affordance*

The coexistence of instrumental, integrative and humanistic orientations is particularly evident when examining his specific motivation to attend classes at the Center for adult education. As a minor student, Gholam, was expected to enroll in such a center to get a middle school diploma and fulfil compulsory education. Despite the external constraint, Gholam’s motivation to attend school responded to his *humanistic orientation*, in his case spurred by his poetic soul and by the desire to access written language:

E che io già da piccolo avevo un’anima poetica. E questa io ho portato. Non tutti hanno questa [...] Diciamo che io quando ero nel mio villaggio, quando arrivavano delle lettere dei primi immigrati afgani dal Pakistan o dall’Iran, non c’era nessuno che potesse leggere queste lettere perché il livello di analfabetismo era altissimo e io sognavo che un giorno sarà che io diventassi lettore di tutte queste lettere per tutte queste donne che arriva la lettera dal marito, dal figlio, dal fidanzato eccetera e magari scrivere la lettera che loro mi dettano queste donne e io scrivo per loro marito. Che cosa c’è dentro questo cuore, che cosa manderanno? Questa curiosità ho sempre portato con me fino in Iran. In Iran ero clandestino non potevo frequentare una scuola, imparare la grammatica persiana e in Italia ho avuto la possibilità di entrare (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 100).

[And that as a kid, I already had a poetic soul. And this I brought. Not everyone has this [...] Let’s say that when I was in my village, when letters arrived from the first Afghan immigrants from Pakistan or Iran, there was no one who could read these letters, because the level of illiteracy was very high and I, I dreamed that, one day, I would become a reader of all these letters for all these women who received the letter from their husband, son, boyfriend etc. and maybe write the letter that these women dictate to me and I write for their husband. What is inside this heart, what will they send? I have always carried this curiosity with me to Iran. In Iran, I was an illegal immigrant, I couldn’t go to school, learn Persian grammar, but in Italy I had the opportunity to enter (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 100)].

#### 4.5. *A vision of unspecified self-fulfillment*

Furthermore, already at that time, he showed great persistence and grit, as he was determined not to fail, to try and exploit every opportunity to improve his life:

Perché ho detto, se io ho fatto tutti questi paesi per trovare la mia libertà dove poter studiare dove poter lavorare, se io ho questo posto come posto ideale per realizzare i miei sogni allora dicevo ‘è ora di, di iniziare!’ E di non fallire eccetera. Quindi questo mi ha motivato tantissimo. Ho detto, se io ho scelto questo posto, devo adesso mettere il meglio per migliorare me stesso, ma per migliorare (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos. 110).

[Because I said, if I have crossed all these countries to find my freedom, where I can study, where I can work, if I have this place as the ideal place to make my dreams come true, then I said ‘it’s time to, to start!’ And not to fail etc. So, this motivated me a lot. I said, if I have chosen this place, I must now put my best into improving myself, but to improve (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos. 110)].

After Gholam turned 18 and got his middle school certificate, he moved to his foster family’s home. Here he was given the affective and material support to find a job in order to renovate his residence permit. He explains that he had to start from scratch:

il mio curriculum iniziava da zero (Intervista 1 Gholam, Pos 50), perché io non avevo nessuna esperienza. Tutte le esperienze che io avevo nel passato non servivano più in Italia (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 172).

[my CV started from scratch (Interview 1 Gholam, Pos 50), because I had no experience. All the experiences I had in the past were no longer useful in Italy (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 172)].

He started with some low skilled jobs. Later he found a job in a hotel as a porter and these experiences reinforced his desire to accrue further cultural and linguistic capital to improve himself:

Capivo in me che se non continuo ad approfondire i miei studi continuerò per tutta la vita a lavorare in un posto come svolgevo quel lavoro da facchino in albergo o altri lavori che non chiede molto spesso lo studio, ma serve avere la forza e ripetere per tutta la vita un solo mestiere (Riflessione Gholam, Pos 11).

[I understood that if I do not continue to deepen my studies I will continue to work in one place for the rest of my life, like I did that job as a porter in a hotel or other jobs that do not require to study very often but require having the strength to repeat a single job for the rest of your life (Reflection Gholam, Pos 11)].

Therefore, his *humanistic orientation* towards the L2 became stronger and he started to imagine enrolling in high school. He explains how he had to stand up, «rebel», to his foster family, who thought he could not combine school with his legal obligations to work:

[...] mi sono ribellato anche alla mia famiglia. Ho detto io voglio studiare. E come potevi studiare se andavo alla mattina a pulire i bagni? E allora trovare un lavoro pomeridiano come facchino e allora alla mattina andavo a scuola e quindi avevo la possibilità di studiare e lavorare contemporaneamente. Lavorare perché dovevo rinnovare il permesso soggiorno e studiare perché volevo arrivare, cioè migliorare sempre la lingua per trovare un lavoro migliore (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 176).

[I also rebelled against my family. I said I want to study. And how could you study if I went in the morning to clean the bathrooms? And then I found an afternoon job as a porter and I went to school in the morning and so I had the opportunity to study and work at the same time. Working because I had to renew my residence permit and studying because I wanted to succeed, that is, always improving my language to find a better job (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 176)].

His first dream of becoming a driver soon gave way to a more elaborate vision (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009, 2010) of his ideal L2 self, which was mainly the result of first-hand experiences, but also of identity negotiations with the people in his network, like his boss or his parents. For instance, Gholam acknowledges he would have liked to attend an academic high school (liceo), but due to his Italian literacy skills, which were considered inadequate, the family opted for a vocational catering high school, the only day school that accepted him at the age of 21.

In SDT terms, even though his vision was open and not particularly elaborate, it is important to stress that it was sustained by an *extrinsic introjected* (fear of failure) and *identified regulation* (humanistic goal of self-improvement).

#### 4.6. *Academic resilience*

An important characteristic that contributed to sustain Gholam’s motivation to attend school and learn Italian in a formal setting is his academic resilience, shown both during middle school and later when he attended high school. As the following quote illustrates,

his *academic resilience* (Martin & Marsh, 2009) is strongly associated to his sense of gratitude and *humanistic orientation*:

Nel frattempo che ero entrato in contatto diretto con la mia famiglia riprendevo anche il significato dell’affetto familiare, mi ero iscritto in terza media, qui se prima per corsi di lingua italiana avevo da studiare solo la base della Grammatica di lingua italiana, [ora, durante la scuola media] iniziavo a mettere la mano nella materia scientifica, storica e matematica e lingua francese, anche qui dopo 150 ore di lezioni ero come un contadino che a mezzogiorno si siede sotto l’albero, sulla testa cantano gli uccelli seduti sui rami, ma il contadino non capisce ciò che canta[no], ma solo si meraviglia da suoni di quei canti come un grande maestro (Riflessione Gholam, Pos 10).

[In the meantime that I had come into direct contact with my [foster] family I also regained an understanding for the family affection, I had enrolled in the third year of middle school, here if before for Italian language courses I had to study only the basis of the Italian language Grammar I began to get my hands on the scientific, historical and mathematical subjects and the French language, here too after 150 hours of lessons I was like a farmer who at midday sits under the tree but above his head the birds sitting on the branches sing but the farmer does not understand what he is singing but only marvels at the sounds of those songs like a great master (Reflection Gholam, Pos 10)].

This curiosity towards all school subjects and the Italian language fueled his persistence, as he recalls that

Io stesso quando frequentavo all’epoca CTP, eh io fino a mezzanotte andavo a tradurre parole per parole tutti i miei compiti e avevo un quaderno di segnare tutte le parole che durante il giorno avevo imparato e di ripetere dalla prima pagina fino a quella pagina dove ero arrivato. Altri invece se ne fregavano, andavano a giocare a calcio, andavano a fare altre cose. In comunità (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 106).

[When I attended CTP at the time, well, I went to translate all my homework word by word until midnight and I had a notebook to write down all the words I had learned during the day and to repeat from the first page to the page I had reached. Others didn’t care, they went to play football, they went to do other things. In the community (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 106)].

Nevertheless, he states: «that at the CTP he didn’t learn anything, non avevo imparato nulla praticamente da quella certificato, però mi ha aiutato tantissimo per proseguire» (Intervista 1 Gholam, Pos 10). [I didn’t learn anything basically from that certificate, but it helped me a lot to continue (Interview 1 Gholam, Pos 10)]. He attributes his difficulties in understanding the content of the lessons to his low level of literacy and to a lack of empathy from his teachers’ side:

E mi ricordo che a scuola cioè volevo rispondere qualche domanda ma ora che io preparavo per chiedere oppure per rispondere già un’altra persona che era italiano magari perché erano anziane oppure venivano rispondevano già e quindi io rimanevo un po’ escluso. [...] E volevo arrivare a quella cioè di rispondere a una domanda risolvere. [...] Quindi tu capisci che quell’insegnante non riesce minimamente immedesimarsi ai suoi alunni (Intervista 3 Gholam, Pos 257-822).

[And I remember that at school I wanted to answer some questions, but since it took me time to prepare, to ask or to answer, another person who was

Italian or maybe because they were old, they were faster and so I was a bit left out. [...] And I wanted to get to that one, that is, to answer a question and solve it. [...] So you understand that that teacher is not able to empathize with his students in the slightest (Interview 3 Gholam, Pos 257-822)].

Also during high school, Gholam’s motivation stayed constantly high. However, during these years, he continued to experience many difficulties in understanding written texts, but also in understanding teachers’ talk:

In seconda io non capivo niente, in seconda arriva il mio professore di italiano diceva: ‘chiudete il libro’ e iniziava a dettare. Nel frattempo io non capivo niente, cioè andava con una velocità e io scrivevo qualche parola che le conoscevo, tutto il resto non riuscivo a prendere a copiare dalle sue dettate e poi quando andavo a prendere dai miei compagni di classe non riuscivo a capire perché scrivevano tutti in corsivo e io corsivo non conoscevo ancora e così sono andato fino in quarta, ad esempio in terza quando spiegava la Divina Commedia io pensavo che Beatrice fosse figlia di Dante e che Virgilio fosse suo fratello (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 35).

[In second grade I didn’t understand anything, in second grade my Italian teacher came and said: ‘close the book’ and started dictating. In the meantime I didn’t understand anything, that is, he was going so fast and I wrote down a few words that I knew, I couldn’t take the rest and copy from his dictations and then when I went to take from my classmates I couldn’t understand why they all wrote in cursive and I didn’t know cursive yet and so I went on until fourth grade, for example in third grade when he explained the Divine Comedy I thought that Beatrice was Dante’s daughter and that Virgil was her brother (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 35)].

It appears that the teachers he had did not encourage or support him, for example, with extracurricular individualized activities. Gholam’s family at that time resorted to private tutoring teachers to help him overcome his difficulties in Italian and other subjects. As the following quote shows, Gholam’s high motivation in this phase continued to be mainly linked with his *humanistic orientation*, and long-term vision and grit:

Io ho sempre sognato a lungo, ma per fortuna sono sempre arrivato come andare all’università che io già il primo anno, quando ho iniziato la scuola superiore volevo andare all’università nonostante tutti i fallimenti, tutti i miei professori che dicevano tu non sei non sarai in grado di fare un tema della maturità eccetera, eppure sono arrivato, quindi se combattiamo per le nostre battaglie alla fine vinciamo anche (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 25).

[I have always dreamed for a long term [goal], but luckily I always got there like going to university that I already in the first year, when I started high school I wanted to go to university despite all the failures, all my teachers who said you are not, you will not be able to write a final exam essay etc., and yet I got there, so if we fight for our battles in the end we also win (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 25)].

This quote provides evidence of his high academic resilience, which, as Gholam explains, was nurtured by his growth mindset (Dweck, 2015) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997):

contavo su sul mio carattere perché dicevo se io ho potuto superare i due anni cioè, tre anni posso superare, al massimo vengo bocciato (Intervista 3 Gholam, Pos 851).

[I was counting on my character because I said, if I could pass these two years, that is, I can also pass the third, at worst I will fail (Interview 3 Gholam, Pos 851)].

#### 4.7. *Favorable socio-contextual conditions*

When reflecting on possible external conditions that contributed to his academic success and integration in Italy, Gholam compares himself to other citizens with a migration journey like him. The fact that he arrived in Italy as an unaccompanied minor and was entrusted to social services turned out to be an affordance to cultivate his humanistic goals and integrate in Italy. First of all, in the group home he found a situation of relative economic stability and safety that allowed him to think about his future in Italy and to make the decision to invest in Italian. He stresses that, being an orphan, he was free from economic obligations and responsibilities towards his family or origin, and thus had greater economic independence and autonomy:

molto spesso succede che quando trovi il primo lavoro dici tanto stipendio ce l’hai, mandi soldi a casa. Io per fortuna, è stata anche una fortuna, io non ho nessuno che mi chiede dall’Afghanistan i soldi, quindi dedicavo tutta la fatica il lavoro sulla mia vita personale, a me stesso (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 172).

[it happens very often that, when you find your first job, you say you have a salary, you send money home. Luckily, it was also luck, I don’t have anyone asking me for money from Afghanistan, so I dedicated all my effort to work on my personal life, on myself (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 172)].

The heterogeneous context of the group home afforded him rich exposure to the L2 both from the educators and from the other Italian speaking members. Through his participation in this community, he got access to others: he did an internship in a local workshop, attended literacy courses inside the group home and then middle school at the CTP. Furthermore, the Social Services entrusted him to an Italian foster family, giving him the chance to imagine to be part of an Italian family.

Finally, he claims that his physical appearance in the multicultural context of Venice might have protected him from racism and discrimination inside and outside the formal learning context:

L’Italia veramente per me è stato, è un paese che non ho mai avuto la forma di razzismo eccetera, queste cose, ma io probabilmente per il mio viso, perché Italia accoglie tanti turisti cinesi e giapponesi e io vengo un po’ mascherato anche in questo modo (Intervista 1 Gholam, Pos 42).

[Italy for me has really been, it is a country that I have never had any form of racism etc., but probably because of my face, because Italy welcomes many Chinese and Japanese tourists and I am also masked a bit in this way (Interview 1 Gholam, Pos 42)].

#### 4.8. *A critical encounter with a concerned teacher*

The turning point in Gholam’s life was when he met his Italian literature teacher at the beginning of his fourth year of high school. When remembering that period, he notes he

initially underestimated her because of her age and physical appearance and for this reason he cheated on the first literature test about Manzoni.

Allora intanto era un’insegnante un po’ gobba. Coi bianchi, anzianotta e un po’ mi sembrava anche persa veniva con i suoi libri e arrivava in classe e io dicevo beh quest’anno possiamo copiare non è un’insegnante brava giovane eccetera che è sa dell’attualità e infatti io ho copiai e che io descrivo nel mio terzo libro tra due famiglie e ho detto copiamo e poi era una verifica su Alessandro Manzoni e io ho copiai, copiai senza aver capito le domande e eppure ero illuso di aver capito tutto e avere scritto tutto, ma in realtà avevo soltanto riempito la pagina, ma non avevo capito le domande lei arriva il giorno dopo mi scrive: «vergognati» e io con quella vergogna che non c’era nessun voto né zero né 10 e avevo la vergogna e io dicevo: «come dovrò superare quest’anno che nemmeno l’inizio con zero e con la vergogna inizio?» e quella vergogna mi ha dato qualcosa di, ho detto che devo studiare seriamente fino a quel momento (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 33).

[She was a somewhat hunchbacked teacher. With white hair, elderly and she also seemed a little lost to me, she came with her books and arrived in class and I said: ‘Well, this year we can cheat, she’s not a good young teacher etc. who knows about current events’, and in fact I have I cheated [...]. It was a test on Alessandro Manzoni and I cheated, I wrote without having understood the questions and yet I thought I understood everything, but in reality I had only filled the page, without understanding the questions. The next day she comes and writes to me: ‘shame on you’ and I with that shame, that there was no mark, neither zero nor ten, I was ashamed, and I said: ‘How am I supposed to get through this year that I’m not even beginning with zero, but with the shame I begin?’ And that shame gave me something, I said: ‘I have to study seriously from now on’ (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 33)].

By providing a pedagogical and relational feedback, rather than just on performance, the teacher conveyed an implicit message that was very important for Gholam: her confidence in his potential. In other words, despite his limited linguistic and cultural capital, she considered him a legitimate learner and speaker and, most importantly, she gave him unconditional recognition. After the critical experience of this class assignment, Gholam says he began to feel «love» (Barcelos & Coelho, 2016) for this teacher, who fortunately was reconfirmed the following year and prepared him for his high school final exam.

The positive relationship with this teacher spurred Gholam to engage and take responsibility for his learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020: 59). Through his engagement with the subject matter, he discovered his interest in the biographies of Italian authors and by reading simplified versions of their works, under his teacher’s supervision, he became aware that he had a strong desire to tell and write about his own story and express his emotions. His teacher was therefore crucial in giving him recognition of his basic needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy, validation as a legitimate Italian speaker, but also to help him become aware of his identity a writer and poet.

Io quando leggevo queste opere, come se io fossi al posto di questi autori che avessi già scritto quelle opere anch’io quindi ero partecipe dentro queste opere e questa mi spingeva di dire alla mia insegnante è arrivato un giorno che, ma prof anch’io posso scrivere secondo lei oppure un poeta deve essere nobile, deve essere appartenere di una famiglia nobile in mezzo vivere in mezzo ai libri, come Leopardi, eccetera consumarsi tutta la vita solo con i libri. E invece

lei ha detto sì, che ognuno di noi possiamo scrivere ognuno che i sentimenti sono dentro di noi, ma non riuscivo a scrivere io ancora, perché non sapevo, ero analfabeta quando sono arrivato in Italia, e in più la lingua italiana io non avevo ancora imparato a scrivere e poi all’epoca il mio italiano ancora diventava più scorretto che correggere, [...] perché scrivevo i messaggi, quindi ho iniziato anche a un miglioramento della lingua italiana e finalmente quel melograno che quando si matura scoppia e deve buttare quei semi fuori e per me è stato così che sono arrivato in Italia pieno di quei semi, ma non riuscivo a raccontare in qualche lingua e non avevo nessuno che mi potesse ascoltare (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 41).

[When I read these works, as if I were in the place of these authors who had already written those works too, therefore I was a participant in these works and this pushed me to tell my teacher, one day: «But Prof., do you think that I also can write, or does a poet have to be noble, must he belong to a noble family and live among books, like Leopardi, etc. consume his whole life only with books?» And instead she said yes, that each of us can write, each of us, that feelings are inside us, but I couldn’t write yet, because I didn’t know, I was illiterate when I arrived in Italy, and moreover the Italian language I hadn’t yet learned to write and then at the time my Italian still became more incorrect than correct [...], because I wrote [sms] with my classmates, so I improved my Italian and finally that pomegranate that when it ripens bursts and has to throw those seeds out and for me that was [the same]. I arrived in Italy full of those seeds, but I couldn’t speak in any language and I had no one who could listen to me (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 41)].

At that time, Gholam took part in his first poetry contest, and, with this teacher’s guidance, he also began drafting his autobiography, which would later be published. After graduating from high school, he enrolled in university. He says that thanks to the Italian written skills that he was developing, at the university he could access the written language in his L1, Farsi. In the university years, he further developed his skills in Italian autonomously, «as a self-taught person» (‘studio da autodidatta’) (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 4)), as he says, especially by writing and reading, and recalls that in these years he finally managed to read a whole novel.

Since then, he has obtained legitimization and made his way in various communities, first of all that of Italian writers and intellectuals. He looks up to Italian authors such as Leopardi, Manzoni or Primo Levi as role models and source of inspiration and the constant relationship with their work nurtures his motivation to improve his Italian skills:

Non ho ancora completato il mio percorso. Vuol dire che devo ancora lavorarci, non è un bene. Ma è un po’ come sbagliando si impara. [...] Tu devi sbagliare, e correggerti. [...] io mi sento veramente orgoglioso della mia fatica dei miei impegni che ci ho messo (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos. 142-148).

[I haven’t completed my journey yet. It means I still have to work on it, which is not good. But it’s a bit like, you learn from your mistakes. [...] You have to make mistakes and correct yourself. [...] I feel really proud of my effort and the commitment I put into it (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos. 142-148)].

His sense of ownership and affective bond with the Italian language has given him the strength to pursue his battle to gain the Italian citizenship despite several refusals:

Non, non, cè\*, perché io comunque nonostante la politica, nonostante le sue regole, nonostante non mi dia la cittadinanza, io non è che per colpa di questo

non devo andare a leggere i Promessi Sposi. Figuriamoci, assolutamente (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 96).

[No, I mean, because I still, despite the politics, despite its rules, even if they don’t give me the citizenship, it’s not that because of this, I shouldn’t go and read *The Betrothed*. Of course, absolutely not (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos.)].

Gholam often travels abroad to present his books and give conferences. Comparing himself with many foreign citizens who, as he says, take the first job they find and don’t cultivate any ambition, he says he still owes everything to his Italian teacher:

Se non avessi incontrato lei probabilmente io avrei sarei un semplice dipendente di chi lavoravo in un ristorante, che lavorava in un albergo [...]. Invece quella insegnante mi ha dato tutto (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 29).

[If I hadn’t met her, I probably would have been a simple worker of someone who worked in a restaurant, who worked in a hotel [...]. Instead, that teacher gave me everything. (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 29)].

## 5. DISCUSSION

Gholam’s LL history and his insightful contribution to the analysis has offered a precious perspective into relevant factors and conditions that contributed to shape his L2 motivational dynamics and persistence.

### 5.1. RQ1. *What has characterized Gholam’s sustained motivation towards learning Italian?*

The findings show that his motivation to learn Italian has been nurtured by a high level of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In Italy Gholam found various opportunities to fulfill his basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. In particular, the unconditional support that he found in his educators, foster family and later in his Italian teacher has motivated him to sustain his efforts in learning Italian, not only to become independent and meet external obligations, but mainly to be able to emotionally relate with significant others in the Italian society.

Anche con la mia nuova mamma e papà e fratelli a volte esprimevo l’affetto con un sorriso ma non potevo avere una risposta, a volte anche i nostri sorrisi sono diversi come le pronunce delle nostre diverse lingue (Riflessione Gholam, Pos 8).

[Even with my new mom and dad and siblings I sometimes expressed affection with a smile, but I could not get a response, sometimes even our smiles are different like the pronunciations of our different languages (Gholam Reflection, Pos 8)].

Favorable socio-contextual conditions also contributed to enhance his economic self-reliance and allowed him to be more autonomous and exercise agency to reach his professional and personal objectives. In this respect, it is significant that Gholam found a safety net that enabled him to elaborate and cultivate a vision for his future that would go beyond the satisfaction of extrinsic obligation such as finding a low skilled job and renovate his residence permit. He for example states that gaining access to the Italian

language and educational system enabled him to think about his future and develop long-term goals:

in comunità dove gli operatori e le operatrici rappresentavano diverse figure in base ai loro studi e età, potevano essere come un padre, una madre, una sorella, un fratello o un altro parente o addirittura per alcuni come fidanzata/o. I rapporti si crescevano di giorno in giorno, ma la lentezza della mia comprensione d’italiano rimaneva molto basso essendo un analfabeta, analfabeta per la lingua ma anche per la cultura occidentale dato che non avevo minimo idea per come sviluppare il mio progresso (Riflessione Gholam, Pos 9).

[in the group home for minors, there were the educators who represented different figures based on their studies and age, they could be like a father, a mother, a sister, a brother or another relative or even for some as a girlfriend/boyfriend. The relationships grew day by day, but the pace of my understanding of Italian remained very slow, being an illiterate, illiterate for the language but also for the Western culture, since I had no idea how to develop my progress (Gholam Reflection, Pos 9)].

This underscores the significance of the learning environment and experience, inside and outside the formal setting, to shape motivation and vision (Sideway, 2022). As Gabrielli *et al.* (2022) stress, teenagers with a migration journey are more dependent on family support and school environment than their native peers and this is crucial to develop academic resilience. Teacher actions such as caring for dialogue, providing space to talk and listen and dealing with discipline relationally are pivotal in fostering engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

## 5.2. RQ2. *How did his motivation change across time?*

Gholam’s narrative illustrates how motivation «may be pulled, shaped and remodelled by various socio-cultural, emotional, historical and psychological forces embedded within the person’s life capital and their field(s) of play (or contexts)» (Consoli, 2022: 124). The findings reveal how Gholam’s initial extrinsic introjected regulation to learn a language to fulfill external obligations became gradually more internalized in his emerging sense of the self. In the early stage of his LL history, Gholam’s vague dream of improving his life prospects by learning Italian was paired with the fear of failing, which echoes Markus and Nurius’ notion of *fearful-selves* (1986), also included in the ought-to-self of L2MSS. A positive, supportive relationship with his educators and later with his foster family transformed the introjected regulation into an integrated one and contributed to foster an open and positive attitude towards the Italian society, typical of the integrative orientation. His account also provides evidence that instrumental and integrative orientation are not mutually exclusive (McEown *et al.*, 2014, 21) and may reinforce each other (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1997: 58).

Finding unconditional emotional recognition and a safety net was also crucial in the development of his *humanistic orientation*, which emerged from his need to become literate, his inner curiosity and his desire to access formal education, which was seen as an affordance. Research shows that high-quality goals are very much associated with motivational intensity and persistence in L2 learning (Noels, 2023).

With regard to his L2 motivation in the formal setting, Gholam’s type of regulation also explains his strong academic resilience which contributed to sustain his motivation

both during middle school and high school, despite negative feedback from some of his teachers and chronic difficulties in meeting academic demands.

During the fourth year of high school, this pattern evolved and Gholam’s motivation to learn Italian became gradually intrinsic. He attributes this significant change to his (new) Italian teacher and the supportive relationship that she was able to create. The anecdotes, along with Gholam’s interpretation, reveal that he encountered a teacher genuinely concerned for his future and willing to understand his needs beyond the immediate learning goals. Pishghadam (2022: 36) calls this type of concern *metapathy*.

Metapathy is the state of emotional metainvolvement or overengagement, which happens when individuals go beyond a reaction to relieve or elevate others’ current emotions momentarily; rather, they are so concerned about the others that they opt for a more thoughtful reaction having long-term benefits for their future life. Such a concerned reaction might seem to be rough for the moment, but it aims to help others reach a promising future.

This result is in line with Self-Determination Theory (see in particular the Relationships Motivation Theory in Deci & Ryan, 2017, chapter 12) and consistent with Hasanzadeh *et al.* (2024) findings, showing that *metapathy* positively predicted motivation among EFL students in Iran.

The following quote illustrates how Gholam’s affective connection with his teacher still shapes his relationship with the Italian language. Now that his teacher is getting older, he confesses that he is afraid to lose a source of motivation and inspiration for his future work:

Quasi penso che la mia scrittura si ferma con lei, in un certo punto. So già. Però lei ad esempio non ha mai accettato che io avessi scritto il mio capolavoro. Lei dice che il capolavoro va scritto quando uno scrittore ha settant’anni ottant’anni. All’epoca della sua massima maturità che ha ormai digerito e immunito da tutte le cose. E dopo di e l’anno scorso lei mi scrisse una bellissima lettera quando ero in Afghanistan, fa visto che sei tornato in Afghanistan rifletti, cioè che vedi, guarda con i tuoi occhi non per il giorno di oggi per l’Afghanistan, ma per il domani del tuo paese ma per il domani del nostro mondo e di creare il tuo capolavoro è come se lei mi desse già un compito e questo compito per me è duro per portare, per questo compito io ho bisogno intanto di migliorare la lingua. Se io non miglioro la lingua io non potrò scrivere quel capolavoro che lei intende dire (Intervista 2 Gholam, Pos 220).

[I almost think that my work stops with her, at a certain point. I already know. Yet, for example, she has never accepted the ideas that I have already written my masterpiece. She says that a masterpiece should be written when a writer is seventy or eighty years old. At the highest level of his maturity that he has now digested and immunized from all things. And last year she wrote me a beautiful letter when I was in Afghanistan: ‘since you have returned to Afghanistan reflect, that is, what do you see, look with your eyes not for today for Afghanistan, but for the future of your country but for the future of our world and to create your masterpiece’ it’s as if she already gave me a task and this task is hard for me to carry out, for this task I need to improve the language. If I do not improve the language I will not be able to write that masterpiece that she means to say (Interview 2 Gholam, Pos 220)].

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The most valuable practical implication of these findings is about the importance of the learning experience, and in particular the supportive relationship with significant others inside and outside the formal context to promote engagement and contribute to internalize extrinsic motivation, or even transform it into intrinsic motivation.

When reflecting on the role of his Italian teacher, Gholam stresses:

Davanti a voi avete cento bocche mute, cento lingue diverse, sono numerose le voci e infiniti i suoni che un insegnante dovrà affrontare. Dovrete essere voi a trascinarli con pensieri saggi, pensieri che possano assomigliare al loro passato, non chiedete nulla e lasciate che loro inizino a raccontarvi i loro segreti pian piano, con naturalezza e pura verità.

Siccome molto spesso i vostri alunni provengono da famiglie povere e analfabete e durante il viaggio, ad ogni confine, hanno affrontato una educazione diversa, saranno stanchi e non vorranno ascoltare le domande per essere accettati e riconosciuti nella nuova terra come cittadini.

Voi, e voi soli, potete offrire la penna come un bastone per salire pian piano sulla collina da dove si vede tutto, dove si respira un’aria nuova.

Tornando al mio cuore, che una volta era chiuso in un carcere cieco pur senza grave colpa, che aveva vissuto notti senza luce, trascinato su onde mai viste prima, immaginate come si è trovato senza madre, padre o altri cari a pregare alle stelle per come avvicinarsi; eppure la vita non mi ha abbandonato, dopo le notti buie doveva sorgere l’alba.

Fate anche voi come ha fatto la mia prof dopo il mio primo libro: tu resta in questa tua Italia trovata, tu ricorda la tua gente, tu custodisci l’arte della tua gente!

Ecco, dietro di me non avevo lasciato altro che un cimitero, ma il mio pensiero era sopravvissuto, alfabetizzato ha potuto conoscere i pesi delle singole parole, tutte le fatiche del passato, così si sono modificate come spargendo intorno petali di fiori.

Ultima osservazione: noi alunni siamo ciechi. Ricordo che ogni volta che la mia prof cambiava argomento, corrente letteraria, io la seguivo, ma a volte seguivo una e poi l’altra, diventavo pessimista e positivista! Poi, dopo aver completato gli studi, leggendo e rileggendo, ho imparato a mediare, ho trovato una via di mezzo, mentre, ancora nel mio villaggio, avevo una sola via, cioè dovevo seguire un pensiero unico, il pensiero che era comodo per quel villaggio.

[In front of you there are hundreds of silent mouths, hundreds of different languages, there are many voices and infinite sounds that a teacher will have to face. You will have to fascinate them with wise thoughts, thoughts that can resemble their past, do not ask anything and let them begin to tell you their secrets slowly, naturally and with pure truth.

Since very often your students come from poor and illiterate families and during the journey, at each border, they have faced a different education, they will be tired and will not want to listen to the questions to be accepted and recognized in the new land as citizens.

You, and you alone, can offer the pen, like a stick, to slowly climb the hill from where you can see everything, where they can breathe a new air.

Returning to my heart, which was once locked in a blind prison even without serious guilt, which had lived nights without light, dragged on waves never seen before, imagine how I found myself without a mother, father or other loved ones praying to the stars for how to get closer; and yet life did not abandon me, after the dark nights the dawn had to come.

You too, do as my teacher did after my first book: you stay in this Italy in the country that you have found, you remember your people, you guard the art of your people!

There, behind me I had left nothing but a cemetery, but my thought had survived. Literate it was able to know the weights of each word, all the efforts of the past have thus changed into scattering flower petals around.

Last observation: we students are blind. I remember that every time my teacher changed the subject, literary movement, I followed her, but sometimes I followed one and then the other, I became a pessimist and then a positivist! Then, after completing my studies, reading and rereading, I learned to mediate, I found a middle way, while, still in my village, I had only one way, that is, I had to follow a single thought, the thought that was convenient for that village].

His metaphor of “the pen as a walking stick” encapsulated the empowering role educators can play in learners’ lives - transforming learners from passive recipients of knowledge into authors of their own future. Deep emotional attunement and the capacity to listen are essential in helping learners like Gholam navigate initial disorientation and process past trauma. Through gentle and patient guidance, teachers can create the conditions for learners to open up at their own pace and begin to make sense of a new, more complex, future.

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