

Chinese International Students in Italy: A Teaching

Model (Note 1)

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Abstract

This study presents a teaching model implemented in an Italian language course for Chinese international students. It begins by outlining the situation of international students in Italy, with a particular focus on those enrolled in the Marco Polo and Turandot Programs. After briefly describing these programs and their implications, a literature review is provided. The study then details the specific context of the case study, including the participants (teaching staff and students) and the qualitative research tools used, such as teachers' and students' diaries and a questionnaire. The data collected from various informants through these qualitative instruments are analyzed using descriptive statistics and the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. The triangulation of data highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching model, which are then discussed.

Keywords: International Chinese students, Italian teaching, Teaching model, Metacognition in language teaching, Intercultural approach in language teaching, Marco Polo and Turandot Programs

1. Introduction

This section provides an overview of international students in academic institutions in Italy. It presents data regarding the presence of international university students, with a particular focus on those of Chinese origin, and further explores the students enrolled in the Marco Polo and Turandot Programs.

1.1 International Students in Italy

In recent years, Italian universities have undergone a process often referred to as ‘internationalization’. According to the definition of the Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OCED, 2020), «International students are those who received their prior education in another country and are not residents of their current country of study». (Note 2) Statistics (MUR, 2024) show that from 2010 to 2016 the number of international students in Italy was around 40 thousand, but since 2017 it has been increasing, doubling in the academic year of 2022/2023 surpassing 80 thousand students.

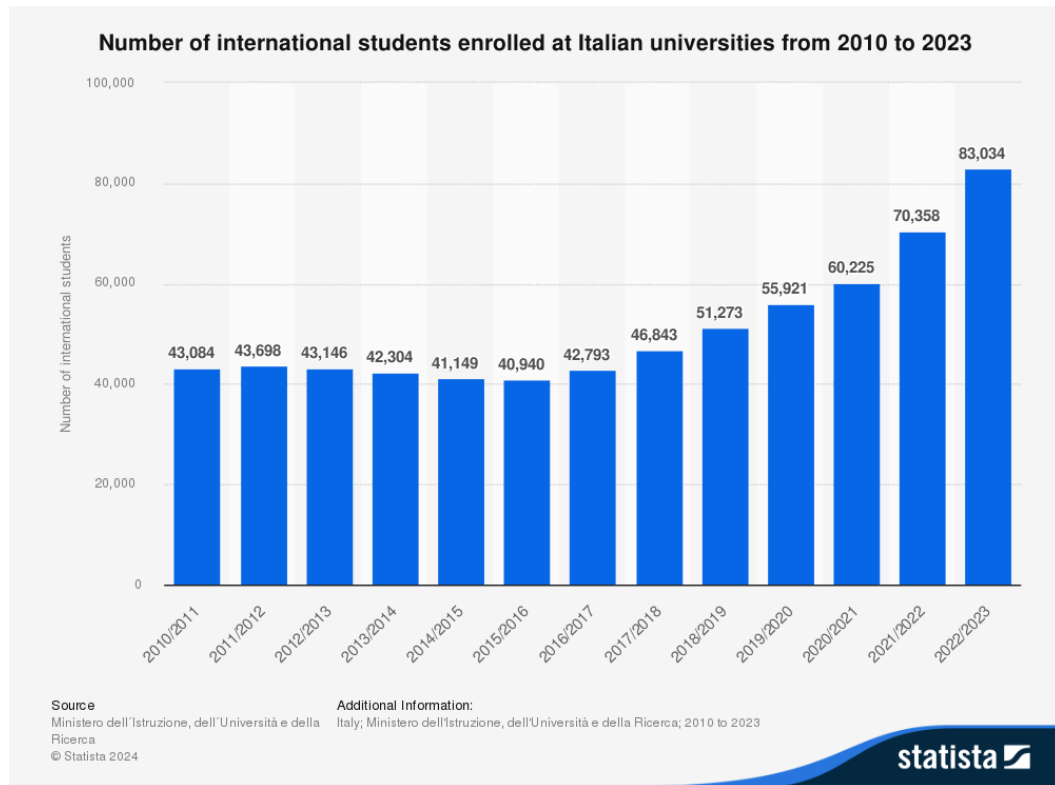


Figure 1. Statistical representation of the data on international students in Italian Universities on data from the Ministry of University and Research (MUR, 2024) done by Statista

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1483719/italy-international-university-students/#statisticContainer> (Note 3)

As shown in Figure 2 below, looking at the students’ country of origin for the academic year 2023/2024 (MUR, 2024), the nationality with the largest number of international students is Iran with more than 13 thousand students, followed by Turkey with over 64 hundred students and China with almost 61 hundred students enrolled in Italian universities.

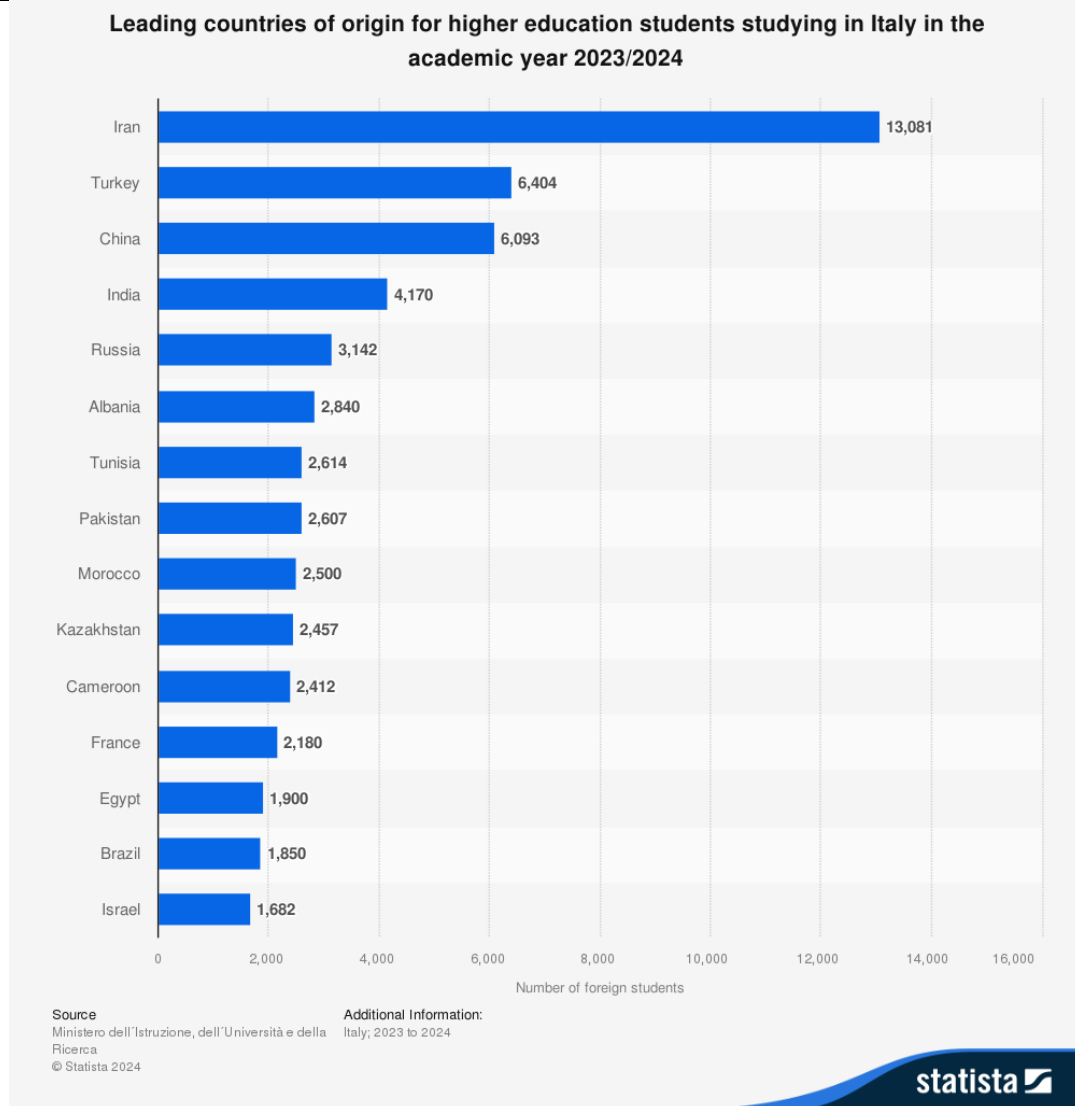


Figure 2. Leading countries of origin for higher education students studying in Italy in the academic year 2023/2024

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1484169/italy-international-students-by-country/> with data taken from dati-ustat.mur.gov.it

Regarding what aspects students find attractive, inciting them to enroll in the Italian HEI system, Uni-Italia (2024b: 22-25) lists the following: the welcoming environment of the small Italian cities; governmental programs (e.g., Marco Polo and Turandot Programs, §1.2); government scholarship programs, academic reputation in international ranking; accessibility in the Erasmus+ Program in other European countries for non-EU students once enrolled in Italy's Universities or AFAM; study programs delivered in English; double, joint and multiple degrees with European and non-European universities; more affordable tuition fees compared to other countries and for the historical; artistic and cultural value of Italy. Additionally, foreign students benefit Italy's HIE learning environment by contributing vibrancy and a global perspective to the academic ecosystem through their varied cultural backgrounds.

1.2 Chinese International Students in Italy

According to Uni-Italia (2024b: 18): «The top five countries of origin for foreign students enrolled in Italian AFAM institutions and universities are: China, Romania, Iran, Albania, and India. These five nationalities make up nearly 38% of the total number of foreign students».

Beside the more common way of applying as an international student like all other non-European entrants, the incoming of Chinese students have the opportunity to be facilitated by the Marco Polo and Turandot Programs (from now on MP/T). These two programs were established respectively established in 2006 and 2009 with an agreement between the government of the People's Republic of China, the Italian Ministry of Instruction, University and Research (MIUR, *Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca*, now Ministry of University and Research, MUR, *Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca*) and the Conference of the Italian Universities' Rectors (CRUI, *Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane*). The Marco Polo Program is designed for those students who want to enroll in an Italian University or Polytechnic University, while the Turandot is for Art Academies and Music Conservatories. Under these agreements, Italian Universities, Art Academies and Music Conservatories dedicate some spots exclusively to Chinese students. The number of these positions might vary every academic year. Chinese students who want to continue their higher education in Italy participating in the MP/T Programs have the following requirements:

- a minimum *Gaokao* (Note 4) score of 400/750 for the Marco Polo Program and 300/750 plus the *Yikao* (Note 5) score for students in the Turandot Program for those entering the 1st cycle or a degree for those intending to enter the 2nd cycle of university studies
- the application for pre-registration to a degree course for the places designated for the two Programs inserted in the dedicated portal *UniversItaly* (Note 6) where it is also expressed the choice of the institution at which to follow the course of Italian preparatory to enrollment;
- the demonstration to have sufficient financial means to live in Italy and eventually return to China;
- a specifically regulated health insurance;
- the availability of suitable accommodation in Italy.

In addition, to be able to access tertiary education in Italy, Chinese students in the MP/T Programs do not have any Italian language requirement, nonetheless they must follow a preparatory course of Italian language in Italy of at least 800 hours. (Note 7) These courses generally start in November and continue until the end of July or the beginning of August when students take a B1/B2 level certification exam (CELI, CILS, PLIDA or Certit) (Note 8) which is usually delivered strictly to this audience at the beginning of August, so that results can be available before the registration period. If the students do not pass the language proficiency exam they should return to China and the same applies for the entrance examination, in case the AFAM Institutions (or University) require one. (Note 9) Students who wish to take part in the MP/T Programs may pre-enrol at only one academic institution or AFAM, so they would not have the possibility of making a second choice or changing their choice if they were not selected.

According to the data from Uni-Italia (2024a: 3 and 5) almost 35 thousand Chinese students to date have participated. Since 2012 the number of students belonging to the Turandot Program has exceeded the number in the Marco Polo Program with a peak in 2020/2021 regarding pre-enrollment for academic year 2022/2023 (Uni-Italia, 2024a: 7-8). (Note 10) It also seems that most of the participants already have a university education in China and therefore choose to study in Italy seeking a specialization, especially in those sectors where the Italian system of high learning is more competitive (music, art, engineering, to name but a few).

At the end of their academic career, the title obtained is recognised by both countries. However, to the knowledge of the authors, there is no published data on how many students have completed their studies and how many have subsequently successfully entered the Chinese or Italian labour market.

1.3 State of the Art of the Marco Polo and Turandot Programs

Since the early years of the implementation of the MP/T Programs, many studies have been conducted and conferences held to discuss topics regarding the different aspects of the programs: i.e., Italian language teaching/learning to the Chinese students in these Programs, as well other organizational facets.

The first studies published on Italian language learning by Chinese students in the MP/T Programs date back to 2010 and 2011 respectively. «Italiano di cinesi, Italiano per cinesi: dalla prospettiva della didattica acquisizionale» (Italian of Chinese, Italian for Chinese: from the perspective of acquisition teaching) (Rastelli, 2010), the first publication, collects a series of studies by researchers, professors and teachers who describe the difficulties of the Chinese learner in relation to the Italian language and narrate experiences of the application of acquisitional teaching in classes of MP/T Chinese students. The next, «La didattica dell'italiano a studenti cinesi e il progetto Marco Polo» (Teaching Italian to Chinese and the Marco Polo Project) (Bonvino & Rastelli, 2011) reports on the proceedings of the first national conference a few years after the establishment of the program in 2006 and account for the studies presented on that occasion.

Following the proceedings of the conference held at the University of Pavia in 2015 entitled «La lingua italiana per studenti internazionali: aspetti linguistici e didattici. Riflessioni sul "Manifesto Programmatico per l'insegnamento della Lingua Italiana agli Studenti Internazionali" con focus sugli apprendenti sinofoni» (Teaching the Italian language to international students: linguistic and teaching aspects. Reflections on the "Programmatic Manifesto for the teaching of the Italian Language to International Students" with a focus on the Chinese students) were published in 2017 (Bagna et al.)

The 2019 conference organized by the University for Foreigners of Siena and entitled «Dieci anni di didattica dell'italiano a studenti cinesi: esperienze e prospettive» (Ten years of teaching the Italian language to Chinese students: experiences and perspectives") gave birth to the book «Manifesto for the teaching of the Italian language to international students. Eight comments» (Manifesto per l'insegnamento della lingua italiana a studenti internazionali. Otto commenti) by Rastelli and Bagna (2020). This volume is *sui generis* and differs from other publications since it proposes good practices aimed at language teaching for this specific category of subjects and is subscribed by several Italian universities, thus demonstrating the commitment to promote effective learning for success in life and studies of international students who want to attend tertiary education courses in Italy. The latest book published on

the MP/T Programs is also by Rastelli (2021). Over the years, other studies have been published in journals dedicated to Italian language teaching/learning. (Note 11)

According to Uni-Italia's latest report (2024a), at the various conferences organized on the MP/T Programs (Pavia 2015, Siena 2017 and 2020, Venice, 2021) in which MUR and the various institutions involved (Universities, AFAM institutions and language centres together with teachers and administrative, technical and auxiliary staff) have participated, three main criticisms have been discussed: first, the fact that a language competence level in Italian of B1/B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is not sufficient to successfully follow/complete academic courses and, for this reason, it should be considered appropriate to require a B2 level of competence by the end of the first year of university studies; secondly, it was the issue of difficulties inherent in the procedures for obtaining a residence permit. Lastly, the mismatch in the admission tests for AFAM institutions, which start in spring, as well as the stress that results on the part of the students which does not allow them to focus on studying Italian with subsequent abandonment of language courses.

Despite the abundance of studies concerning the teaching and learning of the Italian language dedicated to this specific type of learner, it is unknown to the authors of any regarding the implementation of a more comprehensive teaching model that would take into consideration both the teachers and the students as active agents of the learning process in a well defined educational environment. Therefore one of the aims of this contribution is to fill this gap in literature.

2. The Teaching Model

In this section the authors propose a teaching model implemented for the teaching of the Italian language to a group of Chinese students of the Marco Polo and Turandot Programs during the academic year 2023-2024.

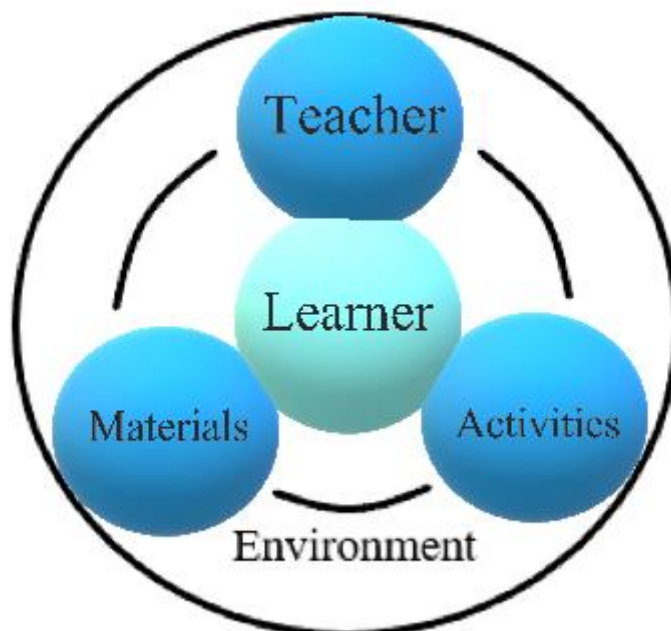


Figure 3. The teaching model

The model should be understood under the lens of system thinking, an epistemological framework that goes beyond linear methods to describe the dynamics of complex systems (Meadow, 2009; Morin, 2007; Von Bertalanffy, 1969). A system has been defined by Hall and Day (1977) as «Any phenomenon, either structural or functional, having at least two separable components and some interactions between these components». It has been chosen here for its holistic approach to reality and for its dynamic perspective. The figure represents a model of a system in which all aspects should be seen as moving and interacting with each other, therefore the position of the different features should not be considered more or less important depending on their static position in the two-dimension representation.

Moreover, it was not possible to portray the multiple facets of each aspect that are described in detail successively. In fact, each aspect shall be considered a complex system in itself.

The learner, the center of the model, is indeed a person, with their family, educational, cultural background and their beliefs not only on language learning but also on the different aspects of life. The instructors also are complex dynamic systems consisting of their life experiences, their educational and working experiences as well as their beliefs regarding language teaching/learning (Mercer, 2011). Materials are defined here as all the instruments used for teaching language: books, audio-visual materials, *realia*, etc. Activities encompass all the teaching actions done in class as well as out of the classroom, i.e., museum visits, linguistic tandem and so on. The environment also includes different levels: Italy, the area where the school is located, the school itself, the classrooms.

All these features enter in contact and interact with each other shaping reality. What makes a good system is the positive interaction between the parts, the balance of their acting one upon the other. Understanding the system can help us in organizing it in a more efficient and proactive way (Kim, 1999).

The overall scope of the system portrayed in the model above is the well-being of the agents, in this case the learners and the instructors (Menegale, 2022), and its outcome is the acquisition of the Italian language in order to be better prepared for their life and academic future.

The aim of this study is therefore to describe how the model was implemented, observe its strengths and weaknesses and suggest possible improvements for future editions.

3. The Case-Study

The reason behind the choice of a case-study (Duff, 2007) as the methodology for this work is that it allows a deep qualitative investigation of the phenomenon in a real life context (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). Its main characteristics are represented by the uniqueness of the phenomenon observed, the crucial role played by the context, and the heterogeneity of the information sources (Yin, 2003:14-15), therefore allowing a more in-depth analysis of the case. «The qualitative case study can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. Case-studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources.» (Merriam, 1998:16) or as Yin (2003:14) puts it «a comprehensive research strategy».

The case studied can be seen, as defined by Merriam (1998:27), «as a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries», and for the present research that is the Italian language course for Chinese students of the Marco Polo and Turandot programs carried out in an instructional setting, namely at the Challenge School of Ca' Foscari University in Italy. It

can be considered a longitudinal case study (Ortega & Iberri-Shea, 2005) since the research started in the middle of November 2023 and continued up to August 2024, for a duration of about nine months and also as an instrumental case-study since the aim of the research was to collect data through the means of different tools to better define the teaching method and eventually apply the findings to similar situations, with some adjustments or developments, whenever needed, according to the situation. The data collection instruments used were different: qualitatively wise the researchers made use of diaries, interviews, and a survey to which some quantitative data about attendance and test results was added to complete the description of the case in a broader and deeper sense.

The advantage of this methodology is the collection of data through the means of different tools which allows for more completeness and by adding triangulation a richer insight of the phenomenon studied can be brought to light. Sometimes the case-study can also become a starting point for new studies and the development of new theories or counter theories based on the data gathered. Nonetheless, researchers using this type of methodology should be careful when generalizing (Duff, 2006) especially when the sample is ‘of convenience’. On the other hand, Merriam (1998:205) observes that «a single case or nonrandom sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many».

Another criticism common to all qualitative research is the lack of objectivity which could be lessened thanks to the use of multiple instruments of data collection and through the perspectives of different stakeholders, e.g. teachers and pupils.

3.1 Participants and Setting

The case-study was carried out at the Challenge School of the Ca’ Foscari University, in Venice (Italy), which hosted the Italian course preliminary to the enrollment in higher education institutions such as Universities, Polytechnic Universities, Art Academies and Music Conservatories.

The participants involved two groups: students and teachers. All the participants were informed of the study prior to its implementation and agreed on taking part in it, according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Note 12), in conformity not only with the European legislation, but also in compliance with the regulations on research activities of Ca’ Foscari University which is also the affiliation of the researchers of this study.

The 51 students came all from the People’s Republic of China. Among them, 44 were of Han ethnicity, three were Uyghurs, one Bai, one Naxi, one Mongol and one Yi. There were 32 females and 19 males and their age varied between 19 and 31 years. Among them 20 pre-enrolled in an Art Academy, 18 in a Music Conservatory, 12 in an University and 1 in a Polytechnic university.

Students were divided into two classes depending on their level of Italian at the time of arrival after a graduated placement test.

The teachers’ team included seven people all together:

- 1 coordinator;
- 2 main teachers with formal teachers training: one held a doctorate and one a master degree in language teaching with previous teaching experience;
- 1 tutor: doctoral degree in China on Anthropology studies;

- 2 trainees: university students of Chinese or Language Teaching who decided to do their mandatory internship in this context (the trainees alternated themselves during the 10 months of the course).

The course was 800 hours long and it lasted about nine months, starting in the middle of November 2023 and finishing after the middle of July 2024, while the proficiency exam was at the beginning of August 2024. The course was suspended due to the closure of the university for the Italian festivities. A week of break from the lessons was added on occasion of the Chinese New Year in order to take into consideration the cultural habits of the students. Classes were held from Monday to Thursday. For the first three months the schedule was the following: four hours of class in the morning followed by four hours of tutoring in the afternoon. It was changed and lowered to two hours after the Chinese New Year to allow the students to take part in private lessons for their specialization or to prepare their portfolios (Note 13).

The morning classes were held by the two teachers who alternated classes weekly to allow learners to have input from different teachers with different cognitive styles, different teaching backgrounds and life experiences and therefore they could offer a richer input. The teachers did not know Mandarin Chinese, the official language of the P.R.C. and did not have previous experience with Chinese students although they had familiarity with monolingual classes. Moreover, one had taught to university students and one to learners whose mother tongue was distant to Italian.

In the afternoon the tutor and one of the trainees would help students with their linguistic and cultural doubts, homework, preparing for admission exams and so on.

Classes were held in person in classrooms fully equipped with whiteboards, digital boards, projectors, computers and internet connections. Class materials and homework were uploaded to Moodle to be made available for the students. The language handbooks chosen were completely in Italian language and included an exercise book. (Note 14) Other materials prepared by the teachers were promptly uploaded to the shared database for students' availability. Along with the handbook, students with different language levels received *ad hoc* prepared materials.

3.2 Course Implementation

In this section we will take into consideration different facets which constitute determinant elements of the teaching aspect for the course analyzed in this study. First of all, the teaching methodology was based on a humanistic, learner centered approach (Balboni, 2005; 2017). The word 'humanistic' refers to the fact that the learner is considered a human person in their complexity. In the language classroom the individuality of the learner is taken into account: their feelings, their beliefs about learning matter. There is also a natural and holistic way of language acquisition that should be respected.

During the Italian language course the specific needs of these students were taken into consideration for the organization of the classes as well as the preparation of diverse teaching materials depending on the level and on the future specialization of the learners.

Every month at least one 'field' activity was organized. The first one was a visit to the local library where students later went to study and borrow books. Another structured educational trip brought the students through the streets of the city where the school is located. Students visited a museum and participated in a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) didactic laboratory (Fazzi, 2023; Fazzi & Meneghetti, 2024). Other activities included a visit

to the University radio station and a day trekking in the mountains with a local guide (Note 15) who explained cultural and historical anecdotes. Additionally, some students participated in an art contest organized by the University: one of them won first place with her poem and another received an honorable mention for his postcard. These activities had the aim at fostering the knowledge of the local community and the territory, promoting global citizenship skills and enhancing implicit language learning (Ellis N., 2005 and 2017) through interaction with native-speakers (Long, 1981; Gass, 1997; Nuzzo & Grassi, 2016; *inter alia*).

Furthermore, on a monthly basis there was a test created by the teachers and which format was similar to the certification test, comprising five parts: oral comprehension, written comprehension, communicative structures, written production and oral production. Testing had a double scope: for the teachers it was a tool to understand if there was the need to review specific language features; for the students it was an instrument for self-evaluation.

3.3 Instruments

In order to seek the most objectivity possible, the instruments used for data collection were assorted (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Follows an explanatory chart of the tools used for this research.

Instrument	Period/Time	Subject(s)
teachers' diary	all the duration of the Italian course	teachers, tutor and trainees
students' metacognitive diary	from November 2023 to April 2024	students
questionnaire	at the end of the course	students

3.3.1 The Teachers' Diaries

Hattie (2009) in his meta-analysis of 800 studies from all over the world looks for the aspects that favour school achievements, those which are irrelevant and those which have a negative impact on them. He comes up with 138 factors which he groups into six macro factors, namely: students, home environment, school environment, teacher, curriculum and teaching. The macro factor resulting in a bigger influence is that of the teacher (also in Day *et al.*, 2011; Roffey, 2012). Therefore, to know the teachers' perception on their agency was considered of crucial relevance for the study.

Instructors as well as the tutor and the three trainees were asked to keep a diary. This was done in order to gather information from both experienced and trained teachers and less experienced, still in training, trainees, to counteract possible bias towards Chinese students (Xu, 2021). They were previously informed that the information collected by the tool would be used anonymously and only for the purpose of research. Some of them preferred to use a shared word document, while others preferred the pencil and paper way. Some compiled it little at the time when something particular came up during class time, others wrote with a timely rate. The diary did not have any formatting but users were free to add what they perceived as either interesting or difficult. These choices were made on purpose to allow freedom on the part of the teachers to report whatever was more striking to them without imposing a frame which could lead to a priming effect or other biases.

3.3.2 The Students' Diaries

Students' metacognitive diaries or metacognitive log booklets need to be considered as dual purpose tools: on one hand they were used to help students reflect on their learning process, eliciting challenges and strategies used to overcome them (van der Stel & Veenman, 2010; Haukås *et al.*, 2018; Perry *et al.*, 2019). For these some guiding questions were used: What did you learn in class? What was difficult about it? What did you do or can be done to overcome these difficulties? Other aspects that you want to share. Learners were allowed to use both their mother tongue or the target language to write as to allow them to better explain their meaning. Differently from the teachers' diary where instructors were left free to write, for the students the choice of adding the guide questions was done in order to comply with the fact that no one of them had used metacognitive activities before and as beginner language learners it was thought it would have been easier for them to have some guidelines in reflecting on their learning process.

3.3.3 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009) was used as a tool to gather information at the end of the course about the overall implementation of it. Like for the instruments described above, the participants were informed that it was part of the research and voluntarily filled it. The questionnaire was administered online and students were given the link to access it. The questions used wanted to assess the overall satisfaction of the course, but also about teaching material, classrooms and other spaces, lessons, exams and other activities.

4. Data Analysis

In this paragraph the different data gathered will be analyzed singularly. The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the documents gathered was realized through the means of the software for qualitative analysis MAXQDA. Follow a summary of the information gathered through the multiple cycle coding done on the documents.

4.1 The Teachers, Tutor and Trainees' Diaries

The authors collected two diaries from the teachers, one from the tutor who also allowed her instant messaging chat thread to be used as data for the present research and three by the trainees. They were free to write when they felt they wanted to annotate something that was striking them, both positively and/or negatively. This was done to avoid priming effects or other types of biases.

The two teachers' diaries are quite different both in the format and the content. One teacher followed the researchers' suggestion of writing the diary in a shared word file while the other preferred using the pencil and paper method. The first one intertwines the reflections on language teaching (e.g., what came out as difficult or easy during class, focussing on different materials, topics and type of exercises or teaching practices) with observations on the students especially on their attentiveness and participation. She notes that students tend to participate when they are interested in the topic proposed, especially if those topics are pragmatic and have strong connection with their lives (i.e., exam tips or other university related topics). She adds that on Mondays and Thursdays pupils show more signs of tiredness. Moreover, starting from February she noticed more and more students dropping out, due to the participation at the admission examination (§1.2). One of the nodes that emerged during coding is the one the authors called 'different perceptions' where diverging cultural lenses between the instructors and the pupils clash. Mainly they are about Second Language Acquisition beliefs: *«Non è facile convincerli che devono fare pratica anche su parti del*

linguaggio che hanno già studiato o che pensano di conoscere bene.» (It is not easy to convince them that they need to practise also those parts of the language that they have already studied or that they think they know well) (Note 16) and classroom behaviour: the teacher, for example, perceives that ignoring a teacher during class, i.e., not paying attention to them, is very disrespectful on the part of the students.

The other teacher takes a different approach and focuses more on the language difficulties encountered by the Chinese students in their process of learning Italian. Nonetheless, she mentions some activities that, in her opinion, were not very successful in class, but, at the same time, she metacognitively questions the reason for this and tries to find possible solutions. She never refers to specific behavioural issues on the part of the learners such as fatigue, disattention and so on. In fact, she depicts the Chinese students as calm, respectful and attentive. She also adds that at the beginning they seemed not to be used to what she refers to as more ‘innovative’ teaching techniques but with time they became more participative and worked well in groups. She also observed the good relationship and reciprocal help among students independently of the classes they were attending.

On the other hand, the tutor seems to have a more empathic way of relating to the students: she often mentions how she feels close to them being she had had a similar experience. (Note 17) Besides the afternoon classes, her role was also to help students with paperwork and administrative procedures, so that students had several opportunities to interact with her even outside the language class and the fact that she can speak Chinese could add in fostering the relationship with the students. In fact, students also searched for her assistance for different issues they encountered in their stay in Italy as well as for some personal matters. (Note 18) Thus the tutor’s notes do not dwell much on Italian language teaching/learning, but focus more on the human side of these students. Yet one criticality she acknowledges is the difficulty of multilevel classes. The same is mentioned by the first trainee. She also notices the tiredness of the learners during the afternoon tutoring sessions and suggests a more structured division of the class time. She proposes the idea of separating the afternoon hours in reading / listening / writing / speaking. (Note 19) Similarly to the first teacher, this trainee also reports students being less attentive and motivated after the winter break. Other issues she observes are related to language learning, especially with morphosyntactic and phonetic features. The second trainee was a Language Science bachelor degree student and indeed her diary is very detailed in describing the learning methodology and the teaching practices she implemented. Metacognitively thinking over her work in class on the process of writing the diary she elicits new ideas and insights emphasizing an intercultural approach. Being an in-training teacher she is still focussing on her teaching actions. She also mentions the tiredness faced by learners in the afternoon sessions and the low number of students in class due to the dropping out. Other recurrent topics are the need to deal with pragmatic matters during the language classroom and the disattention caused by the use of mobile devices.

4.2 The Learner’s Diaries

Despite at the beginning of the course there were 51 students, due to the dropping out that started after the Chinese Spring Festival in February and accentuated through the month of April, the researchers collected 44 metacognitive diaries: 25 written by female and 19 by male students. The entries in the diaries all start in November and finish in the middle of April. The minimum number of entries is one (Note 20) and the maximum is 45 for a total of over 26,527 words. There were 23 diaries from the lower language level class (from now on Class 1) and 19 from the higher language level class (from now on Class 2). The average words for each participant is 603, with a minimum of 7 and a maximum of 2,056. On average,

Class 2 students tend to write an average of two times the words (834 vs. 415) of Class 1 students. For the diaries, students were left free to use the language they preferred. This was a choice weighted by the fact that the use of their mother tongue would allow the participants to express themselves better and deeper. Nobody wrote everything in Chinese, but many write in all Italian, especially in the higher proficiency level class. When Chinese is used, it is mainly for grammar. It is also interesting how one student started with writing almost everything in Chinese and slowly writing more and more in Italian, while another one followed the opposite pattern: she started writing all in Italian and at the end she was writing almost exclusively in Chinese. Only one student uses a few words in English, i.e., ‘easy’ and ‘difficult’. Five students also add emoticons in their annotations.

Follows a chart of the languages as used in the diaries divided by class.

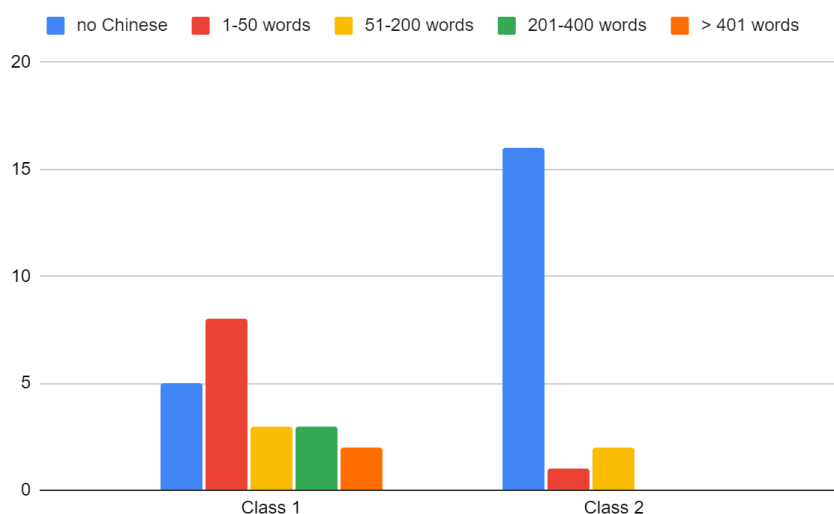


Chart 1. The histogram shows the use of the Chinese and Italian language in the students' diaries

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was done by the MAXQDA software. At the beginning, in the months of November and December, for the students who had previously studied Italian in China, everything was perceived as easy. *«Quello che ho imparato oggi non è molto difficile per me. Perchè ho studiato in anticipo.»* (What I learned today is not difficult for me. Because I studied it before). (Note 21)

Whilst the beginners also notice some difficulties especially in the listening comprehension and in some grammar aspects, i.e., gender and number of nouns and adjectives and verbs conjugations. Vocabulary is generally considered easy. (Note 22) Also pronunciation and the transcription of words is considered simple. Uyghurs students acknowledge the fact that for them Italian pronunciation is rather uncomplicated and also some syntax features resemble those of their mother tongue. In this case the use of plurilingual practices in the classroom could be determinant for language acquisition.

One criticism mentioned by beginner students (3) is the perception that the lessons are too fast and therefore hard to follow. Two students also refer to the practice of memorization as a technique used for vocabulary learning. In the coded documents there are also three suggestions given by the participants: increase practice by repetition and writing of words, listen multiple times to the audio files or receiving the transcription, study more vocabulary.

These pieces of advice are, to the authors, really interesting expressions of the beliefs of the Chinese students on second language acquisition. (Note 23)

4.3 The Questionnaire

At the end of the course a questionnaire was administered. It had 20 items concerning the following topics: general satisfaction with the course, materials, classrooms, other spaces (lunch room, etc.), lessons, language abilities (speaking, writing, listening and reading), exams, extra-activities (visit at the library, the museums, and so on). Each of these questions was in the form of a Likert scale from 1 to 6 and was followed by the request of an explanation for the answer given. The last question asked informants what they would change to improve the course and if they wished to add anything. Twenty-three students filled the questionnaire: 10 from Class 1 and 13 from Class 2. The Likert Scale items show an overall high satisfaction, with a weighted average of five. They stated that they liked having four days of classes followed by three free days which allowed them to attend their specialized private lessons. For the same reasons they preferred having shorter afternoon tutoring sessions, like in the second part of the course. The handbook was considered adequate and interesting, with good explanations for the grammar points. Two respondents admitted that the B1-B2 book was a little too difficult for them. The students complained about the swivel tablet armchairs but were happy to have a space to eat and rest between classes. Seventy-four per cent of the informants perceived the lessons as adequate and they felt teachers were taking into consideration the needs of the students and were patient, repeating and helping learners when necessary. Nonetheless 17% admitted they could not completely understand the teachers, while 4% thought classes were too fast and another 4% too slow. About the language skills they affirmed that teachers were clear in their explanations but listening was still hard. They also wished for more writing practice. The tests were considered as positive because they allowed self-evaluation and improvement. The extra-activities were strongly appreciated as a window to different aspects of Italian culture and as a possibility not only to know more but also to practice Italian in different contexts. In the last questions they reiterated their complaint about the chair. Furthermore, they wished for the possibility of attending language exchange with Italian students of the same university. Ultimately they thanked their instructors.

5. Conclusions

This contribution aims to describe the implementation of a teaching model for teaching Italian to Chinese international students in the MP/T Programs. In the absence of previous studies on this topic, the objective of this paper is to fill this gap. The authors acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly the potential lack of objectivity inherent in qualitative case studies. However, multiple diverse investigative tools were employed to mitigate this bias. Additionally, the data presented are mostly aggregated, which reduces the individuality of the participants. A positive aspect is that the triangulation of data revealed recurring themes across different subjects.

Following the data analysis, it appears that the proposed model had an overall positive impact. However, critical issues were identified, such as student dropout rates, which are also highlighted in the Uni-Italia report (2024a) and should not be considered unique to this context. Other concerns included the excessive class hours at the beginning of the course and the lack of organization in the language tandem between Chinese and Italian university students.

Despite these challenges, several important points emerged. First, there is a demand for a more pragmatically-oriented syllabus tailored to these specific learners. Second, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the diverse beliefs and cultural backgrounds that each individual brings with them. Fostering an open-minded, intercultural dialogue between teachers and students could help break down prejudices, build mutual trust, and create a positive educational environment that simultaneously promotes language learning and student well-being (Zhao, 2016). Moreover, plurilingual teaching practices could not only enhance language acquisition but also respect the individuality of each learner. Another valuable insight from the diaries was the role of metacognition in reflecting on teaching and learning practices, promoting greater awareness of language acquisition and the factors influencing it, such as students' perceptions and emotions.

Undoubtedly, further studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of the teaching model presented here.

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Notes

Note 1. The conceptual contributions of this article are the result of collaboration by both authors. Specifically, sections 1-2-3-3.1 and 3.2 can be attributed to Graziano Serragiotto, sections 3.3 - 4 and 5 can be attributed to Silvia Scolaro.

Note 2. International student mobility <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/international-student-mobility.html#:~:text=International%20students%20are%20those%20who%20received%20their%20prior,not%20residents%20of%20their%20current%20country%20of%20study.y> | OECD

Note 3. More data can be found in the MUR website at this link: <https://ustat.mur.gov.it/dati/didattica/italia/ateneiTAT> - Esplora i dati

Iscritti - Iscritti internazionali per anno accademico - Open Data dell'istruzione superiore

Note 4. *Gao Kao*, short for 普通高等学校招生全国统一考, is the exam that allows Chinese students to enter the university system based on their scores. It takes place annually throughout the country at the beginning of June. The maximum score varies from province to province but is generally 750. All students must take the exams in mathematics and Chinese, a foreign language of their choice among those designated and then other subjects according to the future studies that the student wishes to undertake.

Note 5. The *Yi Kao*, abbreviation of 艺术类高校的招生考试, is an exam that provides a score on artistic subjects for those Chinese students who want to continue their academic path in Conservatories or in Academies of Fine Arts.

Note 6. <https://www.universitaly.it/>

Note 7. The number of hours in the preparatory course for Italian language has varied over time: in the first editions it was 3 months, then extended to 6 and then 9, reaching its current duration.

Note 8. The CELI (Italian Language Certificates) certification is organized by the University for Foreigners of Perugia; CILS (Foreign Language Certificate) by the University for Foreigners of Siena; PLIDA (Progetto Lingua Italiana Dante Alighieri) by the Società Dante Alighieri; Certit (Certification of Italian as a foreign language) from the University of Rome 3.

Note 9. Generally, music conservatories and academies of fine arts hold entrance examinations, often even before the month of September which should be responsible for selecting students from these two Programs.

Note 10. The Italian course is given one academic year before the registration.

Note 11. It does not serve the purpose of this article to provide an exhaustive list of these publications.

Note 12. Regulation - 2016/679 - EN - gdpr <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016R0679>- EUR-Lex

Note 13. Students who want to enroll in music conservatories usually take private singing or instrument lesson; students of art and design have to prepare a portfolio to show at the preliminary interview for the selection; university students sometimes have to prepare the entry exam which is the same as for Italian students, therefore they need prepare for the entry exam quizzes.

Note 14. In the Italian language book market there is a niche of handbooks specifically intended for Chinese students where the content is partially in Chinese (Scolaro, forthcoming).

Note 15. The guide had previous experience with Italian language students. Additionally, synchronously with the instructors the trekking was completed by pre- and post-language activities done in the classroom.

Note 16. Even if there is no language requirement for the MP/T students, many of them study Italian in private schools for a short period of time in China before coming to Italy. The

syllabus of the private schools is often grammar-based and not as communicative (Serragiotto & Sclaro, 2023). Therefore, students might have the perception of 'knowing the language' because they know the grammar rules, when they are not yet fully able to use them properly.

Note 17. She took her doctorate as an International student in P.R.C.

Note 18. Some students had to return to China due to personal or family related issues.

Note 19. This is also the division used in the universities and colleges in China for Chinese as a Foreign/Second Language.

Note 20. This student left the course suddenly to go back to China for family issues.

Note 21. Translated by the authors.

Note 22. This could be due to how their mother tongue as well as foreign languages used to be taught in China, that is through the means of lists of words.

Note 23. For further references on the so called 'Chinese Culture of Learning' see: Biggs, 1996; Cortazzi & Jin 1996a, 1996b and 2001; Rao, 1996; Hu, 2001 and 2002; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; D'Annunzio, 2009; Della Putta 2021; *inter alia*).

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