

# Reflections on the Study of Italian as an L2 within the Context of Chinese Universities. A Comment on Italian Language Learning in Chinese Universities

*Feng Ye*

Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages in Zhejiang, China (<[ye.feng@unifi.it](mailto:ye.feng@unifi.it)>)

## *Abstract:*

The following research aims at investigating the teaching and learning of Italian language in Chinese universities. Starting with the difficulties that Chinese-speaking students face when learning Italian verbal morphology, it will focus on the influence of their mother tongue on the acquisition process. Their apparent difficulty in reaching a good knowledge of Italian language will be investigated in relation to the typological distance between the two languages and their morphosyntactic properties. It will highlight how the interaction of two strongly different language systems influences L2 acquisition (Bettoni 2001, Giacalone Ramat 2003; Banfi 2003). A diagnostic evaluation will show the sources of difficulties in the learning of Italian verbal morphology and it will highlight how it is necessary, in a learning context traditionally focused on grammar and translation, to pay more attention to pragmatic competence and communication.

*Keywords:* Chinese learners, Chinese universities, Interlingua, L2 Italian, Verbal morphology

## *1. Introduction*

The number of Chinese students who come to Italy to pursue higher education is increasing every year. Given that the minimum language ability level required for admission to university courses corresponds in most cases to the B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for

Lan-guages (CEFR),<sup>1</sup> Chinese and Italian institutions are promoting new Italian language courses to assist students in their language studies. However, these students encounter considerable difficulties in achieving this goal and, as shown by research carried out thus far (Banfi 2003; Giacaleone Ramat 2003; Arcodia 2008; Della Putta 2008; Andorno 2010), sinophone learners have particular difficulty in learning Italian.

To understand the causes of difficulty in learning Italian as an L2 from a Chinese L1, many hypotheses have been formulated and several studies have been conducted in Italy, on learners in both guided and unguided contexts. However, there has been no research focused on the teaching methods used by Chinese institutions, which have offered Italian language courses of various levels for decades, nor on the learning contexts of those who study Italian in Chinese universities. Starting from these premises, we intend to present the Chinese university environment, language course delivery methods, and teaching methodologies to assess whether the difficulties encountered by Italian language students in China are the same that they encounter when they attend an Italian language course in Italy. More specifically, this contribution presents the preliminary results of the annual project of Reaserch Institute for Foreign Language and Culture of Foreign Languages (Project number 2018WGYW04) titled "Study on the influence of mother tongue transfer on second language italian acquisition.

This research focuses on the nature and type of major difficulties encountered by learners and intends to assess whether the slowness of learning Italian can be attributed to the mother tongue. To do this, it was decided to perform a diagnostic analysis of the errors committed by a sample of students undergoing their second, third, and fourth year of study at Chinese universities. Starting thusly from the observation of data, it will be possible to reconstruct the learning process.

The results obtained will shed light on the learning processes of Chinese students learning Italian as an L2, and will offer teachers valuable support in terms of awareness of the processes involved in learning. After presenting the context of the research experiment (§2), the informants and the collected data will be presented (§3) and some conclusions will be drawn (§4).

<sup>1</sup> According to the circular published on the MIUR (Ministero per l'Istruzione, l'Università e la Ricerca) website, entitled "Procedures for entry, stay, and enrollment of students requesting visas to attend courses at higher education institutions in Italy for the academic year 2019-2020," the "institutions of higher education are tasked with verifying linguistic competence for access to the courses" unless the students possess a B2 level language certification issued by the CLIQ quality system. For more information, refer to the websites shown in the sitography.

## 2. *The Learning Context and Informant Subjects*

The present research focuses on the study of Italian language in the Chinese university context. Data were collected in three Chinese universities. This is a learning context little understood in Italy and exhibits significant differences with Italian learning contexts. For a complete analysis, it is therefore necessary to frame the study of Italian in the Chinese university context, albeit in broad terms.

According to the Chinese university system, the course of Italian language lasts for 4 years and includes compulsory attendance verified by the instructor's roll-call at the beginning or at the end of each lesson. Although there are not national regulations to outline the extent to which each individual university must organize their courses and provide a number of lessons per week, the norm for weekly guided learning is divided as follows:

- 1st year: 16 hours, of which 10 hours are with a Chinese professor and 6 hours are with an Italian professor or lecturer;
- 2nd year: 14 hours, of which 10 hours are with a Chinese professor and 4 hours are with an Italian professor or lecturer;
- 3rd year: 10 hours, of which 6 hours are with a Chinese professor and 4 hours are with an Italian professor or lecturer;
- 4th year: 6 hours with a Chinese professor.

The training involves two different teachers who, although working in close harmony, have different tasks: the Chinese teacher is in charge of explaining the grammar in Chinese; the Italian teacher, who speaks only Italian during lessons, is responsible for delivering courses in oral conversation and written production.

As for the teaching methods employed by the two teachers, this topic is complex and is linked to long-standing Chinese scholastic traditions, and also to the period of openness and outside influence that China is currently experiencing: on one side there is the Chinese teacher's method, based on the explicit explanation of grammar followed by the systematic execution of grammatical-translation exercises; on the other hand, the Italian teacher is not obliged to follow a prescriptive manual, but can freely organize lessons based on the level and interests of the class. The Italian teacher therefore has the opportunity to motivate the students, to help them develop linguistic-communicative competence, as well as to introduce general themes on Italian culture.

We can see that while the Italian teacher has the freedom to choose his or her own teaching method, the Chinese teacher must adhere to a scholastic tradition influenced by Confucianism, which prescribes a method based in rote memorization and repetition.

The communicative teaching approach, the aim of which is to develop students' linguistic-communicative competence (Hymes 1966) through the students' progressive and autonomous discovery of the linguistic structures of the L2 (inductive glottodidactic method), at present has not been fully accepted in China, where the most widespread operating model consists of four phases: reception, repetition, revision, and reproduction.<sup>2</sup> Learning is essentially based on reception: the student collects linguistic information without clear indication of its usefulness or pragmatic purpose; those are factors considered irrelevant to the purposes of language study. The information is then learned through repetition. Once the students have received and memorized the information, they are ready for the revision or analysis phase, and mechanical reproduction (De Marco, Mascherpa 2011). It follows that for Chinese students, the most important language skills are reading and writing. Although the classroom time with the Chinese teacher are then accompanied by time with the Italian teacher, the high number of students per class (on average thirty) and the relatively few hours dedicated to conversation demonstrate that less importance is given to the development of skills in communication and pragmatic competence. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Chinese students, despite understanding the rules of Italian grammar, cannot apply them effectively when they are in contact with native speakers; they do not know how to use the studied language to communicate.

It is not just the teaching method, but the entire Chinese educational model which substantially differs from the Italian model. Firstly, it should be emphasized that Chinese students are not passive or unwilling to answer questions, which is a criticism often addressed to Chinese learners who study in Italian institutions (Favaro 2003). Instead, Chinese learners simply participate in the study program in ways that find their roots in Confucianism. Chinese culture is characterized by "collectivism" that tends to prefer the common good over the individual good. As a result, individuality is seen as a synonymous with selfishness. The relationship between students is characterized by reciprocal aid, and during oral production activities, no student will try to take the initiative and speak up before their peers.

In addition, Chinese students pay close attention to the superior-subordinate relationship: according to Confucian thought, people belonging to the highest rank (ancestors, relatives, professors) should not be questioned.

This affects the teaching methods used in schools, and this is why during lessons no questions are asked: ideally, the professor explains clearly and

<sup>2</sup> There are still no studies showing that this is the most widespread teaching method, but I have ten years of experience in the university field (first as a student and then as a teacher) and can say that this is currently the norm. Following the ever-increasing open-ing of China and the rapid changes it is experiencing, it is possible that this model will be reformed in the coming years.

exhaustively. Therefore, when they do not understand, students tend to look for answers first through consultation of books or on the Internet and then by requesting help from their peers (Consalvo 2012). This attitude, which is sometimes seen by Italian people as passivity, is in reality a form of respect for the authority. In fact, the teacher is seen as a supremely competent person, an authority to listen to and respect (Tang and Absalom 1998).

A clarification about the university environment in China must be made: even if during the lesson, the teacher assumes a cold, detached and authoritative attitude, once the lesson is finished he or she assumes the typical attitude of a parent or an older brother/sister. Students and professors live in campuses equipped with basic markets, multimedia classrooms and open libraries, characterized by a peaceful atmosphere and monitored 24 hours a day by numerous collaborators. The relationships created between those who live inside the campus which is effectively a city within a city, are comparable to those of a “big family”. The students are young (17-21 years old) and often live far from home. As a result, teachers become a point of reference from both a personal and professional point of view.

The data were collected between December 2017 and January 2018, i.e. at the end of the first semester of the academic year, at three Chinese universities: Zhejiang Yuexiu Foreign Languages University in Shaoxing, a city in southern China; Huaqiao Foreign Languages University of Jilin based in Changchun, northeast China; and Tianjin Foreign Languages University, northern China. The sample of informants is composed of 45 students (15 in the second year, 15 in the third year and 15 in the fourth year) who study Italian as their first curricular language.

### *3. Research Design and Data Analysis*

Data were collected from three Chinese universities in December 2017, i.e. at the end of the first semester of the academic year. The corpus consists of 45 oral recordings and 45 written compositions related to the verbal morphology of Italian. Although research on language learning is usually concentrated only on the analysis of oral production, in this contribution it was decided to additionally present data collected from written productions, for several reasons: firstly, for Chinese learners, the conventions of written Italian such as the alphabet, word spacing, punctuation and the use of capital letters represent significant obstacles, and thus can demonstrate the achievement of a certain level of linguistic competence; secondly, Chinese students are accustomed to a teaching context in which great importance is given to written production, while oral production is virtually neglected. It was thought that the lack of confidence in producing spoken language (among other things in a purely Chinese context) could potentially misrepresent students’ actual knowledge of the language. A further reason can be found in the words of Banfi (2003:183):

[Errors] within any text written by an L2 learner “precipitate” on the page – and are evidenced by the intrinsic force proper to graphical fixation – phenomena which, carefully analyzed, can be considered as valuable “spies” that illuminate non-marginal aspects of how a learner “perceives” the L2 system and how it “reproduces” it by fixing it on the written page.

Because language learning is a process that involves the linguistic development of a learner over time, the variable of time is among the main factors in learning an L2 (Cook 1986). We therefore opted for a “pseudo -longitudinal” research format (Gass and Selinker 2008: 56), i.e. we chose to divide the informants into three groups based on their level of studies and, consequently, on the time of exposure to the Italian language (second year, third year, and fourth year), to submit the same test to the students and to observe the linguistic productions of each group. In this way, the acquisition sequence could be obtained as if it were observed for three years longitudinally. It was decided to analyse only the data of the students attending the second, third and fourth year of the study course because at the start of the experiment the first year students had only been studying Italian for 3 months and the data collected were not assessable in regard to the objective of this research.

The analysis was carried out with a view to interlingua, taking into consideration the linguistic system developed by the student up to the current moment of study. The method of analysis used is a formal-functional-reconstructive method: the system was reconstructed by focusing on the quantity of forms expressed by a function and on the quantity of functions expressed by a form, always keeping in mind the use of the corresponding functions and structures in the L1. It was not limited, therefore, to observe the elements of the text from the point of view of the forms, but we also tried to reconstruct its function in the text and evaluate them from the perspective of the interlingua possessed by the student at the time of the oral or written production they were.

Interlingua is not a stable linguistic system but evolves through a continuous process of gradual elaboration and proceeds (at least in part) in common stages. This type of analysis is independent from the comparison with the target language and aims to reconstruct the learning process of students starting from the statements produced at each stage of the process. After the analysis of the mistakes made in the written and oral production in the selection and inflection of a given verb, conclusions were drawn to assess whether the mother tongue actually plays a major role in the development of morphosyntactic competence of Italian as an L2. In particular, attention was paid to the systematic nature of a specific type of error within the group of learners, i.e. a classification of the errors made most frequently by the students was performed. This classification suggested which aspects were particularly difficult to assimilate.

We recall here that the main causes of systematic errors are the interference of the mother tongue or another known language (interlingual errors) and the development of incorrect hypotheses about the rules of the second language (intra-linguistic or evolutionary errors). Previous studies have shown that in the case of languages that are typologically distant, such as Chinese and Italian, interference “appears more like a slowdown in the acquisition of TL categories that are absent in ML, than like the acquisition of TL of models or elements of ML” (Chini 2005). Moreover, as Limonta recalls, the interference of the L1 on the L2 is particularly strong, especially at the initial stages: “the known insensitivity of sinophones regarding specific phonological traits of our language and some morphological categories typical of inflected languages such as Italian is the main cause of typical errors found in their productions” (2009: 39).

#### *4. The Influence of Chinese as an L1 and Chinese Teaching Methods on the Learning of Italian as an L2*

The data obtained from the experiment allowed the formulation of various considerations. First of all, a pronounced disparity emerged between oral and written production: all students, regardless of the language level reached, showed great difficulty in expressing themselves orally, thus confirming the initial hypothesis, i.e. that the teaching method used in China should likely be modified to allow students to develop linguistic-communicative competence and not only grammatical competence.

Secondly, from the results collected, it emerged that there are systematic errors that occur in the various stages of interlingua. It is curious that errors were recorded in all three groups of students investigated, the percentage decreases as the level increases. It is true that fourth-year students showed an ability to construct complex sentences, but at the syntactic-morphological level there were errors that remained in the linguistic productions of the learners, which sometimes made it difficult to understand whether a student had actually been studying Italian for one year or three years. Furthermore, it was noted that the choice of tense and verbal mood as well as the morphology associated with them are difficult to consolidate in speech produced by Chinese learners. It could be said that these results confirm previous Italian studies (Valentini 2004; Andorno 2010) in which there was a general slowness in learning Italian morphosyntax by Chinese learners.

Below are the non-target productions made by the students:

- errors in the agreement between person, number, and gender of the subject and the verb;
- over-extension of the present indicative forms to the past tense;

- errors in the use of the present perfect:
  - – in the selection, or complete omission, of the auxiliary
  - – in the selection between the use of the present perfect and the imperfect
  - – in the conjugation of the past participle (but not in its gender agreement with the subject)
- errors in the correct construction of the present perfect;
- errors in the choice of the tense to be used in the indicative, conditional, and subjunctive moods
- errors of agreement between principal and subordinate clause(s).

Let us inspect some errors in detail.

In written and oral compositions, students in all years showed difficulty in subject-verb agreement: while telling a story of past experiences, most of students forgot about gender agreement by referring to them-selves as male:

- (1) Sono andato <eh> andata a Taiwan  
 Be.1SG gone.M gone.F to Taiwan

In the formation of the present perfect, the participle often did not agree in number with the subject and the auxiliary:

- 2) a. Durante la festa, la gente tornano a casa, fa una visita ai parenti...  
 During the party, people.<sub>SG</sub> return.<sub>3PL</sub> to home, make.<sub>3SG</sub> a visit to relatives...  
 b. Molte persone ha partecipato al matrimonio  
 Many people.<sub>PL</sub> have.<sub>3SG</sub> participated at the marriage  
 c. \CHN\ Poi siamo andato a casa della sposa  
 Then be.<sub>1PL</sub> gone.<sub>SG</sub> to the bride's house

Students often forgot the auxiliary before the past participle:

- (3) a. ...mangiato con la mia famiglia, guardato la TV...  
 ...eaten with my family, watched TV ...  
 b. \CHN\ ...fatto con lo zucchero e il resto cose non so  
 ...made with sugar and the rest things I do not know  
 c. Al liceo io studiato *history*  
 In high school I studied history

As for the use of the conditional and the subjunctive, students had difficulty using them in agreement with other tenses:

- (4) a. \CHN\ Se fossi ricco, comprassi una casa  
 If be rich, buy.<sub>SUBJV</sub> a house

- b. Se ho molti soldi... farei qualcosa per ripagare la società  
 If have<sub>-PRS.1SG</sub> a lot of money... do<sub>-COND.1SG</sub> something to repay society
- c. Quando ho visto i risultati su internet ho pensato che sia uno scherzo  
 When have<sub>-1SG</sub> seen the results on internet have<sub>-1SG</sub> thought that be<sub>-SUBJV</sub> a joke

One of the most frequent errors recorded was the use of the present tense instead of the past, even in advanced students. For example, in answering a question about a woman's working conditions in the past and present, fourth-year students formulated the following phrases:

- (5) a. \CHN\: "Nel passato una donna deve fare tante cose...tipo...fare come un casalinga a c...ogni giorno devono lavare i...vestiti, pulire la casa, allattare i bambini e...comunque tante cose."  
 ' In the past, a woman has to do a lot of things ... like ... to do like a housewife a c ... every day they have to wash ... clothes, clean the house, feed the children and ... anyway many things'

b. \CHN\: "...loro hanno i stipendi alti e non devono trovare un appoggio e... loro possono vivere una vita liberamente. Ma nel passato le donne devono seguire i pensieri de...de di suo ma-marito, della sua famiglia eccetera."  
 "...they have high salaries and do not have to find an abode and ... they can live a life freely. But in the past, women must follow the thoughts of ...of her husband, her family, and so on."

c. \CHN\ " ...nel passato la donna non può...non poteva uscire a lavorare ed il suo percorso di vita è dedicata-è dedicato dagli altri e non poteva raggiungere il suo valore di vita. Ma oggi per una donna è possibile...rice-ricevere l'istruzione egua-e... uscire a trovare un lavoro."  
 "...in the past the woman cannot ... could not go out to work and her life path is dedicated.<sub>F</sub> - is dedicated.<sub>M</sub> by others and could not reach her worth of life. But today it is possible for a woman to ... receive-the education egua-and ... go out to find a job."

With regard to the use of the present perfect, research has shown that most students, even after three years of study, still have problems in discriminating the use of the present perfect and the imperfect, because they have difficulty distinguishing the "perfective" aspect of verbs (for which the present perfect is used) from the "durative" aspect (for which the imperfect is used). While answering questions that involved the use of the past tense, students of the third and fourth year formulated the following sentences:

- (6) a. \CHN\ (about the previous Spring Festival) "...e poi ho cenato con tutta la famiglia. Dopo cena guardavamo lo spettacolo dalla TV insieme".  
 "...and then I had dinner<sub>-PFV</sub> with the whole family. After dinner we watched. IPFV the show on TV together".

- b. \CHN\ (about the previous Spring Festival) “Prima di mangiare, tutta la famiglia adorava gli antenati per pregare la fortuna. E poi abbiamo fatto una cena ricca”.  
“Before eating, the whole family adored.IPFV their ancestors to pray for their fortune. And then we have done.PFV a rich dinner”.
- c. \CHN\ (about the matriculation exam) “Ho fatto l’esame di maturità tre anni fa. L’esame durava tre giorni.”  
“I have done.<sub>PFV</sub> my high school exam three years ago. The exam lasted.IPFV three days”.
- d. \CHN\ (about the matriculation exam) “ogni giorno ho ripassato.”  
“every day I have reviewed.<sub>PFV</sub>”.
- e. \CHN\ (about a wedding in which the student participated) “Poi sono andata a casa di mia sorella e aspettavamo. Lo sposo arriva...”  
“Then I have gone.PFV to my sister’s house and we waited.IPFV. The groom arrives...”

The results have all confirmed those of previous studies: the learning of Italian, and verbal phrases in particular, is especially difficult because of the typological differences between the two languages. The Chinese student who speaks or writes in Italian must focus attention on a series of linguistic phenomena absent in their own language. These include systematic changes in morphemes of words that functions as verbs, verbal mood, various tens-es, etc. These aspects are difficult for the Chinese student to understand and implement.

In fact, the Chinese language does not provide for the modification of words and expresses, through free morphemes, the functional values that in Italian are entrusted to the morphology; the Chinese verb, moreover, puts the accent almost exclusively on the aspect (perfective and continuous), but not on the mood or tense. The Chinese speaker is therefore not used to thinking about the time in which an action took place, much less to express it through morphological changes.

A further difficulty derives from the phenomena of agreement, namely the presence in Italian of rules of agreement between different moods and tenses.

### 5. *Conclusions*

Although in recent years enormous progress has been made in China in the teaching of foreign languages, and despite the well-established presence of foreign professors in all universities to support Chinese professors in teaching a second language, the excessive importance given to the study of grammar should perhaps be reduced by promoting, instead, the development of linguistic-communicative competence, a trend already fully established in Europe.

Furthermore, the prevailing focus on the study of grammar does not guarantee that students do not make mistakes of the morphological-syntactic type, especially while speaking. The most frequent errors result from grammatical structures that differ considerably between the two languages. It is noted, in fact, that there is a general slowing down of learning and a particular difficulty in using the correct, fully inflected verb forms. This is evident even in learners who have been studying the language for several years.

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