



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Corso di Laurea Magistrale

in

Scienze del Linguaggio LM-39

Final Thesis

Italian Language online courses for

Marco Polo and Turandot students

at Ca' Foscari School For International Education.

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Academic Year

2021 / 2022

Table of Contents

Abstract	pp.7
Chapter 1: Introduction	
1.1 Objectives of the Marco Polo and Turandot Projects'	pp.9
1.2 Admission requirements	pp.10
1.3 MP/T online Italian courses 2020/2021: a teacher's perspective	pp. 12
1.4 The School for International Education of Venice	pp. 13
1.5 The MP/T Italian online language course at SIE	pp. 14
1.5.1 Organisation of MP/T online Italian Language Course	pp. 15
1.5.2 The linguistic educational approach	pp. 16
1.5.3 Purposes of MP/T online Italian Language Course	pp. 17
1.5.4 The MP/T online tutoring classes	pp. 18
1.6 MP/T students	pp. 18
1.6.1 MP/T students' needs and expectations	pp.19
1.6.2 Intercultural learning-process	pp. 19
1.7 MP/T Syllabus: a special educational program	pp. 20

Chapter 2: Glottodidactic methodological choices

2.1 The implementation of Distance Education at School For International Education during the pandemic period	pp. 22
2.2 The virtual classroom in distance education	pp. 23
2.3 Western modern teaching approach and methods	pp. 24
2.3.1 Communicative Language Teaching Approach	pp. 24
2.3.2 The communicative competence	pp. 25
2.3.3 The notional-functional method	pp. 26
2.3.4 Integrated method	pp. 27
2.4 The MP/T teacher's approach at SIE	pp. 27
2.5 Two different learning approaches	pp. 28
2.5.1 Chinese learning approach	pp. 28
2.5.2 A different perspective about Chinese learning approach	pp. 29
2.5.3 Some difference between Western and Chinese teaching methods	pp. 30
2.6 The use of Zoom Meeting in the online MP/T language course 2020/2021 at SIE: a tool that transforms the teaching relationship	pp. 31
2.7 Cooperative learning among peers as well as between, teachers and students	pp. 32
2.7.1 The breakout rooms and tandem activity	pp. 32
2.7.2 Sharing material	pp. 33
2.7.3 Content and Language Integrated Learning through some Italian Cultural laboratories for MP/T students	pp. 33
2.8 New and old skills required for the online education	pp. 34

Chapter 3: The research

3.1 Action research	pp. 36
3.2 Action research in the study of MP/T project's online Italian course at SIE	pp. 37
3.3 Triangulation in the online Italian course for MP/T students at the SIE	pp. 39
3.4 The questionnaire	pp. 40
3.5 The recording	pp. 41
3.6 The survey	pp. 41
3.6.1 Types of questions	pp. 42
3.6.2 The student satisfaction questionnaire	pp. 42
3.6.3 The students online course satisfaction questionnaire	pp. 43
3.6.4 The teachers satisfaction questionnaire	pp. 43
3.7 The results	pp. 44
3.8 Integrated questionnaire data analysis	pp. 44
3.8.1 Familiarity with taking the online courses	pp. 45
3.8.2 Use of technological devices	pp. 45
3.8.3 The relationship with the teacher	pp. 46
3.8.4 Class interaction and collaboration	pp. 47
3.8.5 Students' attention	pp. 48
3.8.6 Students' learning	pp. 49
3.8.7 Instructional design	pp. 50

Chapter 4: The MP/T tutoring experience at *Ca'Foscari* School For International Education

4.1. Tutoring service in the Academic world	pp. 52
4.2 The MP/T tutoring service 2020/2021 at SIE	pp. 53
4.3 The method	pp. 54
4.4 First approach to the Chinese students	pp. 55
4.5 An analysis from the intercultural perspective	pp. 55
4.6 The concept of face	pp. 56
4.7 The transcription: a representation of the reality for research purposes	pp. 57
4.8 Transcriptions of some frames of the tutoring activity	pp. 59
4.8.1. First two transcriptions: analysis of intervention	pp. 59
4.8.2 Third Transcription: representation of change	pp. 64

Chapter 5: Conclusions

5.1 In conclusion pp.74

5.2 Weakness points of the MP/T project, online and offline pp.77

5.3 Suggestions pp.78

List of References pp.81

Abstract

Con questo elaborato si è cercato di analizzare come il Programma governativo Marco Polo e Turandot si sia dovuto adattare e rimodellare a causa delle limitazioni degli spostamenti, attuate per affrontare l'emergenza sanitaria conseguente alla pandemia e, come abbiano risposto gli alunni, ma soprattutto i docenti, al cambiamento. Il corso di italiano, tenutosi presso la School For International Education (SIE) di Ca' Foscari, per gli studenti sinofoni che desiderano iscriversi a Università e Istituzioni dell'Alta Formazione Artistica, Musicale e Coreutica (AFAM), propedeutico all'esame di livello B1/B2, necessario per accedere a tali corsi di studio, si è svolto totalmente in modalità online nell'anno accademico 2020-2021, proprio per l'impossibilità degli studenti di venire in Italia, a causa delle restrizioni conseguenti alla diffusione di COVID-19.

Lo studio effettuato si è basato sulla partecipazione diretta all'attività didattica dell'autrice di questa dissertazione come tutor d'aula, in affiancamento ai docenti dei due corsi di italiano L2. Grazie all'utilizzo di alcuni questionari di gradimento relativi all'apprendimento e all'efficacia del corso, sottoposti sia agli studenti che ai docenti e grazie all'analisi di alcune sequenze di registrazioni dell'attività di tutorato, si sono indagati i lati positivi e negativi di questa tipologia di insegnamento all'interno di un progetto ormai ampiamente diffuso in Italia e della complessità derivata soprattutto dalla distanza tra la lingua e la cultura di partenza e quella studiata, oltre che dalle diverse metodologie di apprendimento e di acquisizione della lingua seconda.

This paper examines the progression of the Marco Polo/Turandot Programs over the years and how it has had to adapt and reshape itself due to the travel restrictions implemented during the public health emergency, resulting from the pandemic. Attention is given to how the students, but especially the teachers, have responded to the change.

The Marco Polo and Turandot projects include a propaedeutic Italian course for Chinese students wishing to enroll at Italian universities or *Alta Formazione Artistica, Musicale e Coreutica* (AFAM) institutions.

The Italian course, offered by Ca' Foscari's School For International Education (SIE) is designed to prepare students to take the B1/B2 level exam required to attend university in Italy. The course took place entirely online in the 2020-2021 academic year, due to Covid-19 restrictions preventing Chinese students from travelling.

The study carried out was based on the direct participation of the author as a classroom tutor in teaching activities, alongside the teachers of two Italian L2 courses.

By way of a number of satisfaction questionnaires submitted to both teachers and students information was gathered regarding the learning and the effectiveness of the course. Further, recordings of the tutoring activities were analyzed, the research investigates the positive and negative aspects of this type of teaching.

Additionally, the thesis looks at the issue of complexity resulting mainly from the distance between the students' first language and the second language that they are studying, as well as the difference in methods of teaching and learning used in the students native country versus Italy.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Objectives of the Marco Polo and Turandot Projects'

The *Marco Polo* project was planned and developed by the Conference of Italian University Rectors (*Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane*, or CRUI) between 2004-2006 and revised, for the first time, in the Autumn of 2006. It was promoted by the then President of the Italian Republic in order to attract more Chinese students to Italian Universities. Following its success, in 2009 a similar project, called *Turandot*, began. The latter concerns students of the fine arts and musical education, which is a highlight of the Italian Academic Educational System.

As Vedovelli (2010) said:

«L'obiettivo cinese è di generalizzare una formazione internazionale della futura classe dirigente, che dovrà essere capace di mettere il Paese in grado di interagire con tutti i Paesi del mondo, conoscendone le lingue e le culture; assorbendo i caratteri del sistema di alta formazione, prendendo i tratti migliori che li contraddistinguono. Ciò porta a creare una classe dirigente capace realmente di fungere da mediatore tra la Cina e gli altri sistemi economico-produttivi e sociali[...]Per la parte italiana l'occasione di "Marco Polo" ha rappresentato la possibilità di delineare, forse per la prima volta, un modello di azione condivisa fra gli Atenei (e perciò 'di sistema') e tale da far diventare il sistema italiano un punto di riferimento – una meta – per un pubblico potenziale caratterizzato dall'omogenea

provenienza (un solo Paese, sia pure immenso come la Cina e perciò non meno variegato) e dalla notevole ampiezza. Questa convergenza di intenti di ‘internazionalizzazione’ ha portato i due Paesi a sottoscrivere un accordo intergovernativo[...]delineando un piano di formazione che si preoccupa di attrarre gli studenti cinesi puntando sulla formazione linguistica in italiano intesa come condizione di possibilità per il successivo momento, quello del percorso di studio accademico nelle discipline scelte dagli studenti.»

In 2010 more than 50 Italian Universities instituted Italian Language Courses specifically aimed at introducing Chinese students to their future at Italian Universities. Currently most of the students benefiting from the *Marco Polo* and *Turandot* programs attend these language classes in private schools, centres affiliated with the University, or the High Artistic and Musical Education Academy.

1.2 Admission requirements

To be accepted to the *Marco Polo* and *Turandot* (from here on out referred to as simply MP and T respectively) projects and obtain an Italian student Visa, a Chinese student must first have passed their *Gao Kao*, (普通高等学校招生全国统一考试 | pǔtōng gāoděng xuéxiào zhāoshēng quánguó tōngyī kǎoshì). It is a certificate of academic competence, administered by Chinese Universities. Students are generally required to achieve a minimum score of 380 out of 750¹.

Candidates are students nearing the completion of high school. Students are tested on subjects connected to their educational curriculum. The test assessment considers social behaviour and economic factors, moral aspects and, in some Universities, the physical abilities of the students. It is one of

¹ The score varies by year and by Province, too

the most selective examinations in the world (Ambroso, 2011). Once the exam is passed, students can then start the bureaucratic process to get an Italian student VISA.

Other admittance requirements are: an official document of acknowledgment from an Italian University; proof of having the means to financially support a stay in Italy and a signed declaration of comprehension and commitment to the purposes of the student VISA, and lastly there is an element concerning the level of Italian language required of the Chinese students, not just to survive in Italy, but also the specific language for the topics they will encounter at the University.²

The admission requirements written in 2006 by both Chinese and Italian authorities, stated that Chinese students could receive a student visa by simply presenting a pre-registration to any Italian University course, without needing to demonstrate any basic competence in the Italian language.

This lack of specificity complicated things quite a lot for Italian Universities guesting *Marco Polo* and *Turandot* Chinese students. The Italian-Language-Welcome-Centers, for example, are supposed to orient incoming students towards the bridging opportunities the University has to offer, to ease their arrival in a new country and system where they are invited to thrive. A complete lack of linguistic preparation on the part of the arriving students, though, doesn't support this structure, but rather results in an additional obstacle that adds to the cultural differences among tutors and tutored, instead of offering shortcuts.

With the above in mind, since 2015, the MP/T Italian language course lasts around 10 months, in order for the student to reach enough linguistic and cultural competence to effectively study at an Italian University.

Additionally the *Marco Polo* and *Turandot* Italian Language courses present a challenge for a University guesting foreign students groups: while the Chinese students are a homogeneous group of learners of Italian L2, other

² <https://www.studiare-in-italia.it/studentistranieri/> last referenced on 29/11/2022

heterogeneous L2 student-groups face internal differences in cultural approaches that can slow down the learning process, when compared with the Chinese group-dynamics and shared-approach to language learning.

1.3 MP/T online Italian courses 2020/2021. A teacher's perspective

This dissertation is focused on the work of Italian language teachers in *Ca' Foscari*, Venice University for humanistic studies, between 2020 and 2021.

In their article Bonvino and Rastelli (2011) they clarify the peculiar role of teachers in the context of MP/T. They must give up some of the most popular and traditional teaching methods acquired in the past, and open new routes to adapt the language-teaching-tools to the new demands. The MP/T Chinese learners aren't familiar with travelling, aren't used to speaking and communicating with peers coming from different countries, and, most of the time, it seems like they do not want to interact at all. Simultaneously, MP/T teachers should be aware that their role can have a huge impact not only on the Chinese students future life but also on their parents' expectations. The article concludes by saying:

«Il programma Marco Polo non è solo un programma di insegnamento della lingua italiana: è una comune assunzione di responsabilità nei confronti di una generazione di giovani cinesi che – per avere nuove opportunità – ha scelto di percorrere la via difficile Bonvino, Rastelli (2011).»

In the following pages we are going to investigate an additional element that influenced the MP/T educational teaching path during 2020/2021: the online delivery of the entire training course, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

An overview will then be sought through the analysis of some satisfaction surveys submitted to MP/T students and teachers in the year 2020-2021, but also through the analysis of recordings of some particularly significant

tutored meetings. Thanks to the critical examination of these elements and in light of the many studies concerning the MP/T project and the different Chinese educational system, we will list some positive and negative elements that have marked this new teaching mode. The hope is that this analysis may give new suggestions for looking at the arena of language teaching and the MP/T project in particular, concerning both teaching and the level of intercultural communication.

1.4 The School for International Education of Venice

Ca' Foscari School For International Education (henceforth referred to as SIE) is the institution tasked with providing the Italian Language courses for the Chinese students participating in the MP/T project at *Ca' Foscari* University in Venice³.

SIE offers University-level instruction within academic programmes. These include courses held in the English Language for exchange students, graduate seminar programmes, as well as a Foundation Year⁴ for future students at *Ca' Foscari* University or other Italian higher education institutions. As well SIE organises joint Summer Schools in collaboration with prestigious international universities such as Harvard University

³<https://www.unive.it/pag/9900/> last referenced on 29/11/2022

⁴The *Ca' Foscari* Foundation Year is a propaedeutic year-long programme designed to prepare international students for undergraduate studies at an Italian university. Students take courses on Italian and European history, Academic English and Italian language, along with a Study Track that aims to provide a basic introduction to the main disciplines available at *Ca' Foscari* and *Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia*. The *Ca' Foscari* Foundation Year is a propaedeutic year-long programme designed to prepare international students for undergraduate studies at an Italian university. Students take courses on Italian and European history, Academic English and Italian language, along with a Study Track that aims to provide a basic introduction to the main disciplines available at *Ca' Foscari* and *Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia* (henceforth referred to as IUAV) for future study.

(Boston, Massachusetts) and Columbia University (NY, New York State). Part of SIE's offerings are numerous summer school programmes focused on a range of engaging and innovative topics, from translation to the environment, from global studies to contemporary art. Such summer programs are open to everyone.

1.5 The MP/T Italian online language course at SIE

These Italian language and culture courses play an important role in all of SIE's programmes. The school also offers semester-long courses as well as intensive Italian language courses during the summer sessions combined with cultural modules and a variety of activities promoting engagement in the city's life and opportunities.

MP/T is one of the most important projects provided by SIE. It is organised by the Venice Didactic Pole of Studies⁵ and it combines the four main higher-education institutions of Venice: *Università Ca'Foscari*, *IUAV*, *Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia*, *Conservatorio di Musica Benedetto Marcello*.

In 2017 the Rectors of these four institutions signed a Memorandum of Understanding, to cooperate in the welcoming of foreign students and in providing services dedicated to them, among these are the above described, offer of Italian Language and Culture courses.

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, during the academic year 2020/2021, MP/T Italian Language and Culture courses were provided entirely online, even though some students, between the second and the third learning modules, did move to Italy.

⁵ *Polo Didattico di Venezia*: An international pole of higher education, situated in the heart of Venice. It offers the possibility to attend a university program, (like Bachelor, Master or PhD degree) or just a single University's course in Italian or in English language, and also to participate in summer school projects or to an Italian language course.

1.5.1 Organisation of MP/T online Italian Language Course

Thanks to cooperation with *Ca' Foscari* University the author of this dissertation has had the opportunity to be strongly involved in the cultural activities aimed at supporting the main language classes.

The course consists of language training divided into two classes, separated by language level: A1/A2⁶, and it was integrated into other types of courses, such as:

- Tutoring (*Attività di tutoraggio*): to support and reinforce the competences learnt during the classes, and the progress made during the oral interaction and written assignments.
- Italian Civilization and Cultural Lab (*Laboratorio di cultura e civiltà italiana*): to introduce elements of Italian social and cultural norms and help give a better understanding of the Italian way of life.
- Writing Lab (*Laboratorio di Scrittura*): to go deeper into the development of the linguistics skills, according to the standards of *Certificazione di Italiano come Lingua Straniera* (henceforth referred to as CILS)⁷ text's trials: listening, reading and writing.

⁶ According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) broadens the scope of language education, reflecting academic and societal developments since the CEFR publication in 2001. It presents the key aspects of the CEFR for teaching and learning in a user-friendly form and contains the complete set of extended CEFR descriptors, replacing the 2001 set. These now include descriptors for mediation, online interaction, plurilingual/pluricultural competence, and sign language competences. The illustrative descriptors have been adapted with modality-inclusive formulations for sign languages and all descriptors are now gender-neutral.

⁷ The CILS certificate is an official qualification that attests the degree of linguistic-communicative competence of Italian as a second language. The CILS Certification is the first Italian certification to have introduced a six levels system of linguistic communicative-competence, proposed by the Common European Framework of

- Language Learning in Tandem (*Scambio linguistico*): a weekly appointment with Italian students of *Ca'Foscari* University who are studying the Chinese language, thereby facilitating the Chinese student's integration in the university's system and social life, while offering a mother tongue partner to the Italian student, thus supporting her/his approach to the Chinese foreign language and culture.

1.5.2 The linguistic educational approach

The lessons follow a communicative approach and use a functional-notional method to answer to the student's true communicative needs. This method of language-teaching is classified along with others under the heading of a communicative approach.

The design of a functional-notional curriculum contributes to the achievement of the primary goal of foreign-language learning courses: the ability to use real, appropriate language to communicate with others, highlighting the communicative purposes of the act of speech.

This method stresses a means of organising language into units of analysis, in terms of communicative situations in which they are used. Notions are elements that may be expressed through nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives or adverbs in a particular situation, characterised by three major factors: the functions; the elements in the situation, and the topic being discussed. A situation may affect variations of language, diaphasic and diastratic variations in particular. A situation includes: the person taking part in the speech act; the place where the conversation occurs; the time when the speech act is taking place and the

Reference of the Council of Europe, and to have employed different modules made for worker students of foreign origin who live in Italy. The CILS Centre is an institutional member of the European Language Testing Association (henceforth referred to as EALTA) and member of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (henceforth referred to as ALTE).

topic or activity that is being discussed. Finocchiaro (1983) placed these functional categories under five headings: personal, interpersonal, directive, referential, and imaginative.

About the Italian Course at SIE, it is important to note that the language used during the lessons is exclusively Italian, even for the absolute beginner level. The improvement of daily communication skills in a language course progresses with the gradual introduction of those elements of the language necessary for living in the Italian Academic environment, but also for studying subjects in the language of the country they hosted. The topics considered during the MP/T Italian courses were faced through comprehension and deeper study of relevant texts related to the curricula that Chinese students will undertake. The objective of increasing the linguistic-communicative abilities was strengthened by means of a strategic approach, not only in the context of studies, but as well connecting different everyday-life aspects of the Italian cultural experience.

1.5.3 Purposes of MP/T online Italian Language Course

In addition to this all round approach, and thanks to a partnership with Study in Venice the students were offered attendance optional courses in order to expand their knowledge about the subject they are going to study, from a linguistic and an academic point of view.

The assessment takes place through *in itinere* tests: the first is a module that includes writing comprehension and an oral exam (speaking and listening); the second is a written essay test, based on the model of the CILS exam.

At the end of the course the students are required to take an exam, which gives them the opportunity to certify their linguistic achievements. Furthermore, if the students are interested, SIE offers the possibility to take the CILS exam. The MP/T students are expected to achieve an intermediate (B1/B2) level of Italian Language by the end of the program. This is also the necessary level for obtaining admission to an Italian University.

1.5.4 The MP/T online tutoring classes

In November 2020 the author of this dissertation started tutoring online courses with two groups of students, one being A1 level and the other A2 level, respectively named *Leonardo* and *Michelangelo*. The role of the tutor was to assist the main Italian Language course, focusing the lessons on the vocabulary the teachers had already proposed to the students in the weekly program, in order to consolidate their knowledge of Italian Language. It was mostly focused on the reinforcement of their oral communication abilities, in particular on the prosody, on the use of new vocabulary learnt, and on the oral comprehension (listening). The tutoring class lasted 2 hours, including a break. It took place once a week online, using Zoom as a platform. The students were asked to participate in extracurricular activities. They also had the possibility to ask their tutor to review a subject that was unclear, or to correct a task they didn't understand during the Italian lessons.

1.6 MP/T students

The spread of Italian language and culture is a broad and complex phenomenon that is intertwined with the internationalisation of educational activities and the language market, this is a driving force behind Chinese students choosing to participate in the MP/T project. (Rastelli, Bonvino, 2011). However, to truly understand the underpinning of the MP/T program, a deeper analysis of who MP/T learners are, is necessary.

Therefore, MP/T students who want to be a part of the Italian Academic World, often have their needs associated with other kinds of students that participate in various international university projects, aimed at the Italian University admission. There are two similarities among Chinese students and students from other countries, which allow us a glimpse into their common learning paths: first, the necessity to acquire Italian language as a

lingua franca and secondly, the urgency for the acquired language skills to be usefully integrated into the broader academic context.

1.6.1 MP/T students' needs and expectations

The main need of an MP/T student is to achieve a core language level, enough to allow them basic communicative competence, because it could be the key to have all the competences required for accessing further, including unrelated courses, in the students' curriculum.

On the other hand the expectations and the approach of Chinese students to language-learning processes differ in some aspects from those of other international students: first of all it seems as if a longer time is needed for second language acquisition. This is due to the distance between the L1 and the target language, but also due to the fact that they are learning a language for the second time (Rastelli, 2021); secondly because of the lack of a common cultural heritage there is not an immediate examination and interpretation of western customs; finally because the approach to studying, is not just different, but markedly different from the one they are familiar with.

1.6.2 Intercultural learning-process

The differences between cultures cause ad hoc or hastily acquired adaptations in response to various inconveniences. When a teacher and a student come from different cultural backgrounds, their individual educational cultures will influence the results of the learning process. Therefore, there might be largely unnoticed gaps between the expectations of the teaching methodology and students from different cultural backgrounds.

Any particular culture of learning will have its roots in the educational, and more broadly, cultural traditions of the community or society in which it is located. (Jin, Cortazzi, 1996). These distinguishing features have obvious effects on the students that will require a longer learning period and a slower adaptation to the new paradigm, but also on the foreign language teachers that instruct them.

1.7 MP/T Syllabus. A special educational program

For the above reasons, and to enable the MP/T student to succeed in their academic studies in Italy, the MP/T teacher should elaborate an efficient educational program, able to meet the communication goal and language skills required in the academic world of the learners, by acquiring the suitable abilities to suit their special needs. These abilities are classified as follows:

- A basic communicative-linguistic proficiency

Cummins (1984), defined them as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (henceforth referred to as BICS). These support interpersonal communication, allowing us to interact with Italian people on daily topics, like asking for information, reading and writing short texts about familiar arguments. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (from now on referred to as CEFR) posits that the B1 learner has acquired sufficient knowledge of the language as the minimum requirement for the access to many academic institutions⁸.

- Specific skills to handle university life

These allow the student to become more familiar with the local academic environment, teachers and administrators. These skills are especially useful if a student wants to gain confidence in dealing with the Italian academic

⁸ Reference on *Convegno Uni-Italia su Programmi governativi Marco Polo e Turandot*, 2022; Ambroso (2011)

bureaucratic system, which frequently lacks clarity and transparency, as well as in the execution of formal tasks, for example, booking a spot for an exam, the task of accessing the universities system for the reporting of grades, filling out their curriculum, or *piano di studi*, and so on.

- Study skills

If we consider the perspective of a Chinese student who is starting to study at an Italian University, they have to acquire the proper kind of linguistic knowledge that helps them to operate in the academic world. For instance, the teachers will ask the students to carry out tasks similar to those they will have to face in the academic context-if not in content, at least in the pragmatic typology. The fact that students improve their BICS and they are able to have a face to face conversation, it doesn't mean that they will be ready to approach an intellectually demanding cognitive-academic language task, but it means that they will need guidance along the way.

The term refers to the classification developed by Cummings (1984), when he coined the term Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (henceforth referred to as CALP), to formally describe the academic learning, as opposed to BICS. According to Cummins studies, in addition to acquiring the language, learners need to develop skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesising, evaluating, and inferring to develop academic competence. That's why academic language is characterised by being abstract, context-reduced, and specialised. A study by Collier and Thomas (1995) has shown that it may take children with no prior instruction or no support in native language development a minimum of seven years to develop CALP.

- Specific expertise

The concept is linked to different fields: not a specialised language, but rather an expansion of their language learning skills, mostly focused on the subjects they will study.

Chapter 2

Glottodidactic methodological choices

2.1 The implementation of Distance Education at School For International Education during the pandemic period

In February 2020, with the unforeseen arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, all types of educational activities were compelled to react to this emergency through the use of distance learning (henceforth referred to as DAD⁹). Thus, Italian L2 courses offered by the SIE started to be taught exclusively online.

According to the *Accademia della Crusca*¹⁰, in an article commenting on the new words, DAD, is a type of teaching that has a long tradition:

«La Didattica a distanza esiste fin dalla metà dell'Ottocento e ha indicato, negli anni, un insegnamento a distanza declinato attraverso mezzi di comunicazione sempre più evoluti: prima la corrispondenza postale, poi la televisione e la radio, infine i mezzi digitali informatici e telematici.»

The European community also supports the use of information and communication technologies (from this point forward referred to as ICT) in language teaching and learning. That's why until the outbreak of the health emergency, the modality adopted was mostly a blend of online and in person methods. Thus, even the MP/T courses of 2019/2020, as with many other courses at *Ca' Foscari* University, involved the integration of traditional face to face methods with the use of technology in synchronous and asynchronous modes. The revolution that occurred with the epidemiological emergency saw a total shift to online education and has once again confronted the world of education and training with the need to respond to

⁹ DAD is the acronym in Italian of *didattica a distanza*.

¹⁰ The *Accademia della Crusca* is among the leading institutions in the field of research on the Italian language, in both Italy and worldwide.

the new demands required in today's society. In fact, the Council of the European Union in 2018 highlighted that not only disciplinary but also transversal skills are crucial in order to realise oneself, both as a person, professionally, and at the level of social inclusion. For this reason, EU and national policies have begun to promote in schools and universities the integration of e-learning methodologies into teaching.

The critical issues regarding didactic innovation through the use of ICT encountered more than a decade ago came back overwhelmingly with the adoption of DAD imposed by the health situation, and they highlighted what was probably still a weak aspect of the Italian educational system. One of these weaknesses, which is necessary to consider in this analysis of the teaching activity of online Italian L2 courses for MP/T students in 2020/2021, is that the virtual space, in which the interaction between trainer and learner takes place, is qualitatively different from the real space.

2.2 The virtual classroom in distance education

The virtual space maintains an extremely flexible link with the coordinates of space and time to which we are accustomed, but there is a lack of the face to face interaction, which the traditional classroom is characterised by. In this case, the communication takes place through the mediation of the screen of the device used. However, the virtual classroom remains the meeting place on the network between the protagonists of the educational exchange.

In this regard, it is interesting to report what emerged in the results of some research conducted on MP/T students by Castronovo and Voltan (2015), in which they confirmed the hypotheses that language learning and acquisition can occur more effectively and more frequently in individuals who are integrated into the culture of the studied language. Indeed, according to these studies, it seems that the degree of integration of the learner can predict proficiency quite significantly, specifically this would affect the ability to comprehend writing and speaking, necessary for the development of BICS. The latter, integrated with BICS, would then be the core language skills to be

developed in a language course preparing for university admission. During the pandemic, the possibility of being integrated in the society and also in the culture of the country whose language is being studied, was minimised, and this greatly affected the Italian language of the Chinese students in the MP/T project. Teachers played a key role in this, as they tried to explore new methodologies in e-learning to bridge the physical as well as the cultural distance, always keeping in mind the concept of the class, the matter of communication, relationships between people, information, education, but also knowledge construction.

2.3 Western modern teaching approach and methods

2.3.1 Communicative Language Teaching Approach

First of all, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the notion of approach in glottodidactics: it is a sort of theoretical model of learning and of language endowed with coherence and scientificity, which is able to generate one or more methods. On the other hand the method defines a coherent set of glottodidactic interventions that translates the pedagogical, linguistic, psychological data into a didactic strategy.

The educational approach, maintained even in the pandemic year by the MP/T program, follows the ideas that glottodidactics has embraced in recent decades and which have been credited with drawing the attention of teachers, authors and trainers to the needs of the learner: the Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching Approach (henceforth referred to as CLT). The CLT was developed in the 1970s thanks to the focus of what will be its core, that is the communicative competence. This concept involves all areas of communication that can be used to convey meaning: it includes linguistic competence¹¹, paralinguistic competence¹², socio-pragmatic competence¹³ and extralinguistic competence¹⁴. The focus is

¹¹ Phonology or phonetics, grapheme, morphosyntax, lexicality, textuality.

¹² Prosodic element relating to speed, tone, and pauses in the utterance.

¹³ The varieties of a language: the registers and the styles used to reach its goal.

¹⁴ Proxemics, kinesics and object competence.

on meaningful communication, not only structure and usage. Hymes (1972), originally, came up with this idea as a contraposition to the concept of linguistic competence proposed by Chomsky (1959): the intention was to oppose a view of language as an isolated formal structure and, instead, suggest the idea of language as an organism bound and conditioned by social and cultural rules and communicative purposes.

2.3.2 The communicative competence

According to Hymes (1972) learners of a foreign language must develop this communicative competence related to the functional dimension of language in various communicative contexts. The communicative situation, formed by the set of social and cultural factors of the context in which the language production occurred, it is in actually the fundamental element to be considered in any language production¹⁵.

Thus, the skills to be developed are the mastering of functional language, for instance how to make a request, or how to make an apology, but always within a broader discourse. The focus is now on the message, its meaning and fluency, rather than the accuracy of the grammar and learners acquire their accuracy gradually and naturally.

Lastly, the Communicative Approach remains one of the paradigms which expanded the most around the world and has been a decisive turning-point in the field of language teaching and is now a huge presence in the worldwide field of language education.

¹⁵ This is part of one of the communicative models, called the situational method. This method assumes instances from sociolinguistics, proposing an anti-mechanistic reaction. It is characterized by the introduction into an essentially structuralist model of language learning, of the concept of the communicative situation: a language cannot be learned unless it is taught in a situation that is, if not authentic, at least as realistic as possible.

2.3.3 The notional-functional method

After years of intensive research, in the 1970s emerged what would later become the quintessential method of MP/T education, namely the notional-functional method. It is the fruition of the communicative approach that emerged as a result of the Modern Languages Project, drawn up by experts from the European Council. The aim of the project was the promotion of foreign languages among European citizens. It was defined, for many EU Countries, the threshold level: the language that must be known by a foreign speaker to live and interact in that country. In this project, language is analyzed on three levels:

- communicative functions, also called communicative acts, which, in this case, correspond to universal communicative purposes¹⁶;
- notions, or rather logical semantic and grammatical concepts¹⁷, linked to the functions;
- linguistic exponents or structures that accomplish functions; a function can be performed by several exponents, to be chosen according to the cultural and social situation.

The object to be taught is no longer identified in terms of grammatical rules as in the formalistic approach or in the automation of minimal structures as in the structuralist approach, but in communicative acts and notions.

Oral skills have a clear priority over written skills, and socio-pragmatic competence is the focus of attention. Unfortunately, however, the methodological indications on how to develop these skills and how to acquire them are very general; indeed, some important nodes in acquisition remain unresolved, such as the forms to be adopted in the language learning process, the role of automatic processes, and the psycho-pedagogical model of reference.

¹⁶ Examples of communicative functions are: introducing oneself, asking for information, offering something, describing, expressing an opinion.

¹⁷ For instance, to be able to perform a certain function, a speaker must know logical notions, temporal, spatial, quantity, or lexical expressions such as greetings, proper name and food names, or grammatical concepts such as gender and number, possessive, interrogative or negative clauses.

2.3.4 Integrated method

In the 1980s-1990s, the notional-functional framework was grafted onto the teaching unit tradition of the situational method creating an integrated method¹⁸, with the increasing support of glottodidactic technology, on what we called Computer Assisted language learning (henceforth referred to as CALL).

In spite of the fact that there was not an explicit methodology in the project, there was extensive use of techniques that refer to dramatisation, simulation, communication, alongside activities that provide fixation techniques, similar to those of structural methods, combined with a revalorization of translation, the abuse of which is criticised, but not the teaching effectiveness of translating.

2.4 The MP/T teacher's approach at SIE

MP/T teachers have learned over time that the concept of the classroom is a crucial part of their teaching activities, to which they need to devote constant attention if they are to achieve their goals, all the more so if the course is delivered online. Primarily, it was crucial for MP/T teachers to understand that in China the study of foreign languages at high levels is almost exclusively aimed at passing exams (Castronovo, Voltan, 2021).

The effect is the focus is on the product rather than the process. The habit of Sino-speaking students is, therefore, to favour approaches that do not require students' active participation in the classroom or the development of learning strategies and autonomy skills. By paraphrasing what emerged from Castronovo and Voltan's research, in the classes composed of Chinese students, it happens that the strategies adopted by the teachers are not understood or accepted by the learners, who are accustomed to methods in which the student receives instruction from the teacher who is seen as an

¹⁸ Every teaching unit proposes one or more communicative functions, providing the notions and structures to perform them; the material, as authentic as possible, is not graded from easiest to most difficult, but is chosen according to the importance given to each function.

unquestionable authority and assimilates it through methodical and objective reasoning, with little personal cognitive input. Therefore, in the Italian Language course of MP/T project on SIE of Venice, there is a tendency to place the student at the centre of the learning process, making him or her co-responsible, especially as he or she is given the opportunity to perform a real task that develops not only metalinguistic competence, but also negotiation, comparison and the use of strategies for self-correction. That is why in the pandemic year for MP/T teachers the challenge toward classroom engagement has been even more challenging.

2.5 Two different learning approaches

2.5.1 The Chinese learning approach

Asian students, and Chinese students in particular, are often described as shy and unwilling to expose themselves during class activities, and often their attitude of respect and deference to the teacher can be confusing. They are perceived as learners disinclined to analysis and critical reflection, relying on mnemonic learning, often aided by electronic media, and concerned with absorbing knowledge rather than understanding it and making critical use of it. They are generally described as passive, tending toward self-isolation and rather reticent about confrontation with their peers (Henze, Zhu, 2012). Some scholars postulate by tracing these characteristics to the Confucian heritage of the Chinese educational model, which urges its students to value the community and its harmony, refraining from expressing opinions that, while affirming their individuality of thought, might be at odds with group norms. Moreover, Confucianism negatively characterises an-authoritarian view of the teacher, the role of which takes on familial characteristics: a good teacher is also a spiritual guide, dealing with educational issues that in the west would be considered exclusively the purview of the family. Thus, good Chinese students tend to copy and reproduce what their teachers say or what the object of knowledge par excellence, the book, shows them. Teachers who have developed in a Confucian educational context value diligent effort, concentration, and attention, rather than expression.

Interactions between students and teachers are therefore not considered pedagogical activities (Della Putta, 2021).

Such a learning culture is considered to be at odds with its Western counterpart, which values assertiveness, independence, critical approach to notions, and dialogic exploration of knowledge (Jin, Cortazzi, 2006). Thus, students educated in the Confucian tradition are thought to be at a disadvantage when facing the learning challenges brought by the advent of the modern information society: adapting to an approach that stimulates creativity and transdisciplinarity, based on deductive reasoning, critical thinking and open exchange of ideas.

Indeed, this would create a strong disorientation in Chinese students, who are historically and culturally unaccustomed to such pedagogical practices. It is important, however, to ask how stereotypical these descriptions are and what the behaviours of Chinese speaking students actually refer to (Della Putta, 2021).

2.5.2 A different perspective about Chinese learning approach

The perspective of Liu (2016) on the broad spectrum of integration difficulties faced by Chinese students is an important interpretive starting point that changes the view of the behaviour of Chinese students'. Adaptive and pedagogical distress is not only cultural in origin, but is mainly due to situational reasons: this view primarily considers the influence of the social and factual context in which learning takes place, rather than Confucian cultural heritage.

Lan (2020) adopting this bottom-up perspective studies the difficulties experienced by Sino-speaking students in their 留学¹⁹ thanks to the MP/T project: thus, problems related to the language barrier, which is difficult for many to surmount, as well as the difficulty in understanding what the Italian information system asks of them, then add to this the resulting isolation and

¹⁹ 留学:the Chinese word to explain the experience of travel and study in abroad

the inevitable subsequent feelings of depression and anxiety. Evidence of this is the high university dropout rate of Sino-speakers (Rastelli, 2011).

Highlighting Chinese students' difficulties in language learning with an unidentifiable cultural impediment, as many teachers do (Tian, Low, 2011), risks stereotyping a phenomenon that is actually much more multifaceted, characterised by wide inter-individual variability; doing so also generates in teachers a feeling of aprioristic distrust toward the possibilities of intervening in the critical thinking skills of this population of students. However, it seems that there is no cultural aversion to critical thinking, and there are no attempts to change the way notions are assimilated by Chinese learners (Tian, Low, 2011).

The underlying problems are: the instructional practices used in China, which promote repetitive learning, crowded classrooms (around forty or fifty students), the disparity of technological and library tools found in urban or rural settings, and the difficulty with the foreign language through which critical thinking must be expressed (Scibetta, 2019).

2.5.3 Some difference between Western and Chinese teaching methods

Chinese Cultures of Learning²⁰ have shown that the discrepancy between the Chinese language teaching style and the communicative teaching style, that is currently more prevalent in western educational culture, forces participants who chose to pursue their studies abroad to change their learning system, in order to successfully fit into the academic culture (Matteini, 2012).

The hallmarks of learning/teaching a second language in China, which differentiate it from the communicative teaching method, are: the centrality of learning grammatical structures, sometimes learned by resorting to the use of native speakers; a lack of attention to the more communicative and pragmatic aspects of the language; an emphasis on error correction, both in

²⁰Works that have investigated the methods of learning a foreign language by synophonic learners. For more information and insights Harvey (1985); Rao (2006); Jin, Cortazzi (2006)

written and oral productions; the importance of the textbook and the central role of the teacher; group work is considered to be of little use; extensive use of mnemonic techniques, especially for vocabulary learning; as well as a low tolerance for semantic ambiguity (Rao, 2006).

Several studies (Byram, Feng, 2004) testify to the difficulties of orienting and learning that are widely found in Chinese students enrolled in Western universities (Henze, Zhu, 2012). In fact, it is in the foreign language classroom that the divergences between Chinese and Western educational cultures emerge most clearly. In a pedagogical context, that has as its main objective the development of a procedural competence, the communicative one-some methodological indications considered globally useful such as the emotional involvement of the learner, exposure to real and verisimilar input, the use of language through interaction with peers, and group work prove to be complex to implement when encountering a classroom with educational and communicative modes that are markedly different and are accustomed more to listening and reflection than to interaction (Byram, Feng, 2004).

2.6 The use of Zoom Meeting in the online MP/T program 2020/2021 at SIE: a tool that transforms the teaching relationship

The MP/T program 2020/2021 was taught entirely on the Zoom platform. Zoom Meeting is among the most popular computer applications that made synchronous distance learning possible during the Covid-19 pandemic. To participate in these meetings, the users need to have access to a computer, cell phone or tablet, equipped with a video camera and an internet connection. Zoom Meetings Services enable organisers, in this case SIE through the teachers, who plan and start meetings. Which allows participants to enter gatherings for collaborative purposes, using voice, video, and screen sharing features. The chat function allows group or individual out-of-session interaction via breakout rooms.²¹ Although this tool has demonstrated that it provides all necessary tools so that distance

²¹<https://explore.zoom.us>

does not hinder the teaching activities, this approach has inevitably changed the way teachers relate to students, and vice versa, compared to in-person classes.

Using Savoca's own words (2022):

«Zoom è uno spazio in cui gli apprendenti hanno l'occasione di potenziare la loro capacità di agire socialmente con la lingua. [...] Si mettono in atto nuovi comportamenti che richiedono di reinventare attraverso la lingua, le competenze che costituiscono il sapere la lingua e il saper fare con la lingua (Balboni, 2018 in Savoca, 2022).»

2.7 Cooperative learning among peers as well as between, teachers and students

2.7.1 The breakout rooms and tandem activity

Thanks to the Zoom meeting app, the Italian language course included not only the possibility to conduct synchronous frontal lessons, but also to have students work in a cooperative learning mode. In online education, zoom sessions separate from the main session, known as breakout rooms, are usually used by a set of students to conduct a group activity, allowing a cooperative context to be reproduced synchronously (Savoca, 2022). The division of the MP/T students class into mini-groups of heterogeneous levels, formed by the teacher, for the purpose of peer tutoring: a kind of support for students in difficulty. These collaborative efforts are empowering for the most deserving, giving them the role of supporting others in the execution of the tasks as well. Therefore, breakout rooms appear as a sort of cooperative learning, because they aim to develop a functional methodology for achieving positive interdependence in the classroom.

The same principle of cooperation with peers is the base of other supplementary activities, accompanying the MP/T curricular Italian course at SIE. They consist in cultural enrichment and interlingual exchange with Italian students from Ca' Foscari, eager to practice their Chinese, in order to strengthen their own oral and written comprehension skills.

2.7.2 Sharing material

In addition to the cloud-based videoconferencing service, teachers through Zoom can share other authentic materials, such as songs, articles or even instructional videos to be included in the lessons to make learning more dynamic. At the same time, students can share their own work during group activities or during class, they can review their activity and understand any weaknesses or misunderstandings, this is useful not only to themselves, but also to the whole class.

In online education, teachers, like students, must be able to use and share with others a mix of social and digital skills, combined with technological resources to achieve the common goal of language learning.

2.7.3 Content and Language Integrated Learning through some Italian Cultural laboratories for MP/T students

Some Italian culture laboratories, that utilised Content and Language Integrated Learning (henceforth referred to as CLIL) methodology, helped the students improve their language skills through a series of progressive activities aimed also at developing their intercultural competence. The activities were carried out in parallel with the support of the language teachers, lab teachers, tutors and language tandem partners (Scolaro, 2022).

This cooperation not only helped the performance of students who were required to work both individually and in groups, but also to their integration and awareness of their own language skills and those of their peers, considering their own limitations and progress within their own group.

2.8 New and old skills required for the online education

This type of teaching requires additional skills beyond those that are already a part of normal teaching activity for both teachers and students. In addition to the cognitive, communicative and social skills, which, as mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, must bring together the two different starting teaching perspectives, with the goals shared by both parties involved: teachers and students, there are also some new skills that Rotta (2001) divides into four levels:

- technical skills: knowing how to use technological tools, navigating the Internet, knowing how to use e-mail programs, forums, digital platforms, etc.; and knowing their potential in depth;
- skills in accessing and understanding content: knowing how to consult hypertext resources, knowing how to move in multimedia environments, being able to correctly interpret content produced by others in the absence of face-to-face discussion;
- ability in time management: checking email regularly, meeting deadlines on time, checking the progress of a collaborative project, etc.;
- interaction skills: respecting the rules of netiquette, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary²² as the set of rules about the acceptable behaviour you can keep online, learning to share processed resources, knowing how to collaborate with others, etc.;

²² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/italian-english/netiquette> last referenced on 18/12/2022

The training of the students, and especially of the teachers, from a technological point of view, is therefore essential to overcome some impasses, or improve one's teaching and evaluative practice.

According to what has been deeply debated in various academic research, something that appears as an *a priori* necessity is the presence of a solid educational relationship. This relationship is built from within. This is because the relationship does not depend on the instrument but on the actors (Ranieri, 2020). Even in DAD, therefore, the relationship remains the foundation of education that is overriding teaching: it is only within a strong and solid relationship that we can build effective teaching (Celentin, Daliso, Fiorentino, 2021).

Chapter 3

The research

3.1 Action research

In the mid-1940s, action research became an actual research methodology, thanks to Lewin's theories²³. Accordingly, social science researchers must involve the main actors in their studies at every stage in order to understand and change certain practices in their work (Piccardo, 2007).

Translating this concept to the teaching world, action research becomes a method that teachers must put into practice to improve their own work and make it easier for their students.

This sort of research is characterised by two basic elements: the object of the research itself, which is rooted in real situations, in the praxis, represented by a precise moment relating to the performance of lessons and to a specific class. The second element is the teachers, the principal players in the research, to the extent that the primary impetus for the study comes from them, and they themselves are the object and the eyes of the investigation. The aim is professional growth, which improves the teaching practices for the entire teaching staff.

²³ For more details see the article entitled *Action research and minority problems*, Journal of Social Issues. Maiden, MA, n°2, Lewin, 1946

Thus, the teacher becomes the researcher, investigating appropriate answers to specific situations. The research process is a bottom-up process, looking from below for solutions to the practical realities of a school, or an educational project, as opposed to abstract or theoretical educational dimensions (Coonan, 2003).

3.2 Action research into the study of the MP/T project's online Italian course at SIE

With regards to the case study considered in this dissertation, it was necessary for the author/tutor to become aware of her own work. By comparing through observation and discussion of some of the activities performed and implemented under different conditions due to the pandemic health restrictions, her own activity with that of the other educational staff. Hence, it was possible to critically examine the activity and the effects of the programs. In order to start action research, the teacher must begin first, from a specific teaching practice, planning a course of work that allows some systematicity and more objectivity to the study. Generally, planning is divided into three main stages: act, observe, evaluate.

The first stage of planning is to choose the object of investigation of the study, to give the appropriate direction to the research, but also to narrow or possibly broaden the field of inquiry. However, this is not always clear from the beginning, which is why Nunan (1989) suggests starting with a general feeling of improving existing practice then asking questions that investigate a possible gap between intentions and practices.

The study undertaken in this thesis was mostly motivated by the desire to investigate the perceptions of Italian L2 teachers and learners at the Ca' Foscari SIE in Venice, Italy, during the course that took place entirely online due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

Thus, an attempt has been made to provide a contemplation of the didactic challenges posed by the health crisis to a project that is already quite complex in its formative guise, analyzing the benefits that may arise from

this methodology. On this basis, a rethinking was done of the didactics for the MP/T project itself.

The questions that motivated the research were the following:

- What were the glottodidactics practices adopted by the MP/T project that took place in online mode due to the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What are perceptions of the teachers and students while teaching and learning Italian L2 in an online context?
- What aspects should be worked on to improve the educational process of the MP/T project ?

These empirical observations triggered what is called 'reflection in action', from which one then arrives at a 'self-reflective enquiry'. Reflection is generally a very important part of the research process because there is often discussion with the rest of the teaching staff, to ensure that there is a full understanding of the research in progress (Coonan, 2003). Sometimes, even the teacher must be able to completely overturn his or her own point of view in order to ignite a far more complex process to accomplish a so-called 'paradigm change' (Easen, 1985).

This was followed by the recognition stage, required to find the information and data needed to more consciously outline and deal with the topic, through consultation of documents and literature concerning the research field of inquiry.

This led to the analysis phase, which involved the collection of 'behavioral' data, through tools chosen in consideration of the objective and the time available.

In general, the preferred methodological orientation for analysis and evaluation in action research is qualitative and interpretive, the data collected being essentially qualitative, although some quantification can sometimes be made use of.

According to Coonan (2003):

«Questa metodologia è ritenuta migliore per il fine che si prefigge un insegnante attraverso la ricerca azione – raggiungere una più penetrante comprensione della situazione nella quale opera e, allo stesso tempo e come conseguenza, crescere professionalmente.»

3.3 Triangulation in the online Italian course for MP/T students at the SIE

Action research is a methodology that is used to understand the nature of teaching and learning procedures. Rather than assessing elements derived from the validity of the educational path, its nature is purely ethnographic. This is compounded by the fact that the data collection methods are, as seen in the previous paragraph, more qualitative than quantitative, so a certain subjectivity persists in information employed in the study. Therefore, these characteristics make it harder to fully understand in detail and investigate the issue at hand (Coonan, 2003).

Thus, the so-called triangulation is applied in the case of this paper, as well as in many other action research instances. This ensures the acquisition of data reflecting multiple points of view, providing more information regarding the situation under examination and, above all, allowing a deeper understanding of the analysed practice. Concretely, triangulation takes place through the use of adopting different data collection methods, involving multiple actors (Coonan, 2003) and thereby providing a deeper examination of the situation.

Indeed, in the action research described in this thesis, two different techniques were employed for information retrieval, questionnaires and recordings.

3.4 The questionnaire

Along with the interview, questionnaire administration is one of the main tools of survey research, defined by Visser, Krosnick and Lavrakas (2000) like:

«a specific type of field study that involves the collection of data from a sample of elements [...] drawn from a well-defined population.»

Survey research was born in Victorian England, thanks to the first surveys conducted by some reformers, and quickly spread, soon becoming one of the most widely used research methodologies in the social sciences (Coonan, 2003). In recent years due to technological and digital improvements, questionnaires have notably become researchers' favorite way to collect data, as they are versatile, easy to design, disseminate, and analyze (Dörnyei, 2003).

Questionnaires allow a blend of both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected through various items.

For instance, there are open-ended questions that involve a broader response in which the respondent can express in their own words their opinions, while closed questions involve answering the question through choosing one of a number of options from a list of possible answers. Closed questions include several types, multiple-choice, checklist, rank order items and rating scales.

In the latter case, currently the most widely used scale is the one devised by Rensis Likert, referred to as the Likert scale, which consists of suggesting response propositions graded on a basis of agreement and disagreement with respect to a specific item.

3.5 The recording

Audio and video recordings may be relied upon both to analyse recording aspects and may usually be used either to analyse aspects related to the language used in the classroom or to better understand teaching practices. They both have the advantage of giving a larger range on which research can be applied to, which can focus on verbal and nonverbal aspects. By transcribing the parts that are interesting to analyse, meaningful aspects can be observed (pattern analysis) for that specific context, but which can also be taken as an interesting cue for possible future research. In addition, this analysis method is not affected by the intermediation of the teacher himself, who often intervenes with comments regarding their intentions during the activity performed, or those of an external observer. It provides a more reliable picture of the situation examined than those obtained through other methodologies.

3.6 The survey

3.6.1 Types of questions

This research data was collected by means of three questionnaires, distributed to MP/T 2020/2021 students of the *Michelangelo* course²⁴, composed of eleven people, and *Leonardo* course²⁵, composed of nine people. The first questionnaire consisted of fourteen questions written in Italian and translated into Chinese, concerning the level of satisfaction with the Italian L2 course, including the various laboratories, tutoring and the language learning tandem, offered by SIE. The second questionnaire submitted to the students consisted of fourteen questions written in Italian and translated into Chinese, concerning their appreciation of the way the course and the supplementary activities were provided through the DAD. Concerning the questionnaire submitted to SIE teachers, regarding both curricular and laboratory activities, with a total of five respondents, they

²⁴The *Michelangelo* course consisted of an A1/A2 level class group

²⁵ The *Leonardo* course consisted of an A0/A1 level class group

were asked to answer nineteen questions concerning the teachers' satisfaction with their expectations and the expected educational results, and also the way in which the activities were proposed, as well as the students' response in this regard.

The questionnaires were formulated by means of multiple-choice questions, yes no questions and others with several possibilities. Some questions used a Likert scale with even numbers, so informants would be prevented from choosing the middle option, including many nuanced possibilities, to avoid respondents from choosing just a convenient reply. In addition, some requirements also demanded, following the closed answer, an explanation of the motivation, in this case, however, optional. Nevertheless, some respondents clarified their opinions, which made it possible to obtain additional qualitative information on top of the quantitative information already collected.

3.6.2 The student satisfaction questionnaire

It was structured in such a way as to allow students to express their opinions on the utility and the attractiveness of the Italian course, but also of the activities used during the Italian course for MP/T project; in addition, the questions required a kind of self-assessment by the student. The respondents were asked to give their opinion on the influence the language course and activities had on their language skills. The purpose of this request was both to make the answers a little easier, by focusing only on certain skills, and to have slightly more targeted results. There were four questions related to the course, while for each extra activity performed there were two to three questions. Finally, the last item asked on a general level the degree to which students appreciated their teachers methodology.

3.6.3 The students online course satisfaction questionnaire

This second questionnaire was structured with some initial questions about their previous DAD experience, followed by questions on the student's perception of their level of learning and attention during the DAD, compared to that required by the face-to-face courses. A sort of awareness-raising request that continued with questions asking the student what difficulties he/she encountered in his/her relationship with the class and teachers through the DAD.

3.6.4 The teachers satisfaction questionnaire

On the other hand, the survey for teachers asked them to compare the positives and negatives of their work with and without the use of ICT, with reference to their own perception of the level of students' learning and attention through this new teaching method. The teachers were asked three final open-ended questions to give them the opportunity to clarify and add information to their answers, improving the quality of the analysis.

3.7 The results

The first two questionnaires proposed to the students were then complemented by the data gathered from the final course satisfaction test, proposed by the SIE itself at the end of the 2020/2021 lessons.

Only nine students answered the final survey provided by the school. This is less than half of the entire group of Chinese learners. The few answers given seem rather unbalanced, as there is always a small percentage disagreeing

with the majority who did not like the activities proposed or the type of teaching offered.

Instead the two free comments were used to request more in depth grammar, an element that the functional-notional communicative approach provides, but proposed as a reflection on language.²⁶

Analysing these facts, it raises a number of questions concerning the motivations that prompted students to refrain from answering an anonymous questionnaire and/or, except in rare cases, to answer it in an apparently hurried and perhaps even superficial manner. Possible reasons could trivially be laziness, or the boredom of having to answer yet another questionnaire whose purpose one does not understand. It is unavoidable, however, that one does not suspect that not answering, and answering what the other person expects, conceals a desire to hide the truth: a negative, or at least non-positive opinion. Particularly, a person whose original culture tends to be basically very respectful of others and to shy away from confrontations, refrains from making explicit and personal comments.

3.8 Integrated questionnaire data analysis

The results of the comparative analysis of the four questionnaires mentioned above revealed some interesting aspects for an evaluative analysis of the online realisation of the MP/T project during the pandemic year.

²⁶ Thanks to the inductive method, introduced into language education by a communicative approach, the learner is induced to construct his/her own learning, to experiment and to solve the language problem from his own discoveries. The learner is called upon to 'do' with the language, to react to new stimuli, to ask himself questions. This is how a reflection on language takes place, thanks to which the student develops and experiences the validity of his cognitive and linguistic constructs through specific didactic techniques aimed at facilitating the sequential progression of the various stages and guiding the student to the conquest of the rule. In this scenario, grammar is the end point of a path and not the starting point.

3.8.1 Familiarity with taking the online courses

First of all, it is necessary to report the fact that 59% of the students had not taken online courses before, and those who had (35%), had done so in China. This shows a lack of familiarity with the e-learning methodology, as reported in the answer to question number 2 of the student survey questionnaire, concerning distance learning. In this question most of the students reported that the Italian course online was between difficult and fairly easy, but rather difficult for someone else.

3.8.2 Use of technological devices

For both students and teachers, there were no major difficulties in using the devices, other than those related to connection. Unanimously the students affirmed that the teachers were competent in technology to teach their subject.

Teachers declared that they have used software other than the one provided by the SIE and that this software has worked and been successful, according to most of the respondents. On the other hand the students declared that they have mostly used the canonical zoom and moodle channels. There were, perhaps, a bias with the comprehension of the question, because despite negative responses to the difficulty of using Zoom and Moodle, as it resulted from SIE questionnaire, they were unanimous in saying that they liked the course and that it met their expectations, someone added that offline courses are more efficient than online courses, anyway.

The comparison made by one teacher from the previous year, in which the course was offered in a blended format, is also relevant: that teacher be made aware beforehand that the course will be offered in only an online mode is stressed as a key factor for a successful outcome. In addition, in 2020/2021 the confidence with technological tools increased both on the part of the teacher and the students, as well as the exercise of a higher resilience in dealing with the dynamics of DAD.

This comment recalls what Celentin, Daloso, Fiorentino (2021), affirmed in their analysis:

«La formazione del docente, sia didattica che digitale, incide fortemente sul grado di soddisfazione percepita in quanto permette la sperimentazione di “altre” modalità didattiche (spesso asincrone), “altri” strumenti di monitoraggio e “altri” meccanismi di feedback, diversi da interrogazioni e compiti costretti a forza dentro il perimetro della webcam (da cui gli studenti cercano di sgattaiolare attraverso tutti gli espedienti a loro disposizione). Le tecnologie non sono quindi definite dagli spazi virtuali che le ospitano ma dalle opportunità pedagogiche che offrono. » Bates (2015) as quoted in Celentin, Daloso, Fiorentino (2021).

3.8.3 The relationship with the teacher

According to the response of only two students, the online methodology made them feel lonely, while the majority said that they felt between normal and quite normal, and that they especially enjoyed the group activities.

For the analysis of these responses, however, it is necessary to know that Chinese education is currently moving towards a hybrid model called collective individualism, which retains the collectivist values of the traditional model, but at the same time recognises a strong individualistic component of the learning. (Zhu, Li, 2020).

Regarding the relationships they established with the teachers, just one student in the questionnaires said they felt it was really difficult, while most

of the students found the online contact with the teacher between problematic and quite problematic.

This tendency could also be linked to the absence of the physical-emotional bond, which is often linked to non-verbal communication, which is totally missing in online courses (Fragai, Fratter, Jafrancesco, 2020). In online the methodology the absence of the physical-emotional relationship is often willingly replaced by the use of chat rooms, break-out rooms or asynchronous working groups, such as tandem, in which the Chinese students feel more comfortable because distance is attenuated and space is left for less filtered interaction, freer of inhibitions of various kinds.

3.8.4 Class interaction and collaboration

Meanwhile, teachers claimed to have perceived a high level of participation, probably due to the fact that students said they enjoyed all the activities, describing them as useful and interesting, including the laboratories and the extra activities. One of the plausible reasons is that the student, especially for the Chinese ones, who usually does not interact during the lesson out of respect for the teacher, as is taught in the Chinese educational system, if protected by the screen, at home or in a familiar environment, feels safer to intervene or to answer to questions (Fragai, Fratter, Jafrancesco, 2020).

In the opinion of the author, another possible motivation is what later became a kind of a pandemic slogan: distance brings us closer. Sharing that feeling of alienation and remoteness from everything and everyone, encouraged us to be more involved with each other and to get together in every possible way, including the rare moments in which you are in contact with other people.

Therefore, a free comment from a teacher noted that one of the positive aspects of online courses was the collaboration between the students. The teacher highlighted the fact that online it was possible to have collaborative activities, which in the classroom would be complex to carry out even asynchronously. So, collaborative activities and task-based learning teaching, in which the student has to use various resources to carry out a project, make the learner really feel active and at the center of the learning process²⁷.

3.8.5 Students' attention

This element would contrast with the students' perception of attention during online courses, which was the same as in face-to-face courses, although 31% of the students claimed to have had a decrease of attention and only 13% declared it was increased.

The teachers' perception was that there was less focus than in the face-to-face course (questions 10-14), although participation (question 13) and individual home study seems to be higher (question 15). This might be caused by a rise in diversion that seems to have increased during online classes, where the use of several devices at the same time is frequent (Fragai, Fratter Jafrancesco, 2020). These distracting elements are closely linked to other factors, such as the duration of the lesson, the activities carried out, the setting of the lesson and, above all, the starting conditions of the group: the composition of classes that are not too large, the rules imposed from the outset by the teachers, the continuous stimulation of the students through an engaging approach.

²⁷ «E' possibile svolgere attività collaborative, che in classe sarebbero complesse da realizzare anche in modo asincrono; questo potrebbe far sentire il discente attivo e al centro, nel caso delle attività collaborative e dell'insegnamento basato sui compiti, in cui deve utilizzare varie risorse per realizzare un progetto». Translation by the author.

According to the SIE student tests results, one of the most appreciated elements of the course turns out to be the ability of the teachers to involve and get all the students to participate and being attentive, which is probably due to the teachers' knowledge of e-learning methodologies, crucial for good management of synchronous online teaching (Fragai, Fratter, Jafrancesco, 2020).

3.8.6 Students' learning

According to the teachers' answers and by comparing the results of CILS test²⁸, the perception of students learning appeared to be worse than the blended modality of the previous year, although the response concerning the students' home study has a clearly positive trend. In question number 11 of the teachers' questionnaire it was 40% higher, 40% the same, and only 20% lower than the previous year.

From the results of SIE tests, most of the students claimed that the course helped them to learn Italian. In addition some students' comments reported that SIE's teachers should give more attention to grammar teaching, perhaps due to a different study approach between the Chinese method and the Western communicative approach²⁹; for someone else, the strong point of the MP/T project was the teachers' competence in teaching their subject throughout the online modality.

²⁸ Session CILS MP/T 2021: 15 enrollments to B1; 1 enrollments to B2; 5 passed the B1; Session CILS MP/T 2020: 42 enrollments to B1; 5 enrollments to B2; 10 passed the B1; 1 passed the B2; Session CILS MP/T 2019: 44 enrollments to B1; 4 enrollments to B2; 21 passed the B1; 2 passed the B2;

²⁹ See Chapter 3 paragraph 3.7 *The Results*

The two polar comments reminds us what Rastelli (2020) said:

«La società cinese potrà essere cambiata, ma lo studente cinese non è cambiato poi molto in questi 15 anni, almeno da un punto di vista delle aspettative e delle attitudini nei confronti del processo di apprendimento linguistico. [...] Se gli studenti cinesi hanno difficoltà con l'italiano non è causa della lingua cinese, ma è perché nessuno può imparare una lingua straniera in dieci mesi, tanto meno la lingua scritta e parlata che dovrebbe dare accesso ai contenuti accademici.»

However, it is remarkable to highlight the fact that the judgment often tending towards positivity and perfection, could be considered a cultural bias, as in Chinese culture there is the habit to put everything in a positive light, in order to not offend anyone (Bai, 2008, as quoted in Scolaro, Canini, 2020).

3.8.7 Instructional design

One of the most significant findings of the teachers' questionnaire was the difficulty in preparing the activities, which, although considered by the majority to be useful or very useful (question number 7), were also considered to be very time-consuming and demanding compared to the preparation of face-to-face lessons (questions number 6 and number 8).

According to the research of Fragai, Fratter, Jafrancesco (2020), most of the teachers report that they spend a greater amount of time preparing lessons online, perhaps related to the fact that the materials teachers used for face-to-face teaching have been completely transformed. Some have chosen to work with pre-existing material, or readapted for the online course, such as e-books, while others have preferred to work with material created *ad hoc* for the class itself, certainly spending more time and effort.

In the view of Celentin, Daloiso, Fiorentino (2021), planning is fundamental to the success of DAD, because it creates a coherent pathway that the student perceives as planning and sharing educational patterns among all the actors involved in the learning process. Thus, a great deal of time devoted to task planning has contributed to the higher degree of satisfaction expressed by the students, especially towards the teaching staff and regarding the online learning process' success. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, there was no correlation between teacher training, instructional design, student participation and the learning outcomes, but it is interesting the comparison with the research carried out by Celentin, Daloiso, Fiorentino (2021). As a matter of fact, their survey has given an opposite answer:

«Lievi correlazioni tra la formazione dei docenti di lingue in e-learning e le abilità sviluppate durante la lezione: i docenti che conoscevano le risorse per l'apprendimento in rete hanno dichiarato di sviluppare la comprensione orale, la fonologia, l'interazione e la produzione orale in misura maggiore rispetto ai docenti con formazioni diverse. Esisterebbe una lieve correlazione tra la performance scolastica degli studenti e lo sviluppo di queste 3 componenti della competenza linguistico-comunicativa».

Chapter 4

The MP/T tutoring experience at *Ca'Foscari* School For International Education

4.1. Tutoring service in the Academic world.

The tutoring service, in line with the Italian national legislation³⁰ as well as with the *Ca' Foscari* University of Venice³¹ Regulations and Statutes, is a service aimed at mentoring and helping students throughout their studies, carried out by senior students or researchers who, by offering their university experience, provide support to other students.

Institutional tutoring programmes for university students are structured in the following formats:

- Informative tutoring: provides an informational service about the didactic organisation, administrative procedures relating to students' careers and the various aspects of university life at *Ca' Foscari*;
- Educational tutoring: is carried out by capable and deserving students. It consists of didactic and supplementary lessons, preparatory and remedial activities, with parallel and complementary interventions to curricular teaching, through tutorials, seminars and workshops, including specific events for international students.

The tutoring supports teachers by helping with tasks such as the preparation of teaching materials, assisting with papers or oral production and also offering students a targeted support and reinforcement service.

³⁰ art. 13 della Legge 19 novembre 1990 n. 341

³¹https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/ateneo/norme_regolamenti/regolamenti/studenti/servizio_tutorato.pdf last referenced on 21/01/2023

The tutor is assisted by the designated offices of the university and is provided with the equipment necessary to carry out their activities. They are also supported by the teachers in the performance of their services regularly, using the knowledge and skills acquired during their training. Tutoring work is regularly paid and evaluated by the manager in charge of implementing the tutoring service at the university, in accordance with the academic authorities' decisions and in compliance with the relevant regulations.

4.2 The MP/T tutoring service 2020/2021 at SIE

The tutoring activity has been a feature of the language course curriculum at *Ca'Foscari* and other universities for several years now, where it is considered an educational aid that supports the universities teaching activity. The tutoring activity of the MP/T 2020/2021 project at the Venice SIE, became even more valuable by helping during the pandemic emergency situation. So much so that its term in support of the students was extended till the end of their Italian Language Course. This was set up in response to the extra demands placed on teachers as a result of the public health policies stemming from the pandemic and the sudden switch to online classes. The aim was to give didactic support to the students, by providing additional instruction or repetition of concepts learned during the normal curricular classes. The tutors worked to clarify any doubts that the students may have encountered either when working individually and to try to introduce students to new methods of language learning.

The author of this thesis, at the end of the studies for her bachelor's degree in Language Sciences, was a teaching tutor for the MP/T 2020/2021 project organised by the SIE from November 2020 until June 2021.

Originally, the assignment was only for the first few months of the year, but due to the growing need for support of the curricular activities during the online course, by both teachers and students, the duration was extended.

Tutoring was held once a week, online, using the Zoom platform for a 2-hour session per group. The groups were divided by language level, the lowest being A1, was the *Leonardo* group, consisting of ten students. The highest level was *Michelangelo*, between an A1 and A2 level, consisting of eleven students³².

The aim was to support the teachers' efforts, by focusing at the beginning on vocabulary enrichment and pronunciation, then later focusing on increasing vocabulary related to the specific disciplines of the future university students, with a focus on enhancing listening skills.

4.3 The method

Every week, before the lessons, the tutor emailed the teachers; giving a short report of the previous week's tutoring activity. The email would describe how the suggested topic had been approached, what materials were used, the type and form of exercises performed and how it was received by the students. Through dialogue, all issues that were encountered were analysed. The teachers in turn provided information on the topics they had worked on during the week in class and those on which they would like to have a more in-depth discussion at the next meeting. Sometimes the teachers themselves would suggest materials to be used (videos, kind of activities to do, etc.). Though more often they gave the tutor total discretion in structuring the activity, simply indicating the elements to focus on. It was often to reinforce concepts that had already been worked on, other times it was to lay the groundwork for the upcoming topic that the teacher would then explore in depth during the lesson.

³² See Chapter 1, paragraph 1.5.4. *The MP/T online tutoring classes*

4.4 First approach to the Chinese students

Upon the teachers' suggestion, before the official start of the tutoring activity, at the end of their lesson, the teachers introduced the tutor to the classes, reminding them of the meeting times and the compulsory nature of the tutoring, reiterating that this would not only be an opportunity to consolidate the concepts learned, but also to reinforce and increase their own knowledge, through a voice different from that of the teachers.

4.5 An analysis from the intercultural perspective

This rather impersonal presentation in the eyes of a person coming from a western style educational system immediately revealed itself to be an excellent example of what was probably the greatest lesson the author learned from her tutoring experience. When teaching and communicating, especially in a multicultural environment, especially if filtered by the computer screen, intercultural communication must be enhanced. This type of competence requires the development of relational skills, an intercultural attitude and adaptability in the face of differences. These are dimensions that cannot be precisely measured, they require intuition to navigate. While some are more naturally adept with these skills, they are able to be taught through a rational and emotional awareness of the phenomenon (Balboni, Caon, 2020).

The tutor is introduced by the teacher to the students and not the tutor simply introducing themselves. This correlates to a very important concept in Chinese school education, that is the value of the teacher in the eyes of the students. Teachers are a symbol of knowledge, as well as a moral example for interpreting society and reality, in the eyes of Chinese students, who then tend to copy and reproduce. (Jin, Cortazzi, 1993).

The second part of this tutor's brief introduction to the students should also be analysed from the perspective of intercultural communication. Aware that the Chinese students might perceive the tutoring activity as a kind of remedial lesson for those who tend to make mistakes or have particular difficulties, the teacher was concerned that they would withdraw in the name of a very important concept in Chinese culture: the face.

4.6 The concept of face

Mianzi or face is a notion closely linked to the collective and highly hierarchical nature of Chinese society in which each person's reputation and prestige in the places they frequent (work, school, family) is fundamental to that individual's identity and social approval. For this reason, students are expected to avoid bringing attention to themselves or risking shame in front of others by trying to perform well at school or work. (Jin, Cortazzi 1996).

Therefore, by mandating that attendance to the tutoring lessons was compulsory, and useful for all levels, the teacher thus removed any possibility of losing face by those who attended the tutoring. Considering the fact that the concept of 'losing face' in China is a source of great embarrassment and shame³³, and has a broad social, intellectual and even moral dimension to it (Jin, Cortazzi, 1996).

The concept of face will also be useful in the interpretation of other attitudes adopted by the Chinese students, as it is linked to cultural biases. At first the tutor/author found this to be disorienting even though she is familiar with teaching online courses to international students and has a fair amount of knowledge in the field of language teaching.

At the beginning of the tutoring sessions students were given the opportunity to freely ask any questions or clarifications on the topics covered during the language course, or in the various workshops they

³³ <http://www.asiablog.it/2016/07/13/mianzi-guanxi-cultura-cinese> last referenced on 21/01/2023

attended, or simply out of curiosity. Most of the time, however, the tutor's question was followed by a long awkward silence, made even longer by the use of the virtual space. As things progressed, the tutor started to ask more targeted questions, inquiring what and how much was left of the topics covered during the curricular lessons. Cross referencing the responses with what the teachers divulged previously to the tutor it was possible to test the extent of the knowledge of the topic. Owing to the increased response, the tutor started using the same method for in-plenum correction of the exercises carried out during the lesson.

The absence of a classroom and especially the lack of a common spatial reference, such as a blackboard which can facilitate the participation of the students during the correction, the tutor decided to use the technique of calling a student by name to correct the exercise out loud.

In correcting any possible mistakes, an effort was made to gradually lead the student from self-correction to sentence revision and finally rewriting the correct sentence for everyone in the common Zoom chat. This was done to minimise any embarrassment.

4.7 The transcription: a representation of the phenomenon for research purposes

Below are transcriptions of some of the significant parts of the recordings that were taken during the tutoring activities. These were collected and archived for research purposes as a representation of data or rather of the phenomena that actually occurred. The type of conversational analysis proposed in this thesis includes ethnographic methods or what is called interactional sociology, in which even notes or memories of interactions are considered important elements for research progress (Pallotti, 1999).

For transcription, the system that was used in this thesis was developed by Jefferson (1978), and it is considered a standard in conversational analysis.

The participants of the transcriptions are noted with a T: tutor, and a generic S: student, as a general way to address the learner.

An orthographic representation of the way the words were actually produced was attempted: trying to bring out at least the most salient characteristics of the Chinese pronunciation with which the learners spoke. In addition to pronunciation, an attempt was also made to bring out the various spoken phenomena that have a certain relevance for the participants, especially in the case of Italian as a foreign language learners, that use non-verbal sounds such as *ah, eh, oh* or laughter, which are rendered with h's in brackets if they are within words, or as *ah, ah* , especially at the beginning of sentences.

To represent volume, capital letters were used for segments pronounced with a higher than normal volume, two small circles (°°) for segments pronounced with a lower volume. Volume is distinguished from emphasis, which is indicated by underlining. A sound or a word can be emphasised in many ways, with variations in volume, intonation, rhythm, voice quality. Though it is important to remember that the attribution of the 'emphatic' character relies on the analyst's judgement and cannot easily be traced back by measurable parameters (Pallotti, 1999). Concerning the use of intonation, the normal punctuation marks were used. The comma was used for suspended intonation, the dot for descending intonation, the question mark for ascending intonation and the exclamation mark for an animated tone.

In the conversations, when the time between speaking turns stretches, the participants mark it as a silence, which can be noted as a pause, in the transcription. The pauses are then transcribed in seconds and fractions of seconds, but without being chronometrically measured. They are merely perceived seconds within the conversation, in accordance with the conversational rhythm in that particular segment of the speech.

The real seconds should only be used as a rough guideline. However, the important thing is always that the reader understands the extent of the silence which can be short, medium, long, or interminable, with respect to that particular conversation.

Short pauses are usually indicated with a dot in brackets. Then there are the intra-shift pauses, noted on the same line as the speech, which occur at points where the shift is not supposed to be over, and their responsibility is then attributed exclusively to the speaker, as the other would not be allowed to intervene.

If, on the other hand, a pause falls at a point where the turn could be concluded, it is called inter-turn break. The silence can be broken either by the previous speaker or by his interlocutor, who would be allowed to speak: to show also the fact that such silence depends on both, the pause is transcribed on a separate line, between turns, even if it is then the first speaker who starts speaking again.

The overlaps are represented in order to show the starting point by aligning the overlapping sentences on the page and also indicating the ending point with the transcription of the new sentence on the new page (Pallotti, 1999).

4.8 Transcriptions of selected frames of the tutoring activity

4.8.1. First two transcriptions: analysis of intervention

Following the transcript of a frame taken during the tutoring activity carried out on 26/04/2021 with the *Michelangelo* class. It exemplifies the fact that good teaching practice requires contextualising linguistic psychological and pedagogical coordinates underlying language education (Della Putta, 2020), especially when the teaching activity is filtered through the screen.

The activity was aimed at vocabulary enrichment and memorising some adjectives related to descriptions of character, which the students had already encountered in previous activities. They were asked to give a definition of these qualities using the formula: “Una persona che” to encourage the use of the relative pronoun and/or the possible formulation of a definition.

For correction, the tutor asked the various students present online to read out their own definition, possibly correcting or modifying it to use the above formula.

T-Andiamo a correggere l'ultimo esercizio che ci mancava da correggere ieri. Vorrei sentire che cosa avete scritto voi per descrivere, per definire una persona SENSIBILE°. OK, cominciamo da Martina, Martina com'è una persona sensibile?

S-Oh(.) è triste facilmente

T-E' triste facilmente. Scrivo nella chat, va bene, così ce l'abbiamo tutti. Sì? La frase sarebbe: “è una persona”, ma questo possiamo metterlo tra parentesi, perché non è necessario dirlo- typing - che è triste facilmente!

OK, Aurora che cosa hai scritto tu per sensibile?

S-Sensibile: ho scritto Mi piace aiutare gli altri

T-Ok, allora (.) può essere. Siccome stiamo parlando sempre di una persona, si dice

(0.5)

S-Qualcuno si piace aiutare gli altri.

T-Allora è un po' diversa la costruzione italiana, te la scrivo perché è un po' difficile

"E' una persona a cui piace aiutare gli altri"

Si scrive così, non vi spiego perché, perché è un po' complicato, però ricordatevi che questo A CUI vuol dire A QUESTA PERSONA, è un pronome, si chiama così (.) "a cui piace aiutare gli altri".

Bene anche questa definizione. Saverio, che cosa hai messo per sensibile?

S-E' emotivo.

T-Ahn, ok. E' una persona tra parentesi S-una persona emotiva. Ah, scusa scusa

(0.7)

T-Dimmi Saverio, scusa, non ho capito.

This latter interaction between tutor and student and the clear embarrassment felt by the second students demonstrates the very high esteem with which the tutor and their role are held in managing groups rather than individual students (Hofstede, 1991).

This sense of respect for the teacher leads Chinese students to rarely intervene in class, preferring the teacher to question them, perceiving the making requests as a kind of questioning of authority and possibly a challenge or demonstration of disrespect for authority (Jin, Cortazzi, 1996).

From the same tutoring recording of 26/4/21, it is also interesting to analyse the following frame:

S-E' una persona che non (0.3) Che non (0.4) ahn (0.4). non piace (0.4) ahn (0.4) no (0.4)

T-Dai, prova Elva, dai (0.4) hai capito, no, che cosa vuol dire gelosa? Prova, dai, prova a dirmelo tu con le tue parole, se hai capito cosa vuol dire gelosa.

(1.3)

T-Sai, geloso è una persona che controlla sempre, che non si fida, una persona insicura (0.5) prova a dirmelo tu

(1.0)

S- Quando una persona non ha non ha molto sicurezze, è gelosa.

T-Ok, ok. Quando una persona non ha molte sicurezze (0.5) però manca una parte (0.5) e non si fida degli altri. Ok?

Vediamo il vocabolario che cosa ci dice, vediamo, questo ragazzi, ricordatevi di questo Treccani³⁴, perché è un dizionario molto buono italiano. Se avete bisogno di qualche definizione, questo è il vocabolario online migliore. Vediamo, Elva, che cosa ci dice ...

In this quick banter, a key element emerges, one that highlights the difference between the Chinese and western approaches to scholastic education. The Chinese students intervene in class only after adequate reflection; first they look for answers in the book, as in the recording dialogues, the student searches for confirmation either from their notes or

³⁴ <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia> last referenced on 21/01/2023

online. This highlights the fact that Chinese culture emphasises mental rather than oral activity. Only once they are sure of their answer, do they speak. In general, before turning to the teacher, the Sinophones students look for answers in the book, then from their classmates, only if this last attempt fails will they ask the teacher, but in a separate venue and not in front of the class (Jin, Cortazzi, 1996).

The reasons for this type of attitude, apart from being related to respect for the teacher, are also attributed to the aforementioned issue of losing face. Less-than-thoughtful questions, or incorrect answers, could foment a kind of derision from other students and thus cause them to lose face (Jin, Cortazzi, 1996), essentially losing one's status, credibility and the esteem of peers within a group.

As a result, in order not to have to directly ask for clarification during the tutoring activity, the Chinese students preferred to write a personal email to ask the tutor some questions or to request the correction of some extra exercises.

There is another possible reason why Chinese students tend to intervene only at the teacher's request and it is because in Chinese society, the individual is expected to contribute to society and satisfy its needs. Therefore, the act of asking questions, of any kind, is seen by some as a waste of time for other students, diverting the teacher's discourse (Jin, Cortazzi, 1996).

However, it is necessary to emphasise how, thanks to the use of videoconferencing platforms for online lessons, the mode of intervention in the virtual language classroom has changed, whether it is for Chinese students or another user. In a Zoom meeting, the teacher is forced to say the name of the student to whom he or she wants to yield the floor. This is done randomly, as opposed to what happened previously in class. During the in-person lessons, the teacher asks only a small group of students to speak, the so-called teacher's action zone. With the introduction of distance education and the change in the concept of the space and fruition of the

lesson, the layout of what is defined as the teacher's action zone, the group of learners that the teacher generally tends to interact with most during the lesson, has been redesigned (Savoca, 2022). Hearing oneself called by name and the fact that this happens with all participants definitely reduces the risk of the teacher only engaging some learners, leaving out those that are shy. In addition it gives greater motivation to participate actively, even for the students who tend to be more isolated, and might then experience online teaching passively. In this way, even those who in the face-to-face mode did not feel recognized, because they were not part of the teacher's zone of action, became even more engaged.

Finally, in the reported frame, the tutor suggests researching further the meaning of the word in question by consulting the Treccani encyclopaedia online, immediately after the student's answer, so as to have a comparison. This can be attributed to the fact that in the western approach to language learning, learner-centred activity and classroom interaction are emphasised, and verbal activity is indulged, as mentioned above.

4.8.2 Third Transcription: representation of change

The analysis of a sequence taken from the recording during one of the last tutoring sessions shows that in the latter part of the year, there was an educational shift in terms of the tutor's didactic approach and the response of the students to the activities.

The recording highlights what Zhou and Todman (2008) and later Bangou and Bourdet (2010) defined as the third stage of the encounter between two learning cultures in a language classroom. The convergence of two different linguistic and cultural approaches generally involves three adaptive stages: at first, the teachers utilise activities and group management methods typical of the host institution's glottodidactic orientation, that often collide with the learning patterns familiar to the neophyte learners. A case in point is the research by Chiapedi, Voltan, Visigalli (2017), on Italian teachers'

perceptions of the methods employed by Sinophone learners in Italy. The results showed that learners who were more 'aligned' to certain methodological components achieved better results. The result initially is discomfort in the classroom (Ely, 1986), which often causes motivational lapses in teachers, early course drop-outs, low cognitive activation during activities and a general feeling of distrust in the instruction received. In the second period, teachers search for explanations for the behaviour and difficulties with the students. This leads to further in-depth research and peer group discussions to solve the problems that have arisen during the teaching activities. Usually, students, especially in a university context, also question what the requirements are in the new education system.

In the third stage, the two approaches to education come together. The teachers suggest ways of working that are more familiar to those the learners are used to. Who, for their part, are more encouraged to work according to their 'new' teachers' methods. However, the unease is not always settled, and efforts are made to balance the different points of view with adequate adaptation of practices (Della Putta, 2021).

The frame taken during the recording of the meeting that occurred on 3/5/2021 with the MP/T students of the *Michelangelo* class demonstrates, first, how the class group has accepted and moved towards the methods of the tutor, but also in cooperation with their peers and how a mutual receptivity to dialogic exchange among participants can be identified. A subject of special interest to the participants since it affects them personally is that of the university and they are very interested in learning about it through the guidance of an insider to that world. Due to the Covid-19 health emergency, except in rare cases, none of them had been able to have contact with colleagues or people from the academic environment who could show them how that world works.

T-Allora oggi voglio cominciare con un brainstorming, cos'è un brainstorming?

Un insieme di idee. Allora per esempio Saverio, se io ti dico UNIVERSITA', tu che parola mi dici?

S-Univelsità?

T-Sì, la prima parola che ti viene in mente

S-Ah(0.5)ammissione. AMMISSIONE! a-mi-ssione

T-Adriana la prima parola che ti viene in mente con università diversa da AMMISSIONE

S-mmm(.) facoltà

T-facoltà, ok. Tutti sanno il significato di facoltà, vero? (0.5) Martina.

S-Docente

T-Aurora?

S-Vooto

T-Voto.(0.5)Jessie, ciao jessie.

S-Ciao, buongiorno

T-La prima parola che ti viene in mente se ti dico UNIVERSITA'

S-Discipline, disciplina

T-Luigi, la prima parola che ti viene in mente se ti dico università

S-Dipr-dipartimento

T-Ok. Chi manca ho chiamato tutti? Adesso più difficile. Una parola collegata ad AMMISSIONE

S-Scusi, la parola(.) con questa parola una fresa?

T-No, un'altra parola però legata non a università, ma ammissione

S-L'esame di ammissione

T-Esame(.)Una parola legata a facoltà, Adriana

S-Facoltà di medicina

T-Medicina,ok.(.)Una parola legata a docenti, Martina

S-Studenti, gli studenti

T-Ok, una parola legata a voto, me lo dice Aurora

S-Prendele un bel voto

T-Prendere, ok. Jessie, anzi no, chi era Luigi che mi ha detto disciplina?(.)Luigi, una parola legata a disciplina. S-No, sono io

T-ah, sei tu disciplina Jessie?(.)Allora Jessie, dai!

S-Matematica

T-Ok. E invece Luigi, dipartimento

S-Dipartimento di chimica

T-Sempre più difficile. Saverio, una parola legata a esame di ammissione?

S-Esame di ammissione di conservatorio.(.)Ah(.)forse, nononono, pianoforte.

T-Ok, qual è il collegamento Saverio, non capisco. Che collegamento c'è?

S-L'esame di, l'esame di(.)ah(.)per pianoforte di ammissione

T-Ok, allora mettiamo CONSERVATORIO?

(0.7)

S-Ahn, si. Conselvatolio

T-Poi abbiamo facoltà di medicina, di chi era, non mi ricordo più, Adriana?

S-Eh(.)Non(h)so

T-E' difficile, è lo so lo so. Dai, pensateci, pensateci un attimo.(.) Legato a medicina

(0.6)

S-Archi(0.4)Archide(0.4)Archide-tura. Archidatura

T-Ok, però devi dirmi il collegamento, Adriana(.) Dimmi che collegamento fai?

S-E' università(h)

T-E' un tipo di facoltà

(0.9)

S-Non(h)so

T-Si o no?

S-(0.5)Ahn, Può ripetere?

T-Architettura, come medicina, sono due tipi diversi di Facoltà. Giusto?

S-Eh, sì

T-Ok, va bene(.)Poi chi abbiamo Martina: docenti, studenti e poi?

S-GLASE

T-Classe, ok.Ok. Aurora

(1.3)

S-Scusi scusi, ahm, plendere un bel voto di matematica

T-Ok, ok disciplina matematica, Jessie

S-Logica

T-Ok. Dipartimento chimica, Luigi

S-(0.7)ehm, chimica industriale

(0.6)

T-Ok, ok. Adesso ognuno di voi pensa a una due o tre frasi dove usa queste parole, ok?

Based on this analysis, it can be observed that students who have already learned a portion of the applicable vocabulary for the context, are more likely to perform a pre-task such as brainstorming, which, according to Ingrassia (2014) should be avoided or minimised.

However, learning vocabulary by memorisation is one of the crown jewels of the Chinese educational systems approach to language. In this context, an attempt was made to build on their prior knowledge in order to expand their vocabulary, without limits due to sentence construction, but simply by

association of ideas. While the activity progressed, the tutor showed the results by way of a kind of tree diagram, displaying all the ideas that came up on the shared screen. The implementation of certain analytical activities, often necessary at the beginning of a task, such as tables, diagrams or graphs, which are useful for reinforcing the language learned by Chinese students, involves the production of written as well as oral activities. (Ingrassia, 2014). This is a further technique adopted by the tutoring activity to bring the principles of modern Western glottodidactics closer to the Chinese speaking public.

T-Volevo chiedervi un'altra cosa, allora se io vi dico (0.8) PIANO DI STUDI, cosa mi dite?

Non lo so se voi ce l'avete in Cina il piano di studi, ma in Italia, all'università, ma anche al conservatorio, c'è il PIANO DI STUDI. Chi è che sa che cos'è?

(1.0)

Aurora, lo sai?

S-Ehm(0.6) Secondo me è: studi lento(°°)

T-E', scusami? non ho capito?

(0.6)

Studi? Non ho sentito proprio, Aurora

S-Ahn, scusi: lento

T-Lento? Piano intendi quello?

No è un altro piano, è un altro significato della parola piano di stu...Piano, vuol dire lento. ok?

S-Live-livello

T-Nnnnnnnnoooooo

(0.7)

S-Aptame (°°)

T-Chi lo sa. Qualcuno lo sa, ragazzi?

(0.8) c'è qualcuno che lo sa? Martina, Adriana?

(0.5)

S-Per favore di nuovo!

T-Ok, il piano di studi vedete che l'ho scritto qua, lo vedete scritto nel mio...nel mio computer, credo, no?

Si, ve lo ingrandisco.

Questo. Piano di studi, questa parola, l'avete mai.. S-Questo piano S1-Piano è class S-Questo piano è grande, ehm grande

T-Non ho capito Saverio, puoi ripetere?

S-Ehm,Gradi

T-Gradi, cosa intendi gradi?

S-Ehm,grade grade (0.8) grado Grado

T-Ahn, ok. Allora è ve... avete ragione, anche quello che ha detto Aurora. Piano vuol dire tante cose

Vuol dire livello, grado. Vero!

Vuol dire piano, lento.

Ma c'è anche un altro significato di piano di studi

S-Dice su internet, io ho cercato T-NOO(h)cercare Jessie! Ahahaha, volevo che ci arrivassimo da soli!S-Ahah

T-Ve lo faccio vedere qual è il piano di studi?

Io ce l'ho perché sto finendo l'università anche se insegno già e sono un po' vecchia, ma sto ancora studiando perché voglio completare la mia formazione.

Vi faccio vedere il mio piano di studi.

Attenti!

(2.3)

Parto direttamente dal mio così capite bene di cosa si tratta.

It is clear from the second part of the recording that the class is now fully engaged in the topic. Therefore, an invitation to answer a question of the same type used previously, even those in written form, is immediately taken up by the students who try to use the acquired knowledge to answer it orally. Reflection on the language is then carried out automatically and autonomously. It is only after several attempts that someone utilises an online dictionary, by contrast, when the tutoring started in the year, this action came immediately. When a student would utilise the PC to find the answer they would be mildly rebuffed, by the tutor who would then reiterate amid the group's laughter that the purpose of the task was to try and deduce the meaning of the expression by using their own knowledge.

In having access to all the content on the web, the teacher can show task solutions to the students and share their personal curriculum on the Zoom platform.

It is through the use of the online platform that the tutor can show a *realia* of fundamental importance in the future life of the students. Through this the tutor can not only clearly and efficiently explain the meaning of the expression, but also provide the students with very useful information for their academic career. At the same time, the task provides further vocabulary and knowledge input to the MP/T learners. As can be seen in the subsequent questions the students asked the tutor in the following recording.

From the analysis of this frame we can deduce what has already been explained by Celentin, Daloiso and Fiorentino (2021):

«La didattica delle lingue ha sempre intrecciato però un dialogo molto proficuo con il mondo delle tecnologie per l'educazione linguistica e con il web, relazione che è tornata utile in un'occasione come quella dell'emergenza sanitaria. In particolare il ricorso alla tecnologia nell'ambito della competenza linguistico-comunicativa è un ambito esplorato da molti anni nella linguistica educativa attraverso e-learning, blended learning, flipped classroom, mobile learning. [...] Tra le componenti della competenza linguistica che si possono sviluppare tramite la didattica online ci sono la competenza fonologica e la competenza lessicale, ma il web offre ora una serie di strumenti per lavorare anche su altre componenti della competenza comunicativa.»

Indeed, again citing Celentin, Daloiso and Fiorentino (2021):

«In DAD l'insegnante si confronta con un uso autentico della lingua, in quanto usa la lingua per parlare della lingua stessa e può sfruttare questo contenitore per sviluppare in modo efficace la competenza linguistico comunicativa degli studenti, senza dover ricreare artificialmente contesti esterni di apprendimento.»

Chapter 5

Conclusions

5.1 In conclusion

As examined in the previous chapters, this study set out to investigate how the release of the online Italian course for the MP/T project, resulting from the restrictions imposed in response to the health emergency in 2020-2021, has emphasised even more the importance of an educational pathway based on a continuous dialogue between teachers, teaching assistant staff and students.

The research further highlighted the value of the teacher as a key figure in the process of teaching/learning a foreign language, especially when filtered through computer screens.

In analysing the results of the satisfaction questionnaires submitted to students and teachers of the MP/T 2020-2021 project, among the most notable findings that emerged was an increase in the workload that teachers needed to do during DAD, possibly due to the fact that DAD teachers are required to have a more diverse skill set.

Indeed, during the year of the pandemic, teachers in the MP/T project not only had to be well versed in their subject matter and the glottodidactic methodologies to be used, they also had to know how to make the most of the resources and potential offered by technology.

According to the metaphor of Balboni (2008), the proper use of technology depends on the correct management of relationships, content, time, modality and purpose decided by the teacher within a context where the focus is always on the learner.

Thus, teachers embraced content and revised approaches and methodologies as needed, to adapt to the culture of learners and the educational system of their origin, pooling all their skills in the areas of technology-literacy, organisation and, last but not least, empathy.

In the final part of the thesis, the direct experience of the author of this thesis, who worked as a tutor for the MP/T project at the SIE in Venice, was discussed. In order to demonstrate and corroborate what was learned during the author's service, sequences of recordings of tutoring activities were examined.

The first lesson learned from the tutoring experience was that the most important thing when dealing with a class, whether online or in-person, is to adopt a cross-cultural attitude, which starts from a willingness and openness to differences, on the part of both teachers and students, and moves up to negotiating meanings³⁵. Only through an exchange in which both actors of the learning process are willing to question their own beliefs, cultures and others, is it possible to co-construct a common discourse.

Avoiding errors due to implicit cultural biases, which can be found in different methodologies and approaches to foreign language teaching/learning, as well as an intrinsic part of the cultural background belonging to the teacher and student respectively, is necessary to achieve the common goal which is learning Italian.

The analysis of conversations from a number of language tutoring classes revealed a major element in the success of online tutoring to Chinese students: the methodologies applied and the actors who make these methodologies useful for language acquisition are what really made a difference.

As was already anticipated by Celentin, Daloiso, Fiorentino (2021): technological skills are helpful to the teacher in overcoming difficulties or improving their teaching and evaluative practices, but what is actually essential is a solid educational relationship between learner and teacher,

³⁵ For more details Balboni, Caon (2020)

even and especially with the distance that necessarily comes out with the use of DAD.

All teaching is efficacious only if the relationship between the teacher and his or her student is strong and stable.

New resources that technology has supplied us, undoubtedly, play a central role in distance education, but they are not what establishes its success or failure.

What is most important is the motivation that leads an MP/T Chinese student, from the PC on the desk of their bedroom, to attend for 3 or 4 hours a day the online Italian L2 course, which will grant them access to that highly desired University and to finally realise their dream of living and studying in Italy.

Who better than the teacher who has an excellent relationship with the learner, to act as a perfect motivator. Encouraging, lesson after lesson, each day more and more, the student to overcome difficulties, even if it is a challenging path?

A series of task-based activities were carried out to implement vocabulary related to topics relevant to students. It was expected that to complete the task learning by rote would be employed, emphasising the repetitive learning nature of Chinese teaching practices. It turned out that by bringing Western teaching methodologies closer to the glottolinguistic approaches more prevalent in the Chinese school system, students felt more engaged with the activity.

According to the lesson transcripts, the increased participation, partly due to the choice of a topic of major interest related to their future but also through the use of real sources, led the students to reflect on the language autonomously. Thus leading to the complete accomplishment of the inductive path of language acquisition. This suggests that, online as well as offline, the lesson can be interesting and stimulating if the teacher has full awareness of the target audience that they are addressing. The different ways in which his or her students approach language, their abilities and

limitations, their interests and needs. Secondly, it is necessary for the teacher to be able to articulate discourse by different channels of expression, managing communication time in a dynamic and engaging form.

To accomplish this, the teacher must be able to continuously challenge and exchange views, not only with their own students, but also with the rest of the teaching staff, or with those who assist in the teaching activity, in order to carry out a thought-filled project. This will allow for a well-considered layout, in which spaces are well organised and in which students are assigned a role appropriate to their learning process.

5.2 Weakness points of the MP/T project, online and offline

Regardless of the type of course delivery there are certainly a series of other factors underpinning the MP/T project that would need to be revised. As in some articles in the collection of Rastelli (2021)³⁶ not only facilitating the process of Chinese students' access to Italian universities, but also to improve the teaching quality of the Italian course itself.

It was debated for several years if it was necessary to reform the recruitment of MP/T students. Possibly to have more orientation activities before their departure, the inclusion of curricular content in the syllabus. The requirement of adequate language skills preceding the arrival of Chinese students in Italy, but also the need for a commitment to lifelong learning that does not end with the program, but continues and is integrated into the chosen curriculum. This would effectively be a modification of the aims of the MP/T Italian Language course, which is supposed to be a preparatory course that leads to a future academic career. Towards which would necessitate greater awareness, both from a linguistic and content point of view, as well as didactically and culturally speaking.

With DAD, it has become essential to design language teaching/learning pathways that take advantage of the resources offered by new technologies,

³⁶Bagna, Scibetta (2021); Castronovo, Voltan (2021); Della Putta (2021)

capture the potential of virtual space, and actively involve teachers in their guiding role toward effective learning and students no longer seen in the user/learner mode but invested in the role of social agents (Picardo, North, 2020). Foreign language teacher training and increased student awareness, become indispensable elements to the effectiveness of online language education.

5.3 Suggestions

From this study, critical issues emerged independent of the method by which the course was provided. Reflecting on some of these could be helpful in the future for those contemplating possibly offering an online course.

The first among them is that task-based activities, which allow learners to work independently on real tasks and which generally encourage group cooperation and critical thinking, trying to make the learners reproduce real communicative and interactive situations, based on the needs imposed by the task resolutions, are very effective to use online for Chinese learners, and are helpful in creating motivation, tightening the class group, and making it more performative.

This modality is generally considered a difficult, if not risky, methodology because students may feel disoriented by an educational proposal diametrically opposed to that of their home country (Lai, Lin, 2015). In a classroom of Chinese students, it is not possible to insistently propose practices typical of the communicative and humanistic/affective approach, but on the other hand, teaching cannot completely veer its course toward more formalistic approaches that are part of Chinese classroom culture either. Neither of these choices would involve a deviation from scientific and operational principles that have been studied for years by glottodidactic experts, from which good language teaching cannot be dispensed with. However, by grading the glottodidactic intervention and bringing it closer to the more popular methodologies in China, the student perceives this pattern with less stress and they are more stimulated to take action to

solve the task, thereby also affecting the overall mood of the class group, which in turn is motivated to participate.

In conclusion we can use the words of Porcelli (1994) still valid for defining a good educational intervention:

«Avere presenti le coordinate pedagogiche, psicologiche e linguistiche che costituiscono la struttura profonda della glottodidattica significa allora non tanto avere un metodo, ma piuttosto essere sensibili al discorso metodologico. In questa prospettiva non si è mai padroni di un metodo preconfezionato e da applicare, ma si sviluppano le competenze professionali riflessive che presiedono all'organizzazione dell'intervento didattico».

The second implication from this study is that a combination of online and in-person classes can be a good compromise for this type of project. For instance, providing the first part of the course online and the second part in person, would give students the opportunity to progressively experience the encounter with our culture, giving them sufficient time to become aware of the new methodologies and the new culture they are experiencing. Giving them the tools to later handle the challenges when dealing with Italy at large. According to what Rastelli (2021) says, there is a large body of research that has led toward the idea that it is not so much the typological distance between languages that makes the learning process more complex for MP/T students, but rather it is what the Chinese learner does in China and in Italy that makes the tasks feasible or impractical (Rastelli, 2021).

Therefore, starting with the very basics of Italian language by being taught by a native speaker is definitely a good stepping stone in immersion, including and above all cultural one, into that idiom.

This method is certainly different from what is offered in an Italian language course in China, which allows a slower and smaller immersion in the studied language. Furthermore, even from the teacher's point of view,

having time to get to know the learners and their *modus operandi* toward language learning allows the teacher to have a better preliminary screening of the prospective learner.

In the second part of the course, the teacher should be able to decide in accordance with the students' progress, whether to stop and insist on the teaching of the basic structures or to pursue the learning path provided by the syllabus. This would also ensure a certain homogeneity in the level of the MP/T classes and the student would be able to advance in language acquisition until he or she reaches the CALPs necessary to access the university.

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