

Chinese Students' Development of Textual Competence in L2 Italian: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract:

The majority of studies conducted about Chinese students' acquisition of L2 Italian since the 1990s have mainly focused on the analysis of learners' phonological and morphosyntactic competences, usually adopting contrastive methods (Valentini 1992 and Banfi 2003, *inter alia*). More recent studies have been carried out from the point of view of applied linguistics (Rastelli 2010) and input processing (Rastelli 2013). However, textual and meta-textual competences of this category of learners have not yet been deeply investigated, even though the importance of such competences has already been acknowledged within important documents of language policy, e.g. the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR 2001). This article is divided into two main sections. After preliminary theoretical considerations about some key-concepts, I will first emphasize, according to a theoretical background (Scalise and Ceccagno 2005; Diadori and Di Toro 2009 *inter alia*), the role played by some factors in slowing down, as well as in causing difficulties to Chinese students' development of textual competence in L2 Italian. Secondly, I will analyze the results of a corpus-based cross-sectional study, the purpose of which was to investigate some aspects involved in the development of Chinese University students' textual skills in Italian as a Second Language.

Keywords: L2 Italian, Textual Competence, Text Coherence and Cohesion

1. Introduction

The number of Chinese people residing in Italy has constantly increased since the end of the nineteen eighties (ISTAT 2013). The Chinese population in Italy was composed of about 70.000 people in 2002 (ISTAT 2003), about

180.000 people in 2010 (ISTAT 2010) and about 223.000 people at the beginning of 2013 (ISTAT 2013). This rising number, as well as the fact that the Chinese have represented for several years one of the top five nationalities among migrants in Italy from EU and non-EU countries, confirms that Italy is one of the most chosen European destinations by Chinese migrants (Ceccagno 2009).

The Italian areas characterized by massive presence of Chinese overseas are the region of Lombardy (especially the city of Milan and its surroundings), the region of Tuscany (in particular the provinces of Prato and Florence), the city of Rome and the Vesuvian area near Naples (ISTAT 2013).

From the perspective of Italian as a Second Language teaching a new, heterogeneous category of learners with specific communicative needs has become increasingly significant.

Among Chinese learners of Italian as a Second Language, university students constitute a considerable group. Thanks to international agreements signed between Italian and Chinese universities, and particularly thanks to the “Marco Polo Program” started in 2006 (about which more detailed information will be given in the following Section), the number of university students as well as exchange students from China has sharply risen in the past few years.

From a social point of view this phenomenon has considerably contributed to changing some diffused social representations and negative social stereotypes systematically attributed to Chinese migrants by the hosting society and by Italian media.

From the point of view of the research about Italian as a Second Language teaching and the production of specific teaching materials, this phenomenon has likewise had a strong impact.

The first research studies about Chinese learners of Italian as a Second Language (ISL) were published starting from the early 1990s (the most relevant ones were Valentini 1992 and Banfi 2003), focusing in particular on learners’ development of morphosyntactic abilities both in class and spontaneous contexts, usually through contrastive methods.

Afterwards, some innovative studies were conducted from the point of view of Second Language Acquisition in its different dimensions (Diadori and Di Toro 2009), of applied linguistics (Rastelli 2010) and of cognitive linguistics, with particular regard to the analysis of the input processing (Rastelli 2013).

However, relevant works on the textual dimension (as well as on socio-pragmatics and intercultural pragmatics) in Chinese learners’ acquisition process of ISL have not been conducted yet. With regard to other languages, on the contrary, considerable studies have already been carried out: among all, as regards this learning dimension of Chinese students of English as a Foreign Language, the study by Deng, Chen and Zhang (2014) is worthy of mention.

The current work describes the main results of a cross-sectional and corpus-based research study about Chinese students’ development of textual

competence in L2 Italian conducted in 2014 within “Marco Polo – Turandot” courses at the University for Foreigners of Siena, Italy, and taking into consideration also the “GranVALICO” and “VALICO” learners’ corpora (about which further information will be provided in the next section). The study is mainly divided into two parts: one is about the analysis of a corpus of texts, the other one is about the evaluation of Chinese ISL students’ perceptions of the importance of the dimension of text production in their acquisition pathways.

1.1 The “Marco Polo – Turandot Program” and the “VALICO” Learners’ Corpus

The “Marco Polo Program” (*Make Boluo jihua* 马可波罗计划) is the result of a bi-lateral agreement between Italian and Chinese governments signed in 2006, then modified in 2009 adding the “Turandot Program” (*Tulanduo jihua* 图兰朵计划). The main aim of this program is to allow Chinese students to spend a period of at least six months within an Italian university in order to attend L2 Italian intensive courses, with the purpose of consequently starting a degree course in their disciplines in Italy. The difference between the “Marco Polo” and “Turandot” programs is that the former is mainly addressed to students who would like to specialize in scientific subjects, while the latter is mainly addressed to students who would like to specialize in arts and music.

Since the beginning of this project the University for Foreigners of Siena has always attracted a high number of “Marco Polo - Turandot” students (see Table 1): from 2007, the year of beginning of the project, to 2014 the total number has sharply increased, reaching 945 learners.

*Table 1. The increasing presence of Chinese students in Siena since the year of inauguration of the “Marco Polo – Turandot Program” (source: statistical data of the CLUSS centre, University for Foreigners of Siena)

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013	2014
Chinese students in Siena	110	98	202	204	459	753	945

The relevant presence of these “temporary migrants” in Siena and in small towns in its neighbourhood has transformed the province from a territory where Chinese presence was one of the lowest in Tuscany to a place with a considerable presence of Chinese people,¹ as well as a place of innovation with regard to Chinese migration to Italy, in just several years.

¹ For further information about Chinese presence in Tuscany, especially in the district of Prato, see Ceccagno (1997, 2003, and 2004); Dei Ottati (2009 and 2013); Berti, Pedone and Valzania (2013).

“GranVALICO” and “VALICO” (“Varietà Apprendimento Lingua Italiana Corpus Online”, or “Online Corpus of the Learning Varieties of the Italian Language”) are on-line learners’ corpora containing a relevant number of written performances carried out by ISL students with different nationalities, belonging to different age groups, and with different levels of language and communicative competence. Such corpora, gathered and put online by researchers of the University of Turin starting from 2003, and already consulted and investigated for several studies about ISL learners, represent a precious resource both for teachers who want to reflect about how to use electronic corpora in their L2 Italian courses and for researchers who want to conduct corpus-driven and corpus-based studies.

2. *Theoretical Remarks about some Key-Concepts*

Before describing the adopted methodologies and the main findings of this study, it is particularly important to focus on theoretical considerations about some key-concepts that are strictly related to the investigated dimension of Chinese students’ ISL learning, that is, their textual competence.

First, since one of the purposes of this study is to measure some specific aspects of the observed learners’ textual competence, a brief account of some definitions and connotations of the concepts of “text” and “textual competence” will be introduced.

Afterwards, taking into consideration the importance of the role played by “common ground construction” in the development of textual competence in an L2, a short section will be dedicated to the differences between written and oral communication in terms of common ground construction. Finally, some remarks about the notions of “topic accessibility” and “topic continuity” will be also provided.

2.1 *The Concepts of “Text” and “Textual Competence in a Second Language”*

Among the numerous, different connotations that have been given about the concept of “text” in linguistics (Werlich 1975; Givón 1983, *inter alia*), I agree with Palermo (2013) who defines such a concept as follows:

qualsiasi enunciato o insieme di enunciati – realizzato in forma orale, scritta o trasmessa – dotato di senso, che, collocato all’interno di opportune coordinate contestuali, realizza una funzione comunicativa [...] Qualsiasi espressione linguistica, effettivamente avvenuta e contestualizzata, è un testo, anche se formata da una sola parola.

(Palermo 2013: 22)²

² English translation by the author: “any meaningful expression or set of expressions – realized orally, through writing or transmitted –, which, collocated within an appropriate context, realizes a communicative function [...]. Any linguistic expression, concretely happened and contextualized, even if composed by one single word, is a text”.

Although in this work I will take into consideration only written productions, I agree that under the label “text” there must be both orally-produced and written texts, regardless of their duration or length.

With regard to the notion “textual competence”, it is useful to take into account two main connotations:

- it is the ability to identify and distinguish different textual types and genres and, consequently, to have a series of expectations according to each type or genre in the process of interpretation of a text (Palermo 2013);
- it is the ability to compose, as well as to comprehend a text, with all its characterizations, according to its type or genre.

It is important to differentiate between textual competence in the L1 and textual competence in the L2. In order to describe textual competence in the L1, two key-concepts, used by Kecskes (2014) in his definition of “pragmatic competence”, must be taken into account: “language socialization” and “conceptual socialization”, the latter developing through the relationship between the language knowledge and the knowledge of the socio-cultural norms of a specific language community. I argue that the interplay between “language socialization”, “conceptual socialization” and socialization with the norms of text planning, building and comprehension according to different text types and genres within a language community and a mainstream culture plays a crucial role in the connotation of the concept of textual competence in the L1.

Textual competence in an L2 has been increasingly investigated in the last decades, both in international documents of language policy and in Second Language acquisition research. The *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages* (2001), in particular, emphasizes three fundamental competences in the process of a Second Language Acquisition, namely linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence, including in the latter abilities related to text planning, building and comprehension.

As far as Second Language Acquisition research is concerned, the central role of texts in the L2 learning process has been emphasized by many scholars: among all, the concept of “text-based learning unit” of Vedovelli (2010) is worthy of mention.

The substantial difference between the development of textual competence in the L1 and textual competence in an L2 is that in the former the above-mentioned socializations take place from the very beginning of an individual's life, while in the latter they take place later and generally in a more limited space of time.

Furthermore, various scholars focus on the fact that the main difference between text types and text genres is that the former are basically universal, while the latter are historically and culturally determined (Palermo 2013). For this reason, a further difference between textual competence in the L1 and in

an L2 lies in the fact that a Second Language learners must familiarize with various text genres that can be characterized by relevant differences compared to those in his/her language community.

2.2 Spoken vs. Written Communication and Common Ground Construction

Scholars associated with different disciplines point out that spoken communication is usually more successful than written communication (see Traxler and Gernsbacher in Gernsbacher and Givón 1995). The main reason supporting this hypothesis is that “conversation is collaborative: speakers and listeners actively interact – they collaborate – to establish mutual representations” (*ibidem*: 218), while “written communication requires that writers build mental representations” (*ibidem*) of how their readers will comprehend their texts. In building such mental representations, “if writers know what their readers do and do not know about the world, then they will most likely make reference to concepts to which their readers have ready access, and explain in more detail those concepts to which their readers do not have ready access” (*ibidem*: 218-219). Givón (in Gernsbacher and Givón 1995), who seems to share the same opinion, assumes that “during writing, revision and editing, the negotiation occurs cognitively between the writer’s own mental representation and his mental representation of what he/she assumes the reader knows” (*ibidem*: VII).

In other words, one of the main differences between these two ways of communication lies in the construction of common ground between the speaker/writer and the addressee.

While in oral communication common ground can be co-constructed by the interactants, in written communication common ground can be only postulated by the writer. The writer must hypothesize to what extent (s)he can share her/his background with the addressee, in terms of encyclopedic knowledge, “conceptual socialization” and cultural models.

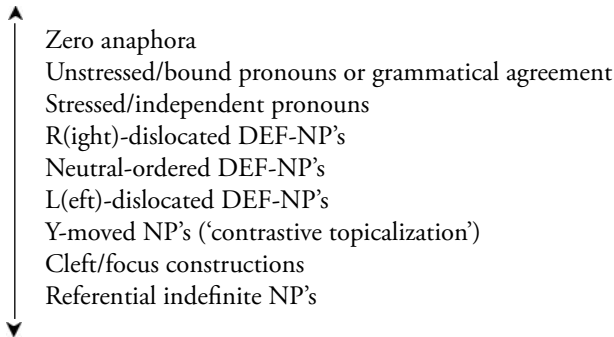
Therefore, among other aspects, the dimensions of “culture” and “interculturality” gain also importance in the development of an L2 learner’s textual competence.

2.3 Topic Accessibility and Continuity: the Interplay between Coherence and Cohesion

Two further concepts that play a crucial role in this work are “topic accessibility” and “topic continuity”. Such notions are strictly related both with text coherence and cohesion. Givón (1983), who deeply investigated these concepts in relation with the structure of anaphorical chains, argues that some grammatical devices commonly used as anaphoras can be collocated on a scale for the coding of topic accessibility and continuity in texts. Givón’s scale (*ibidem*:

17), that illustrates the grammatical devices used from the most continuous/accessible and less marked topic to the most discontinuous/inaccessible and most marked topic, can be considered as applicable to all languages (even if with necessary variations according to the typological characteristics of the selected language).

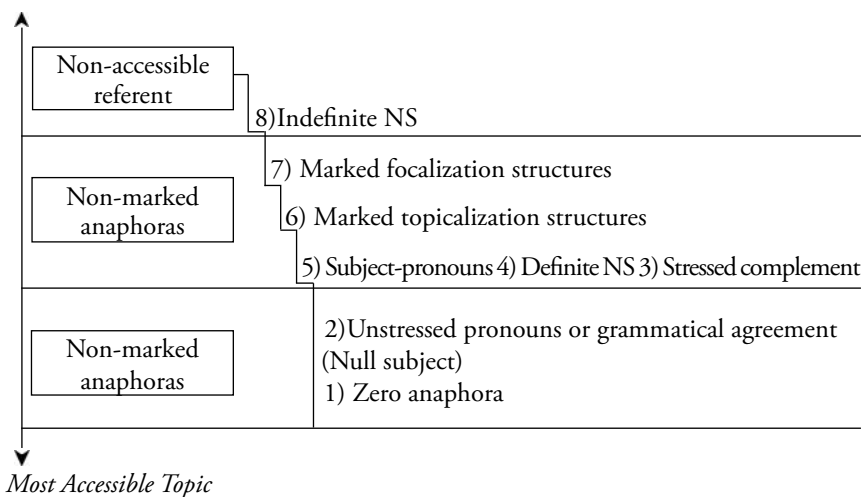
Most Continuous/Accessible Topic



Most Discontinuous/Inaccessible Topic

The scale below represents the adjustment of Givón's scale for the coding of topic accessibility and continuity according to the typological characteristics of Italian (Palermo 2013: 170). Such scale can be a precious tool in order to analyze the structures of ISL students' anaphorical chains in their written productions.

Least accessible topic



3. *Some Textual Phenomena in Italian and Chinese: A Brief Comparison*

Substantial differences between Italian and Chinese³ with regard to various linguistic aspects are clearly visible. The most important research studies conducted until now about Chinese learners of L2 Italian have usually emphasized almost exclusively typological differences (Italian is a basically inflected language, while Chinese is a basically isolating language), as well as genealogical differences (Italian is an Indo-European language, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family) between these two languages. With particular regard to Chinese learners' acquisition process of ISL, the "distance" between Chinese and Indo-European languages contributed to focus the attention on difficulties in the use of verbal conjugation, adjective-substantive agreement and those related with other aspects of the morphosyntax. However, differences between Italian and Chinese rely with their whole language systems, from graphic symbolization to text structure.

In particular, two graphic differences between Italian and Chinese writing systems are worthy of mention: the former has an alphabetic writing system, while the latter has a logographic writing system based on characters.⁴ In addition, in Italian texts words are commonly separated by blank spaces, while Chinese characters in Chinese texts follow one another and they are separated only by punctuation. In order to better describe such graphic difference, compare the section of a Chinese text reported below and its translation into Italian:

(1) 风吹起来的时候，房屋和大地一起黑暗中漂浮。在很远的地方，也许就在榆睡的这间旧瓦房里，有一种看不见的物质在咯吱咯吱地响着。

'Quando il vento comincia a soffiare, le case e la terra fluttuano insieme in mezzo alle tenebre. In un posto molto lontano, forse in quella vecchia casa col tetto in tegole dove Yu dormiva, c'era qualcosa che non si riusciva a vedere che continuava a far rumore cigolando'.⁵

(Su Tong in Castorina & Romagnoli 2008: 97)

It can be perceived that in the Chinese Section, except the intervals in correspondence with punctuation marks, there are little blank spaces between single characters (even though they are not as clear as those between words in the Italian version).

³ Whenever this work talks about "Italian" (language), it refers to standard Italian. Similarly, whenever in this work "Chinese" (language) is mentioned, such expression is referred to the standard and official language in People's Republic of China, also known as *Putonghua* 普通话, or 'Mandarin Chinese'.

⁴ In order to analyze more deeply the various sub-categories of Chinese characters, see Norman (1988).

⁵ Personal translation by the author.

In fact, as reported in Arcodia (2010), the intuitive notion of “word” in written Italian does not find a correspondence in written Chinese: according to common perceptual criteria and according to Chinese linguistic tradition, such intuitive notion in Chinese corresponds to the *zi* 字, or ‘character’, and not to the *ciyu* 词语, or ‘word’ (as it is commonly conceived and perceived by members belonging to the Italian language community). In other words, Chinese texts are considered as “containers of *zi* 字” and not as “containers of *ciyu* 词语” (the latter expression belonging most of all to the terminology used in dictionaries and in grammar books).⁶

As far as punctuation is concerned, it was introduced in the Chinese writing system at the beginning of the 20th Century and consequently to the intensification of the relationships with Western countries. The first process of standardization of the use of punctuation in Italian, instead, developed between the mid-15th Century and the mid-16th Century, as a consequence of the “invention” of printing.⁷

The marks that characterize punctuation in Chinese and in Italian are rather similar; however, there are some remarkable differences.

First, in written Chinese there are two kinds of comma, the *douhao* 逗号, graphically represented by the mark “,” and commonly used in order to separate two juxtaposed clauses (either through paratactic or through hypotactic connections), and the *dunhao* 顿号, graphically represented by the mark “、”, a kind of comma that appears almost exclusively in order to separate lexical items in lists (commonly known as “enumeration comma”). In written Italian there is only one kind of comma that is usually represented by the mark “,”.

A further element of Chinese punctuation that does not find its equivalent in Italian punctuation is the *jiangehao* 间隔号, a mark used in order to separate foreign proper nouns transcribed in Chinese characters. Such mark is usually collocated at mid-height of the characters’ total height: an example can be *Balake•Aobama* 巴拉克•奥巴马, the transcription in Chinese characters of the name Barack Obama.

Furthermore, substantial differences concern the frequency of use of the semicolon. In Chinese it is rather uncommon, except in academic texts; in Italian, although it is not frequently used, it seems to be more common than in Chinese. In any case, as far as punctuation is concerned, it is always necessary to take into account the crucial role played by individual choices.

⁶ From a phonetic point of view, every Chinese character always corresponds to one and only one syllable; from a semantic point of view, it is not true that every single character has its own meaning. Chinese words, in fact, are prevalently bi-syllabic, although monosyllabic words represent a good percentage compared with the total number.

⁷ For further information about punctuation in Chinese see Norman (1988). With regard to the process of standardization and development of the use of punctuation in written Italian, see Coluccia (2008) and Richardson (2008).

Considerable differences concern also the use of parataxis and hypotaxis, and particularly of paratactic and hypotactic connections. Written Chinese is characterized by a broad use of long periods, often with several coordinate and subordinate clauses, according to the logic of *zhuanwan mojiao* 转弯抹角: such expression could be translated '(to write/to speak) in a roundabout way' and it is strongly related not only with written communication, but also, and most of all, with spoken communication.

To mention an example, see the period below and its literal translation:

(2) 你是知道，有很多罪犯，前脚出监狱，后脚就进枪店，买枪就到处杀人。枪店也查买枪的是么人，管他是是杀过人放过火，脑子正常正常，只要给钱，他们就卖。

(Lit. translation) You – not – to be – not – to know –, – there is / there are – *quantifier* – many – criminal –, – forward foot – to go out – *particle that emphasizes the perfective aspect of a verb* – prison –, – rearfoot – *particle that emphasizes the immediateness of an action* – to enter – gun shop –, – to buy – *particle that emphasizes the perfective aspect of a verb* – gun – *particle that emphasizes the immediateness of an action* – everywhere – to kill – person –, – Gun shop – also – not – to check – to buy – gun – *particle for nominal constructions* – (person) – to be – which (kind of) – person –, – regardless – he – to be – not – to be – to kill – *particle for verbal experiential aspect* – person – to set – *particle for verbal experiential aspect* – fire –, – brain – normal – not – normal –, – if only – to give – money –, – they – *particle that emphasizes the immediateness of an action* – to sell –.

(Liu *et al.* 1997: 328)

As it can be perceived from the literal translation of the extract above, some sentences do not have any connectors, yet they are connected through the mechanism of juxtaposition. In fact, it is rather frequent that paratactic and hypotactic connections are not explicitly expressed in Chinese (it could be said that they are not grammaticalized), and, therefore, that the clauses of a period are simply juxtaposed. In this way the interpretation of such connections is left to the readers' inferential abilities. For example, look at the sentence below:

(3) 我吃饭了，(我)就走。 *Wo chifan le, (wo) jiu zou.*

(Lit. translation) I – to eat – *particle that emphasizes the perfective aspect of a verb* –, – (I)⁸ – *particle that emphasizes the immediateness of an action* – to go.

There can be several translations for the sentence above and all of them may be equally correct. For instance: 'After having eaten I will go' or 'I have (already) eaten, so I'm going'. In this case, like in many other cases, context plays a key-role in the interpretation of an expression.

⁸ The null subject is a diffused phenomenon in Chinese.

However, Chinese periods are not always long: one kind of short and concise period is represented by the *chengyu* 成语, idiomatic expressions or proverbs necessarily constituted by a sequence of four characters. Such expressions are characterized by a considerable informative density and often convey a meaning for the interpretation of which good inferential abilities are required.⁹ Although *chengyu* originate from and belong to oral tradition, they appear in a wide range of written text genres.¹⁰

(4) 入乡随俗 *ru xiang sui su*.

(Lit. translation) to enter – village – to follow – custom/habit.

(Possible idiomatic translation) ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’.

A further important aspect that characterizes Chinese written language is the use of archaic lexical and grammatical items: this characteristic is shared by a considerably wide range of different text genres (from scientific essays to advertisements) and a significant number of the archaic characters used is composed by inter-phrasal connectors or by the ancient versions of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives.¹¹ An example worthy of mention is the coordinative conjunction *er* 而, that can have both a copulative and an adversative function. Italian does not seem to be characterized by such a marked and broad use of conjunctions typical of previous historical periods.

Another difference between Italian and Chinese writing styles concerns the use of nominalizations. Nominalizations, in particular deverbal nouns, are becoming broadly used in contemporary standard Italian, while in Chinese they represent a rarely used mechanism. Various Chinese characters, most of which already have their own lexical meanings, are used as suffixes in order to build deverbal nouns. Two common examples are represented by the suffixes *xing* 性 and *hua* 化, generally used in order to build abstract nouns (*gan* 感 = ‘to perceive’ forming *ganxing* 感性 = ‘perception’; *jiandan* 简单 = ‘simple/to be simple’ forming *jiandanhua* 简单化 = ‘simplification’).¹² Although the use

⁹ The above-mentioned expression *zhuanwan mojiao* is also a *chengyu*.

¹⁰ Besides the *chengyu*, there are also other kinds of idiomatic expressions that originate from the oral tradition. Very diffused, for example, are the *suyu* 俗语, usually characterized by a bigger number of characters compared with the four characters of the *chengyu*.

¹¹ In Chinese the same character can have the function of both personal pronoun and possessive adjective. For example, *wo* 我 means both ‘I/me’ and ‘my’. The syntactic position is the fundamental criterion for the correct interpretation of the character. In some cases, however, in order to give to that character the function of possessive adjective it is necessary to add the element of nominal determination *de* 的 on the right of the pronoun.

¹² In Chinese adjectives also have the function of nominal predicates. In fact, words like the above – mentioned *jiandan* are generally defined “verbal adjectives” or “adjectival verbs” in grammar books, and they must be considered both adjectives and verbs at the same time. For this reason the above – mentioned *jiandanhua* can be also considered as a deverbal noun.

of such deverbal nouns in Chinese has risen in the past decades, if compared with Italian it still constitutes a minor phenomenon.

A rather relevant difference between Italian and Chinese from the point of view of syntax must be also mentioned: although both languages basically belong to the syntactic typology SVO, Chinese sentences are often constructed through a topic-comment sequence. Such kind of constructions is usually perceived as marked in Italian, while in Chinese it is not. For example, see the statement below:

- (5) 美国, 我没去过 *Meiguo, wo mei qu guo.*
 (Lit. translation) United States – , – I – *negative particle for the perfective verbal aspect*
 – to go – *particle for experienced actions.*
 (Translation) ‘I have never been to the United States’.

A final difference analyzed in this Section concerns pragmatic particles. Chinese learners of L2 Italian have generalized difficulties in using such particles, even at advanced levels. These difficulties could be partly related with the different dislocation of the particles within the sentences: in Italian they are usually dislocated on the left, while in Chinese, which makes wide use of them, especially in spoken interaction, they are dislocated on the right. In order to give a better idea of this fundamental difference, consider the position of the pragmatic particle in the following utterance (a compliment addressed to a child) in the Italian version and in the Chinese version:

- (6) **Ma** com'è carino questo bambino!
 这个孩子这么可爱啊! *Zhe ge haizi zheme ke'ai a!*

The attitude to search for or to collocate pragmatic particles in the final part instead of in the initial part of a sentence/utterance could constitute a factor of delay for Chinese ISL students' development of this pragmatic skill at different levels.

Those listed and briefly analyzed above are some structural differences that could lead to the slowing down of or to difficulties in the development of Chinese students' textual competence in L2 Italian. However, the individual dimension of the observed subjects must be always taken into consideration: in particular, their cultural and educational background (in this study the analyzed group is apparently homogeneous in terms of educational background, even though the different places of origin of the “Marco Polo – Turandot” students could have an influence on this factor), personal writing styles and the “communicative spaces”¹³ lived by single learners in the L2 context can play a

¹³ In order to better analyze the concept of “communicative space(s)”, see Krefeld (2004 and 2010).

relevant role. It could be useful to deepen the knowledge about the interplay between the individual “communicative spaces” and the development of the learners’ communicative, as well as textual and meta-textual competence.

Further questions that could be investigated in relation with the observation of Chinese ISL learners’ development of textual competence may be related with the following topics:

- The influence that the norms of politeness in contemporary Chinese language have on the structure of some text genres (especially those where the relation with the addressee can be perceived as stronger, i.e. in letters).¹⁴

- The role played by the key-concept of “face” (usually translated in Chinese with the words 面子 *mianzi* and 脸 *lian*), as well as by all the discourse strategies known as “face performing strategies”, in Chinese ISL textual performances.¹⁵

- The influence of the readers’ (with particular regard to ISL teachers in class) predominant mental representations and perceptual patterns of textual basic categories, like, for instance, coherence and cohesion, on L2 students’ success in text building and comprehension.¹⁶

4. Methodology and Data Analysis

The data analyzed in this work was gathered in part during a study conducted in 2014 at the University for Foreigners of Siena, in part consulting the “GranVALICO” and “VALICO” learners’ corpora. I carried out empirical, non-participant observations of a selected corpus composed by four groups of A2-B1 level “Marco Polo – Turandot” students during an initial period of two months. The reason why learners of different levels were in the same classes is that in that part of their intensive courses they were grouped according to their disciplines of specialization, and not according to their language and communicative competence in the L2. Afterwards I totally analyzed 92 text productions, characterized by an average length that varies between 150 and 200 words. Fifty of these texts were written by the observed learners’ and were

¹⁴ For further information about the history of politeness in Chinese, and in particular about the radical changes between politeness in historical Chinese and politeness in contemporary Chinese, see Pan and Kàdàr (2011), and Kàdàr and Mills (2011).

¹⁵ Many scholars have investigated the concept of “face” in Chinese, often with different opinions (Mao 1994, *inter alia*).

¹⁶ With particular regard to the category of coherence, Givón (1995) distinguishes between two different approaches: coherence in text and coherence in mind. According to his opinion, coherence has to be considered as a mental entity; it is “not an inherent property of a written or spoken text. [...] Coherence is a property of what emerges during speech production and comprehension – the mentally represented text, and in particular the mental processes that partake in constructing that mental representation” (VII).

about different topics belonging to different text genres. However, most of them were short narrations of past and present personal experiences. The other forty-two texts of ISL Chinese students were selected from the “GranVALICO” and “VALICO” learners’ corpora, with the purpose of gathering a larger corpus. In order to guarantee a good reliability of the analysis, I tried to select these texts according to criteria (age groups, language and communicative competence, period of ISL learning) that were as similar to the characteristics of the observed “Marco Polo – Turandot” students as possible. In fact, the texts from the “GranVALICO” and “VALICO” learners’ corpora belong to A2-B1 level students with an average age between 18 and 30 years-old.

The analysis of the gathered materials mainly focused on some mechanisms of text cohesion (connectives and anaphoric chains) and text building (punctuation). I tried to investigate some of the most common irregularities and to hypothesize some reasons at the basis of these phenomena. However, it is rather complicated to provide exact explanations for the diffusion and the persistence of certain difficulties. The individual writing style is a relevant variable that must be taken into consideration; furthermore, it is often difficult to understand whether an irregularity is due to the lack of text cohesion and text building skills or whether it is due to the lack of acquisition/lack of mastery of particular syntactic and inter-phrasal structures. A representative example can be Chinese ISL learners’ “deafness” towards Italian relative clauses (even at very high levels of L2 competence) and their generalized strategies in order to substitute this kind of clauses through different structures. This rather diffused phenomenon often leads to standard-deviations, with a considerable influence also on the textual dimension.¹⁷

In addition, it is important to emphasize that some common difficulties (like those analyzed in Section 4.2) characterize also ISL learners’ with different mother tongues. It is rather complicated to attribute a kind of irregularity specifically to Chinese ISL learners: in any case, common characteristics and generalized phenomena emerging from text performances of this specific category of learners can be identified and investigated.

A further part of the study consisted in a statistical survey carried out gathering data from a questionnaire filled in by 470 “Marco Polo – Turandot” students, among which 406 studied at the University for Foreigners of Siena

¹⁷ For more detailed information about this phenomenon, see Banfi (2003). Banfi (2003) introduces in his volume a detailed analysis of the strategies adopted by Chinese ISL students at different levels in order to avoid to use relative clauses with relative pronouns. In particular, Banfi explains that since relative clauses in Chinese are formed by nominal determination – constructions, or even through simple juxtaposition phenomena, Chinese ISL learners seem to re-produce the same structures also in their Italian relative clauses.

and 64 studied at the school of the “Fondazione Italia – Cina” in Milan, a collaborative Institution with Siena.

The main purpose of the questionnaire was to identify the observed students' most diffused perceptions of the role played by different abilities in their ISL acquisition process.

This survey also aimed at investigating the importance of “Marco Polo – Turandot” students' perceptions of the acquisition of ISL, trying to identify which kinds of relationships there can be between some perceptual patterns and the success/failure, motivation/lack of motivation, acceleration/slowing down in their L2 Italian acquisition pathways.

The questionnaire (in the Appendix of this work) was composed of eleven questions, among which eight were not open questions. With regard to the other three questions, one asked to write three words related to the personal impressions and feelings about Italian, and two questions asked to briefly explain the reasons for the choices taken in the previous part of the questionnaire.

4.1 Perceptions of the Textual Dimension: Some Statistical Data

The data gathered through the statistical survey partially de-construct some diffused language-based prejudices and common feelings, both among students themselves and among ISL teachers. Some of the most relevant data is introduced below.

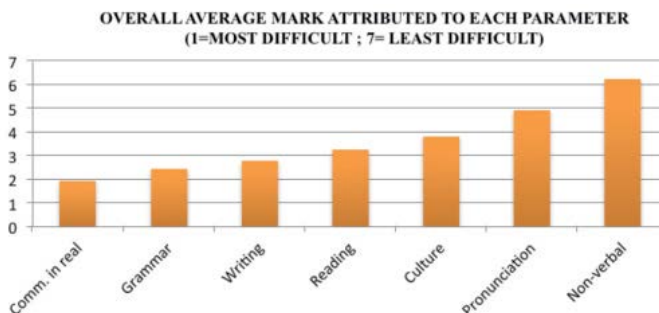
First of all, the analysis of the answers to a question about the perceptions related to the importance of different abilities involved in L2 Italian acquisition emphasizes that students perceive “writing” (this expression was included in the questionnaire and explained to the students as “the ability to write texts in Italian”) as particularly difficult.

The question asked respondents to order the abilities “pronunciation”, “grammar”, “reading comprehension”, “writing”, “communication in real situations”, “to study and to comprehend ‘Italian culture’”, “non-verbal languages”, from the one perceived as the most difficult (1) to the one perceived as the least difficult (7).

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the dimension of text writing is clearly perceived as one of the most difficult ones, with an overall average mark of 2,79.¹⁸

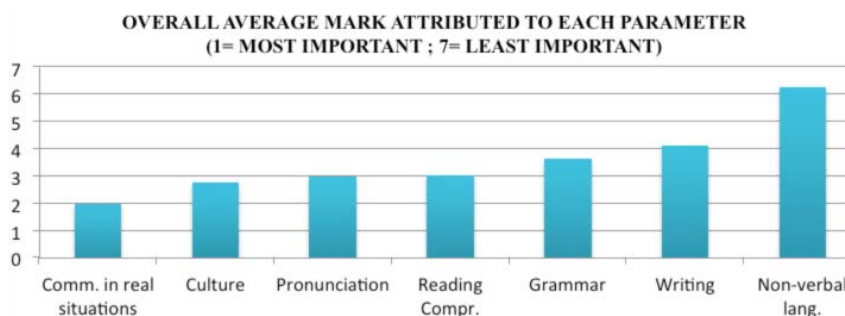
¹⁸ “Overall average mark” refers to the result obtained adding together all the marks (1 to 7) attributed to each ability and dividing the total sum by the number of students who answered the questions.

Figure 1. Statistical data about the answers to the question on “difficulty attributed to different aspects of Italian” contained in the questionnaire



A further question shows that, besides being perceived as difficult, at the same time the ability of text writing is also perceived as not particularly important. This question asked to put in order the same abilities of the question shown above from the one perceived as “the most important” (1) to the one perceived as “the least important” (7). As shown in Fig. 2, text writing occupies only the sixth place out of seven, with an average mark of 4,14.

Figure 2. Statistical data about the answers to the question on “importance attributed to different aspects of Italian” contained in the questionnaire



This data seems to be partly contrary to a common point of view, that appears to be shared by both Chinese students and ISL teachers,¹⁹ according to which writing is commonly perceived as a very important skill in Chinese learners’ L2 acquisition process, since it is supposed to be one of the key-

¹⁹ A further statistical survey about ISL teachers’ perceptions of Chinese students’ abilities in L2 Italian is being carried out by the author of this work.

activities of the most diffused Foreign Language teaching methodologies in China. However, the situation of Foreign Language teaching in China is undergoing quick changes and in the last few years new, innovative methodologies based on communication and with different approaches to the textual dimension have been adopted, not only in universities but also in middle and high schools (Jun 2008; Leung and Ruan 2012).

4.2 Brief Analysis of some Common Characteristics Observed in the Gathered Texts

According to the analysis of the 50 text productions of “Marco Polo – Turandot” students and the 42 texts from the “GranVALICO” and “VALICO” learners’ corpora, some of the common characteristics observed, with regard to elements of cohesion and text building, will be briefly described. Some examples of texts will be also shown. Such texts were selected as the most representative ones with regard to the analyzed common characteristics and irregularities.

Once again, it must be emphasized that such phenomena are not exclusively specific of ISL Chinese learners, yet they can also belong to different typologies of L2 Italian students.

Prevalence of short periods. A phenomenon that commonly characterizes the most part of the analyzed texts is the prevalence of short periods, composed by simple connections, rarely grammaticalized hypotaxis (sometimes almost absent), prevalence of parataxis and juxtaposition of sentences. For example, see the following texts, the first one of a B1 level “Marco Polo – Turandot” student, and the second one from the corpus “GranVALICO”, of a Chinese ISL student with a similar competence, whose age is between 26 and 30 years old (Italian standard deviations are marked in *italic* and the corresponding regular expressions are reported in bold in brackets).

Nella questa festa scorsa (**‘Durante la scorsa festa’**), sono andata a Bologna e Carrara con la mia amica Maristella. Quella mattina, ***ci abbiamo veduto*** (**‘ci siamo incontrate’**) alla stazione di Siena. Prima della partenza avevamo fatto due carte sconto per autobus quindi i prezzi dei biglietti erano molto più economici. Quando siamo arrivati (**‘arrivate’**) a Bologna era già mezzogiorno. Abbiamo visitato l’Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna in cui Maristella vuole studiare la pittura. Dopo, mi ha consigliato un ristorante giapponese che era vicino all’Accademia. Abbiamo mangiato un pranzo gustoso e ***mi sono piaciuto molto*** (**‘mi è piaciuto molto’**). Poi siamo andati ***agli*** (**‘alle’**) attrazioni turistiche diverse. Il giorno dopo siamo andati a Carrara ***che era una città avevo visto*** (**‘che è una città che avevo già visto’**). ***Maristella piaceva molto Carrara*** (**‘A Maristella piaceva molto Carrara’**) e anch’io. Sono tornati a casa il pomeriggio successivo. Abbiamo dormito sul treno perché ***siamo*** (**‘eravamo’**) stanchi. ***Nei prossimi giorni*** (**‘Nei giorni successivi’**),

mi sono riposata a casa e ho guardato la TV o i film sul computer. Penso che la vacanza *sia* (*'sia stata'*) significativo e divertente.²⁰

L'altro giorno due uomini camminavano sul marciapiede. Tutte e due *avevano portavano* (*'portavano'*) molte cose. Un uomo magro, alla sinistra, aveva bottiglie latte, una anguria. Portava *un* (*'uno'*) zaino e andava *il la* (*'in'*) bicicletta con un cane piccolo. Invece alle (*'alla'*) destra, un uomo grasso portava anche molte cose. *Sembra che aveva già appena viaggiato* (*'sembrava che avesse viaggiato da poco'*). Camminava con un cane grande che è molto *fierce* (*'feroce?'*). Quando *hanno venuti* (*'sono arrivati'*) *al corno* (*'all'angolo'*) della strada, *hanno incontrato essi sono andati a contri cozzare insieme* (*'si sono scontrati'*). Tutte le cose sono cadute *nella* (*'per la'*) strada. Anche se una donna e un gatto che abitano nel primo piano *hanno riuscita* (*'sono riusciti'*) a prendere le cose nella aria. Tutte e due uomini si hanno sentiti *imbarazzanti* (*'imbarazzati'*). I loro cane (*'cani'*) hanno mangiato i cibi e se ne sono andati. *I* (*'Gli'*) uomini *hanno spendito a lungo* (*'ci hanno messo molto'*) a riprendere tutte le cose.²¹

²⁰ Literal translation in English: In – this – holiday – last –, – (I) *auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions* – gone – to – Bologna – and – Carrara – with – my – friend – Maristella – . – That – morning –, – (we) *auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions* – met ourselves – at the – station- of – Siena – . – Before – of the – departure – (we) had – made – two – cards – discount – for – autobus – so – the – prices – were – much – more – cheap – . – When – (we) *auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions* – arrived – to – Bologna – it was – already – noon – . – (We) have – visited – the – academy – of – Fine Arts – of – Bologna – in which – Maristella – wants – study – the – painting – . – Afterwards –, – (she) – to me – has – suggested – a – restaurant- Japanese – that – was – next to – of the – academy –, – (We) have – eaten – a – lunch – delicious – and – me – to be – liked – very much – . – Then – (we) *auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions* – gone – to the – attractions – touristic – various – . – The – day – after – (we) – *auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions* – gone – to – Carrara – that – was – a – city – (I) had – seen – . – Maristella – liked – very much – Carrara – and – also – I – . – (They) *auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions* – gone back – to – home – the – afternoon – following – . – (We) have – slept – on the – train – because – (we) are – tired – . – In the – following – days – myself – (I) *auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions* – relaxed – and – (I) have – watched – the – TV – or – the – films – on the – computer – . – (I) think – that – the – holiday – is – significant – and – funny – . – .

²¹ Literal translation in English: The – other – day – two – men – walked – on the – sidewalk – . – Both – had – brought – lots of – things – . – A – thin – man –, – on the – left –, – had – bottles – milk –, – one – watermelon – . – (He) brought – a – bag – and – went – the – the – bicycle – with – a – dog – little – . – Instead – on the – right –, – a – man – fat – brought – lots of – things – . – It seems – that – (he) had – just – already – travelled – . – (He) walked – with – a – dog – big – that – is – very – ?fierce? – . – When – (they) – had – come – to the – horn – of the – street –, – (they) had – met – and – themselves – (they) went – to – collide – together – . – All – the – things – *auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions* – fallen – in the – road – . – Even – if – a – woman – and – a – cat – that – live – in the – first – floor – have – managed – to – take – the – things – in the air – . – Both – men – themselves – (they) have – felt – embarrassing – . – Their – dog – have – eaten – the – foods – and – (they) went away – . – The – men – have – spent – long – to – take back – all – the – things – . – .

Periods are prevalently short and the use of subordinate clauses is rather limited in both texts. However, there are two well-composed relative clauses in the first example (*abbiamo visitato l'Accademia di Belle Arti in cui Maristella vuole studiare pittura* and *mi ha consigliato un ristorante giapponese che era vicino all'accademia*),²² even though the most prevalently used mechanism in order to avoid this kind of clause at this level of competence is still the juxtaposition, and a temporal clause and a concessive clause in the second example (*Quando hanno venuti al corno della strada* and *Anche se una donna e un gatto che abitano nel primo piano hanno riuscita prendere le cose nella aria*),²³ respectively), even if the auxiliary verbs used in both clauses are wrong.

Prevalence of repetition phenomena instead of substitution phenomena in anaphoric chains. A generalized characteristic of the analyzed texts is the wide use of non-marked anaphoras and the restricted use of marked anaphoras (in particular zero anaphoras and unstressed pronouns, corresponding to the first stages of the adjustment of Givón's scale for the coding of topic accessibility and continuity according to the typological characteristics of Italian, illustrated in Section 2.3). The most diffused phenomena consist in partial and/or total repetition. On the other hand, partial and/or total substitutions seem to be much less used, sometimes absent. For example, see the anaphoric chains in the "thematic paragraphs"²⁴ of the texts below. The first text belongs to an A2 level "Marco Polo – Turandot" student, the second one comes from the "VALICO" corpus and was written by a Chinese learner whose age is between 18 and 25 years old and whose level of competence is B1 (Italian standard deviations are marked in *italic* and the corresponding regular expressions are reported in bold in brackets).

Durante vacanza io e *miei* ('mie') amiche *sono andati* ('siamo andate') a Parigi perché questa città *mi molto piace* ('mi piace molto'). *Il Parigi* ('Parigi') ha molti monumenti come Torre Eiffel, Arco di Trionfo, etc.

Il primo giorno *abbiamo* ('abbiamo') visto Arco di Trionfo allora *abbiamo andato* ('siamo andate') a casa. Il secondo giorno *abbiamo vista* ('abbiamo visto') Torre Eiffel e Louvre. Secondo me, Torre Eiffel è molto grande e *maestoso* ('maestosa'), ma sfortunatamente, *non andare* ('non siamo andate') alla torre. Allora, noi siamo andate Galeries Lafayette, poi io e compagno di stanza *abbiamo andate* ('siamo andate')

²² English translation: 'We visited the Academy of fine arts in Milan where Maristella wants to study painting' and 'She suggested me a Japanese restaurant that was near the Academy'.

²³ English translation: 'When they came to the street crossing' and 'Although a woman and a cat that live on the first floor managed to catch things in the air'.

²⁴ Such expression is used in Givón (1983: 7).

al ristorante di Cina per mangiare cibo di Cina. Allora siamo andate *il* ('al') Blocco Ponte. Il Blocco Ponte è molto famoso fra *?valentine?*. *Il* ('L') ultimo giorno siamo andate Disneyland in Parigi. *Il Disneyland* ('Disneyland') è molto grande, bella e interessante per me. Ho guardato il topolino, paperino, dinosauro e astronauta, ma sfortunatamente, a causa della mancanza di tempo, io ho visto solo una paradiso.

Miei amiche e me ('Io e le mie amiche') *molto felice* ('eravamo molto felici') durante questa vacanza.²⁵

Sogno

L'altro giorno al lavoro il Signor Rossi stette per timbrare su un documento *che l'aveva dato la sua direttrice* ('dato dalla sua direttrice'). *Perché* ('Poiché') l'estate era vicina, il Signor Rossi cominciò a sognare a occhi aperti. Immaginò che lui fosse il capitano di una barca sul mare blu e una bellissima donna l'accompagnasse. Il Signor Rossi guidava la barca parlando con la bionda donna da costume. *Come bella* ('Come era bella!') Il cielo era sereno, il sole era splendido... Faceva bel tempo e i gabbiani stavano volando. Anche il sorriso della donna e i suoi capelli lunghi svolazzanti fecero una parte della bella scena... All'improvviso la donna diventò arrabbiata e cominciò a sgridarlo ad alta voce. Il Signor Rossi fu molto sorpreso e confuso *della* ('dell') improvviso cambiamento dell'atmosfera. Non credé che avesse fatto qualcosa di sbagliato. "Timbrare sul documento può costarti molto tempo?" La bionda donna diventò la direttrice e la sua domanda lo fece ritornare alla realtà. Riconosciuto che lui era ancora nell'ufficio, seppe che il bel viaggio d'estate *fu* ('era stato') un sogno.²⁶

²⁵ Lit. translation in English: During – holiday – I – and – my – friends – auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions – gone – to – Paris – because – this – city – to me – very – like – . – The – Paris – has – lots of – monuments – like – Eiffel Tower – , – Arch of Triumph – , – etc. – . – The – first – day – (we) have – seen – Arch of Triumph – so – (we) have – gone – to – home – . – The – second – day – (we) have – seen – Tower – Eiffel – and – Louvre – . – In my opinion – Tower – Eiffel – is – very – big – and – majestic – , – but – unfortunately – , – not – go – to the – tower – . – So – , – we – went – Galleries Lafayette – , – then – I – and – mate – of – room – have – gone – to the – restaurant – of – China – for – to eat – food – of – China – . – So – (we) went – to the – Pont des Arts – . – The – Pont des Arts – is – very – famous – among – the – ?valentine? – . – The – last – day – (we) auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions – gone – Disneyland – in – Paris – . – The – Disneyland – is – very – big – , – beautiful – and – interesting – for – me – . – (I) have – seen – the – mickey mouse – , – donald duck – , – dinosaur – and – astronaut – , – but – unfortunately – due to – the – lack – of the – time – , – (I) have – seen – only – one – heaven – . – My – friends – and – me – very – happy – during – this – holiday – . – .

²⁶ Lit. translation in English: Dream – . – The – other – day – at the – work – the – Mr. – Rossi – was about – to – stamp – on – a – document – that – it – had – given – his – director – . – Because – the – summer – was – near – , – the – Mr. – Rossi – began – to – dream – with open eyes – . – (He) imagined – that – (he) was – the – captain – of – a – boat – on the – sea – blue – and – a – wonderful – woman – him – accompanies – . – The – Mr. – Rossi – drove – the – boat – talking – with – the – blond – woman – by – costume – . – How – beautiful – ! – The – sky – was – clear – , – the – sun – was – splendid – ... – It was good weather – and – the – seagulls – were flying – . – Also – the – smile – of the – woman – and – her – hair – long – fluttering – made a part – of the – beautiful – scene – ... – Suddenly

In the first text only one example of substitution through a nominal syntagma can be observed (*Durante vacanza io e miei amiche sono andati **Parigi** perché **questa città** mi molto piace*).²⁷ More diffused, instead, are repetition phenomena, both partial and total (*Il secondo giorno abbiamo visto **Torre Eiffel** e Louvre. Secondo me, **Torre Eiffel** è molto grande e maestoso, ma sfortunatamente, non andare alla **torre***).²⁸

The analysis of the above-shown texts emphasizes the fact that zero-anaphoras and/or unstressed pronouns are rarely used in the learners' anaphoric chains. In other words, looking at the adjustment of Givón's scale for the coding of topic accessibility and continuity according to the typological characteristics of Italian, level 1 and level 2 are usually ignored in the anaphoric chains activated in the observed learners' texts.

Defective use of punctuation. First, it is important to take into consideration the fact that punctuation can be strongly influenced by individual choices. Despite that, a generalized defective use of full stops and commas can be observed when analyzing the gathered texts. For example, see the following texts, one from a B1 level "Marco Polo – Turandot" student, the following one from the corpus "VALICO", written by a learner whose age is between 18 and 25 years old and who is also at a B1 level (Italian standard deviations are marked in *italic* and the corresponding regular expressions are reported in bold in brackets).

La settimana fa ('**La settimana scorsa**'), sono andata a Milano con la mia amica. Abbiamo preso il treno da Siena a Firenze. Poi, abbiamo cambiato il treno alla stazione di Firenze. Dopo due ore, siamo andati a Milano. Stazione di Milano è **bellissimo** ('**bellissima**'), sono stato molto impressionato. **Edificio della stazione è grandissimi** ('**Gli edifici della stazione sono grandissimi**').

Abbiamo visitato la chiesa di Milano. Si chiama il Duomo di Milano. È il più grande edificio gotico del mondo. Siamo anche andati all'università **che ci accingiamo a entrare per frequentare** ('**che ci accingiamo a frequentare**'). L'università ha un museo, **mi piace l'opera d'arte molto all'interno** ('**mi piacciono molto le opere d'arte all'interno**').

– the – woman – became – angry – and – (she) began – to – scold him – with loud voice – .
 – The – Mr. – Rossi – was – very – surprised – and – confused – of the – sudden – change
 – of the – atmosphere – . – (He) did not believe – that – (he) had – made – something – of
 – wrong – . – ' – To stamp – on the- document – can – cost – to you – a lot of – time – ? – '
 – The – blonde – woman – became – the – director – and – her – question – made him –
 get back – to the – reality – . – Realized – that – he – was – still – in the – office – , – (he)
 knew – the – good – trip – of – summer – was – a – dream – . – .

²⁷ English translation: 'During our holidays my friend and I went to Paris because we like this city very much'.

²⁸ English translation: 'The second day we saw the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre. In my opinion, the Eiffel Tower is very big and majestic, but, unfortunately, we didn't go to the Tower'.

Siamo giocati ('Abbiamo giocato') a Milano molto felici. Abbiamo comprato un sacco di cose, e abbiamo trovato un ristorante *nel* ('del') sud-est asiatico. Il cibo del ristorante era delizioso.²⁹

Ci sono un impiegato sui 30 anni e una ragazza molto giovane, molto bella e prosperosa, la quale è la superiore dell'uomo. Lui è innamorato *dalla* ('della') bella ragazza. Un giorno circa *ale* ('alle') 3 e mezzo, come il solito, *quelli due lavorano insieme* ('i due lavoravano insieme'). Negli occhi dell'uomo, la ragazza gli sembra lo stesso bella ogni giorno, *e ogni è molto più bella* ('ogni giorno è sempre più bella'). Quindi, lavorando, si distrae nel sognare una *sceneta* ('scenetta') molto romantica. Loro si sono sposati. Con il tempo molto sereno e i gabbiani *volando* ('che volano') liberi e spensierati, loro *stanno in un viaggio di nozze* ('sono in viaggio di nozze') con il piroscifo. La ragazza dai capelli biondi galleggiando nel vento, con il costume, è piuttosto affascinante. Lui, guidando il piroscifo, ne è innamoratissimo. Si parlano, *si ridono* ('ridono'). Ma all'improvviso, lui *si sente gridare* ('sente gridare') la ragazza: "Cosa stai facendo?" Essendo confuso, lui dice: "Ma perché? sto guidando benissimo". E alla fine ritorna dal sogno. Si accorge che è la ragazza che gli stava chiedendo con tono *riprovatore* ('?di rimprovero?').³⁰

²⁹ Lit. translation in English: "The – week – ago – , – (I) auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions – gone – to – Milan – with – my – friend – . – (We) have – taken – the – train – from – Siena – to – Florence – . – Then – , – (we) have – changed – the – train – at the – station – of – Florence – . – After – two – hours – , – (we) auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions – gone – to – Milan – . – Station – of – Milan – is – wonderful – , – I – have been – very – impressed – . – Building – of the – station – is – very big – . – (We) have – visited – the – church – of – Milan – . – It is called – the – ' Duomo di Milano ' – . – (It) is – the biggest – building – gothic – of the – world – . – (We) auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions – also – gone – to the – university – that – (we) prepare ourselves – to – enter – for – to attend – . – The – university – has – a – museum – , – I like – the – work of art – a lot – inside – . – (We) auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions – played – in – Milan – very – happy – . – (We) have – bought – lots of – things – , – and – (we) have – found – a – restaurant – in the – south-east – Asian – . – The – food – of the – restaurant – was – delicious – .

³⁰ Lit. translation in English: "There are – a – clerk – about 30 years (old) – and – a – girl – very – young – , – very – beautiful – and – curvy – , – who – is – the – boss – of the – man – . – He – is – fond – of the – beautiful – girl – . – One day – about – at – three and a half – , – as usual – , – those – two – work – together – . – in the – eyes – of the – man – , – the – girl – to him – seems – the same – beautiful – every – day – , – and – every – is – much – more – beautiful – . – So – , – working – , – (he) distracts himself – in – dreaming – a – scene – very – romantic – . – They – clitic - auxiliary verb 'to be' for past tense constructions – married – . – With – the – weather – very – clear – and – the – seagulls – flying – free – and – carefree – , – they – are – in – a – honeymoon – with – the – steamship – . – The – girl – with – hair – blonde – floating – in the – wind – , – with – the – costume – , – is – rather – fascinating – . – He – , – driving – the – steamship – , – clitic – is – very fond – . – (They) talk each other – , – (they) laugh each other – . – But – suddenly – , – he – clitic – feels – shouting – the – girl – : – ' – What – are (you) – doing – ? – ' – Being – confused – ,

An excessive use of commas (*La settimana fa, sono andata a Milano con la mia amica; Poi, abbiamo cambiato il treno alla stazione di Firenze; Dopo due ore, siamo andati a Milano*)³¹ as well as an excessive use of full stops (*Abbiamo visitato la chiesa di Milano. Si chiama il Duomo di Milano. È il più grande edificio gotico del mondo.; Lui è innamorato dalla bella ragazza. Un giorno circa alle 3 e mezzo, come il solito, quelli due lavorano insieme. Negli occhi dell'uomo, la ragazza gli sembra lo stesso bella ogni giorno, e ogni è molto più bella.*)³² are clearly visible.

Transfer phenomena from the L1 could be identified. For instance, in the text of the “Marco Polo – Turandot” student above, even if it can be rather complicated to understand to what extent some phenomena can be related with personal attitudes, some parallels between the following sentences and the corresponding ones in Chinese could be identified:

Stazione di Milano è bellissimo, sono stato molto impressionato.

(EN. ‘The railway station of Milan is really nice, I was really amazed’).

米兰的火车站很美丽，我真惊讶。 *Milan de huochezhan hen meili, wo hen jingya.*

Lit translation: Milan – *particle for nominal constructions* – railway station – very – nice – , – I – really – amazed.

L'università ha un museo, mi piace l'opera d'arte molto all'interno.

(EN. ‘The university has a museum, I like the works of art inside very much’).

大学有一个博物馆，我很喜欢里面的作品。 *Daxue you yi ge bowuguan, wo hen xihuan limian de zuopin.*

Lit. translation: University – to have – one – *measure word* – museum – , – I – really – to like – inside – *particle for nominal constructions* – work (of art).

In addition, the semicolon never appeared in the observed texts, while the use of the ellipsis (“...”), which is becoming increasingly diffused in chat conversations and in text messages, was a rather generalized phenomenon.

– he – says – : – ‘ But – why – ? – (I) am driving – very well – ’ – And – finally – (he) comes back – from the – dream – . – (He) realizes – that – is – the – girl – who – to him – was asking – with – tone – ? of scolding? –.

³¹ English translation: ‘The week ago, I went to Milan with my friend; afterwards, we changed the train at the railway station of Florence; after two hours, we went to Milan’.

³² English translation: ‘We visited the church of Milan. Its name is Duomo of Milan. It is the highest gothic building in the world; He is in love with the beautiful girlfriend. One day at about half past three, as usual, those two (people) were working together. In the man’s eyes, the girl seems beautiful in the same way every day, and today she is much more beautiful’.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of some of the common characteristics in the 92 texts of Chinese ISL learners emphasizes the diffusion and the persistence of some difficulties in text cohesion and text building skills of this category of learners.

The reasons at the basis of such difficulties can be heterogeneous. Some transfer phenomena from the L1 could be identified: however, it is rather complicated to differentiate between transfers and individual writing styles and attitudes.

Furthermore, as reported above, the level of competence in L2 Italian of the analyzed subjects is a variable that has to be taken into consideration. For instance, in the analysis of the anaphoric chains, the fact that A2 and B1 learners' vocabulary skills could be poor in order to activate anaphoras through substitution with a wide range of nominal syntagmas must be taken into account; the same could happen when learners have difficulties using zero anaphoras and/or unstressed pronouns, probably because of the lack of morphosyntactic skills.

In any case, what emerges is the necessity to pay more attention to the importance of the textual dimension in the process of L2 Italian teaching to Chinese students. Such necessity becomes even more urgent because "Marco Polo – Turandot" students have the purpose of attending Italian universities or academies and, therefore, they require awareness of the rules of text building and comprehension of a wide range of text genres in Italian.

Appendix

Questionnaire about "Marco Polo – Turandot" students' perceptions of Italian

1. Da quanto tempo studi italiano?

A - Meno di 6 mesi **B** - 6 mesi / un anno **C** - Un anno / due anni **D** - Più di due anni

2. Qual è il tuo livello di conoscenza della lingua italiana?

A1 A2 B1 B2 C1 C2

3. Perché hai iniziato a studiare la lingua italiana? (Puoi scegliere anche più di una risposta)

A - Per il piacere di imparare una lingua nuova

B - Per un lavoro futuro

C - Per dovere

D - Per la curiosità di conoscere una lingua difficile

E - Per conoscere ed apprezzare meglio la cultura italiana

F - Per comunicare in modo efficace con le persone italiane

G - Altro: _____

4. Prova a descrivere la lingua italiana, secondo le tue impressioni e sensazioni, in tre parole

- 1 _____
 2 _____
 3 _____

5. Fra i seguenti aspetti della lingua italiana quali sono i più DIFFICILI per te? Prova a metterli in ordine (1= PIÙ DIFFICILE - 7= MENO DIFFICILE).

- La pronuncia (发音)
- La grammatica (语法)
- La comprensione alla lettura (阅读)
- La scrittura (写作)
- Sapere usare la lingua nelle varie situazioni reali (在不同情况下的语用)
- Studiare e comprendere la "cultura italiana" (学习, 了解意大利文化)
- I linguaggi non-verbali (肢体语言)
- ALTRO (其他): _____

6. Fra i seguenti aspetti della lingua italiana quali sono i più IMPORTANTI per te? Prova a metterli in ordine (1= PIÙ IMPORTANTE - 7= MENO IMPORTANTE).

- La pronuncia (发音)
- La grammatica (语法)
- La comprensione alla lettura (阅读)
- La scrittura (写作)
- Sapere usare la lingua nelle varie situazioni reali (在不同情况下的语用)
- Studiare e comprendere la "cultura italiana" (学习, 了解意大利文化)
- I linguaggi non-verbali (肢体语言)
- ALTRO (其他): _____

7. Fra gli aspetti della lingua italiana qui sopra, quale hai scelto come IL PIÙ importante? Perché?

Secondo me l'aspetto più importante
 è _____ perché _____

8. Fra gli aspetti della lingua italiana sopra, quale hai scelto come IL MENO importante? Perché?

Secondo me l'aspetto meno importante
 è _____ perché _____

9. Fra i seguenti aspetti della lingua italiana, in quali pensi di essere più bravo? E in quali pensi di essere meno bravo? Prova a metterli in ordine (1= PIÙ BRAVO - 5 = MENO BRAVO)

- La pronuncia (发音)
- La grammatica (语法)

- La comprensione alla lettura (阅读)
- La scrittura (写作)
- Sapere usare la lingua nelle varie situazioni reali (在不同情况下的语用)

10. Secondo te, quanto è importante conoscere la “cultura italiana” per imparare a usare la lingua italiana nelle varie situazioni reali?

(1= non è importante 10= è importantissimo)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. Secondo te, studiare l'italiano in Italia ti aiuta ad imparare più velocemente a usare la lingua italiana nelle varie situazioni reali? (1= non mi aiuta per niente 10= mi aiuta moltissimo)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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