Difficulties and Expectations of First Level Chinese Second Language Learners

Gloria Gabbianelli and Agnese Formica

Abstract The aim of this paper is to highlight the difficulties and expectations of first-level Mandarin Chinese (Throughout the paper, the term Chinese will be used to specifically refer to Mandarin Chinese) as a second language (CSL) learners, as well as to investigate the connections that exist between these factors and the learning process. The respondents who participated in the study include 85 CSL first-level learners, studying at one Italian university and three Italian secondary schools. Data was collected through a survey encompassing the following six areas: aural reception, aural production, reading, writing, grammar and spoken interaction. The influence of beliefs, concerning perceived difficulty on students' performance, was evaluated using a proficiency test created to adhere to the six areas investigated by the survey. The results revealed that the majority of respondents seemed to be aware that learning Chinese is a long and complex process, while at the same time, students enrolled in long-term language courses declared high achievement expectations. Within the framework of this study, perception of difficulty is especially focused on aural reception, writing and reading ability. The study offers a preliminary investigation on the connections between performance, expectations and perceptions of difficulty in the first-level Chinese language learning process.

1 Introduction

Chinese language learning (and, consequently, teaching in Italy) has been constantly expanding in recent years and is bound to grow further due to the interest of students and various institutions, at all levels. While Italian university instructors

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have developed a structured teaching method due to a long tradition of Chinese teaching, teaching methodology in secondary schools has only recently come under the scrutiny of researchers and still requires much in-depth study and improvement.

Chinese language teaching in secondary schools was formally recognized by the Italian Ministry of Education as an official language of the National Didactic Curriculum in 2014.[1] In 2012, the first national Chinese Secondary School Teacher Training Course was held in four different universities in Italy, training about 60 Chinese Teachers nationwide.[2] These are just two of the reasons which have led the authors to believe that the number of Italian secondary school students studying Chinese language will rapidly increase in the next few years (See and Ching 2013).

Although widely known, learning a second language which is typologically distant from the mother tongue influences the acquisition process in terms of learning time and effort (Giacalone 1994; Ellis 1994). Thus, in contrast to learning languages typologically similar to Italian (such as European languages which are part of the National Didactic Curriculum), learning and, consequently, teaching Chinese assumes different requirements of effort and time for Italian mother-tongue learners and teachers.

Researchers need to properly focus on every aspect of this new didactic area. This study is intended to offer an initial investigation of the expectations and perceptions of beginner students of Chinese in Italy. Indeed, reports from experienced CSL teachers show how, after a first few months of study, students generally experience learning frustration because of the perception that the language is too difficult. They often become demotivated to the point of failing to complete the course(s) they have enrolled in.

It is well known that in second language learning, motivation – defined as an intention "to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (Gardner 1985: 10) – is a very important element. Several studies have demonstrated that it is a considerable factor; capable of significantly influencing success and language acquisition speed – low motivation is generally connected to bad learning results (Gardner 1985; Ellis 1994; Csizér and Dörnyei 2005; Bettoni 2001). Although many discussions concerning various types of motivation and their correlation to many different factors involved in the learning process are still ongoing, it is undisputed that motivation is an effective impulse to learn a second language (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Dörnyei 1994). In the context of higher education explored by this study, students were learning a foreign language in their "native" setting and did not have any real communicative need to use it. For these reasons, learning motivation must be kept high; stimulating students'

[1] Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR.AOODGPER.REGISTROUFFICIALE(U).0003560.11-04-2014), www.istruzione.it.

[2] According to the Italian Ministry of Education Decree N. 249, September 10th, 2010, any secondary school teacher that desires to be employed on a long term contract is required to possess this type of training certificate.

satisfaction, enjoyment and interest in studying is fundamental, otherwise learning difficulties can easily prevail, leading to students' frustration.

Since learning satisfaction/enjoyment is considered an important motivating factor (Ellis 1994; Dörnyei 2001), expectations can play a significant role in Chinese didactics. Despite students' growing interest in learning Chinese, they generally approach it without any previous knowledge of the peculiarities of Chinese language.

Moreover, it should be considered that students who choose to study Chinese in secondary school, enroll in a long study process of 5 years that must be completed. Until recently, in Italy, Chinese language has been mainly taught at university level, where students may elect to change their curriculum or their major after an initial period of study. A different set of rules applies to the study of CSL in secondary schools. For these students, the learning process lasts for a period of up to 5 years with the added risk of affecting scholastic and even personal growth, particularly if they are not involved in and fascinated by the subject. For these reasons, exploring students' expectations, perceptions of difficulties and real difficulties in learning, becomes a crucial aspect in the learning and teaching process, allowing teachers and researchers to understand these factors in order to find ways to avoid detrimentally affecting the learning process. Therefore, the purpose of teaching does not only concern linguistic and communicative goals, but must also motivate students and increase their curiosity; offering different activities which involve cultural and social aspects, which can serve as an opportunity to also engage those students who experience difficulties in language learning.

Several studies have been conducted to offer an initial exploration of the difficulty of Chinese learning by Anglophone learners (Samimy and Lee 1997; Huang 2000; Bergman and Cheng 2001; Chiang 2002; Nisbet et al. 2005; Hu 2010).

At the same time, in Italy, with interest in Chinese learning increasing and the number of Italian learners growing constantly,[3] a limited number of studies has been carried out on teaching and learning. A number of these investigations mainly focus on teaching materials (Ardizzoni 2012), curriculum design or teaching methodology (AA.VV 2011; Langè 2012). This is probably due to the fact that Chinese teaching in secondary schools has only recently been officially established.

Despite the fact that motivation, expectations and learning satisfaction (enjoyability) are essential factors in the learning process, so far, few studies investigating beginner CSL learners' expectations have been carried out in Italian secondary schools. For this reason, the decision was made to explore beginner Chinese learners, attempting to classify aspects of difficulties that can affect the long-term process of learning Chinese. Might the learning success of some motivated learners be affected by initially wrong difficulty perceptions and expectations?

The results of this study are intended to be an initial investigation in order to find ways to facilitate the student learning process.

[3] See:http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2013-02-08/istituto-confucio-pisa-corsi-cinese142302.shtml?uuid=AbIxwVSH, accessed on February 8th, 2013.

2 Research Purpose

In order to find out and understand the main problems that Italian learners of Chinese must face during their first approach to the Chinese language, the following factors are explored: expectations, perceptions of difficulties and performance. Regarding these three areas, the analysis, in particular, will explore: (1) students' expectations regarding Chinese language learning; (2) students' perceptions of difficulty in learning Chinese, in order to find out which particular language features might be the cause(s) of learning frustration, when (and if) learning frustration appears; (3) how students' expectations and perceptions of difficulty affect their success (performance) in learning Chinese. Together with the focus on students' expectations and perceptions of difficulties, through the analysis of this last factor, our objective is to investigate if, and at what level, these perceptions of difficulties have a real impact on the learning process and how they affect performance.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' expectations with regard to learning Chinese?
2. What do students perceive as the main difficulties of learning Chinese?
3. Do these perceived difficulties affect performance? If so, in which areas do they affect performance?

3 Research Method

The research method consisted of several phases, including: selection of respondents, data collection, data analysis and the evaluation of findings. The first priority was the selection of respondents. Eighty-five students of Chinese language, belonging to four different institutions where the authors of this paper teach Chinese, took part in the research. All students participating in these Chinese classes were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix A) after studying Chinese for a period of 4 months. Students were informed that they were taking part in a study conducted by their teachers, aimed at improving Chinese teaching procedures (Dörnyei 2003).

3.1 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire[4] consisted of two sections. Section A focused on expectations concerning learning Chinese. It consisted of 17 statements, including two open questions, where students were asked to indicate their expectation levels on a five-point scale (completely agree, agree, partially agree, disagree, completely disagree).

[4] See Appendix A.

In section A, items A1, A2 and A3, dealt with the respondents' expectations toward the Chinese learning process. Item A4 presented an open question asking what students expected to be capable of at the end of the first year of study. Item A5 dealt with learning satisfaction, while items A6, A7 and A8 asked about difficulties encountered and the amount of effort required to learn Chinese. Items A9 through A14 concerned respondents' beliefs pertaining to the relationship(s) between Chinese and other languages they know, as a comparison of difficulty for learning or structural similarities. The questionnaire also investigated learner expectations in learning achievements (items A15, A16). Finally, item A17 asked about their intention to continue studying Chinese.

Section B focused on perceptions of difficulties. It presented 29 statements, including two open questions, addressing the following: aural reception, aural production, reading, writing, grammar and spoken interaction. Once more, students had to express their perception of the level of difficulty on a five-point scale (very difficult, difficult, medium, easy, very easy). Focus information on the contents of Section B is presented in the findings paragraph, together with the contents of the proficiency test.

All collected data referring to expectations and to perceptions of difficulties were calculated to obtain descriptive percentage values. For analysis of the data, in order to obtain results that could allow better focus on main trends, it was decided to reduce the five-point scale to a three-point scale. Elaborating the graph in such a manner meant that although only three levels were shown, it was possible to obtain a clearer observation outcome.

In order to achieve the three-point values, the analysis of data pertaining to expectations combined the results of "completely agree" with "agree", and "disagree" with "completely disagree". Thus, the interpretation of data, as obtained by the graph representation considered for analysis, was based on three groups of values: agree, partially agree and disagree. Secondly, in this section, it was decided to combine the data regarding questions that focused on similar aspects. This was carried out in order to identify the main trends referring to beginner Chinese learners according to their achievement expectations, perceptions of effort required for learning and learning satisfaction.

For the analysis of difficulty perception data, levels 1 and 2 (very difficult, difficult) were incorporated into one single value, as were levels 4 and 5 (easy, very easy). The levels represented by the graph were then changed to show three levels: "difficult", "medium" and "easy".

In the last phase, students were asked to complete a proficiency test (Barni 2000) that was created according to the six areas investigated in the survey (Appendix B). Results were analyzed and reduced to numerical values, using a scale of three-point values (excellent, sufficient, insufficient) in order to obtain descriptive statistics for the six areas.

At this point, a comparison was made between the statistical results of difficulty perception and performance in the six areas investigated in order to explore if these difficulties were merely perceived, or if they were indeed affecting student language improvement and the learning process.

4 Survey Respondents

The survey participants consisted of beginner Chinese learners from four different academic institutions all located in the Marche region, in central Italy (Appendix C). Eleven of the respondents were university students from the "University of Urbino". They were 20–27 years old and enrolled in a 3-year academic course of Chinese language as a major. During each academic year, they should receive 250 h of conversation lessons with a mother-tongue lecturer and 30 h of Chinese grammar lessons.

Three of the learning institutions involved were secondary schools that offer Chinese language courses, although conditions did vary by school. Forty-nine of the respondents were first-year students (14–15 years old) from "Liceo Linguistico Benincasa", a linguistic secondary school that offers compulsory Chinese language courses. Students of this institution were enrolled in a 5-year language course. In the first 2 years they must attend three classes every week, one of which is taught by a Chinese mother-tongue teacher. In the last 3 years, they attend four classes a week. The fourth class is dedicated to Chinese culture and literature. Besides this, in the third year, the school provides the opportunity to go on a short study tour to China. Participation is not compulsory for students, but the trip takes place during the school year and is considered a curricular activity. As we can see, similarly to the university students, this group of respondents took part in a long-term Chinese language course. This contrasted with the remainder of the respondents from "Liceo Scientifico Marconi" (11 respondents) and "Itis – Technical Secondary School Enrico Mattei" (14 respondents), who took part in short-term language courses, as their schools do not offer compulsory courses. The former offers Chinese language as curricular subject, but it is included among elective courses. The Chinese class is mixed and composed of students between 15 and 17 years old, (second to fourth year students). Students receive 50 h of Chinese lessons per year and no mother-tongue lecturer is provided. Students from the second institute take part in an 18-h per year, elective and non-curricular Chinese language course. Students are between 16 and 17 years old (belonging to the third or fourth year) and those that attend the course obtain didactic credits.

5 Findings and Discussion on Learning Expectations

This section describes findings connected to the three research questions. It begins by laying out students' learning expectations with reference to research question number one. The following part highlights two different sets of outcomes: firstly, the perceptions of main difficulties, which were drawn from the results of the questionnaire with reference to research question number two, and, secondly, the relationship between the perception of difficulty and actual performance. This is drawn from comparing responses given to the questionnaire with proficiency test results, with reference to research question number three.

Section A of the questionnaire is dedicated to expectations. Statements were created to investigate students' beliefs about the Chinese learning process.

The main area investigates students' prior information about the Chinese language and their learning expectations before commencing Chinese classes. Italian learners generally approach the study of Chinese with little or no knowledge of the language's characteristics; sometimes they even possess incorrect information. When students were asked about their familiarity with the language before starting study, results confirmed this general trend: 69% of respondents did not know anything about Chinese language, while the remainder possessed summary information concerning Chinese language. They knew it is a language that uses characters and tones. A number were familiar with the term *nihao*, used to say "hello", and some knew how to pronounce a few numbers.

Keeping in mind the fact that the students lacked any real knowledge of what they were about to face, it was of interest to discover what competences students expected to acquire during the first year of study. The most common answers referred to the following topics: "Introducing myself; talking about my life, interests, etc., basic conversation skills; asking for information if I get lost; basic, but grammatically correct, speaking skills". Students revealed realistic learning expectations, most likely due to information they had already learned. It must be considered that students took part in the research study after a 4 month period of study. Thus, the little information they had acquired up to that point could probably motivate respondents to set their answers towards a credible acquisition process.

This area also investigated students' beliefs relating to the comparison of Chinese with other foreign languages. Almost all the respondents declared that Chinese was not similar to any other language they knew; one of the respondents claimed similarities to the Japanese language, while a second respondent identified grammatical similarities with English grammar.

The second main area of research investigated students' expectations and beliefs about effort required in studying Chinese. One statement asked students to range their perception of effort referring to the Chinese learning process compared to other languages. The results indicated that 49% of respondents believed that studying Chinese requires more effort compared to other languages, 39% of respondents agreed that it is similar to studying other languages, while 17% partially agreed. Referring to expectations of learning competences in Chinese, compared to learning competences in other languages, all the respondents had quite high expectations: 52% declared that they would be as competent in Chinese as they would be in French, German, English and Spanish. A further 19% partially agreed and only 29% disagreed. The majority of students consider Chinese a 'different' foreign language, confirming the results of the study by Yang and Medwell (2017).[5] Their study investigated English university and school students' beliefs about leaning Chinese, and found that Chinese is harder to learn, compared to non-European languages.

The questionnaire also presented a statement exploring the level of effort required to learn Chinese. According to these statements, the results were heavily one-sided:

[5]Yang and Medwell's paper is contained within this same volume, Chap. 6.

90% of students expected and were prepared for the effort level required. Considering the previous results concerning effort required for studying Chinese, it can be assumed that almost all the learners expected the study of Chinese to be difficult.

Findings referring to students' beliefs on the difficulty of studying Chinese, before actually starting to learn Chinese, also proved to be of significant interest. A clear difference was noted between students of institutions/schools offering long-term and short-term language courses. The majority of the former claimed that studying Chinese was less difficult than they expected, while the latter claimed that Chinese was more difficult than they initially thought. Referring to the above results, which demonstrate that students recognized that a high level of effort is required in learning Chinese, we can assume that "effort required" most likely played a role in these responses and that students attending short-term language courses do not put enough effort into the learning process, thus perceiving it as more difficult.

For the most part, these findings demonstrated that students were aware that learning Chinese probably requires more effort compared to learning other languages, but they also showed that students firmly believed that they could obtain high competence in Chinese.

The remaining research statements explored expectations on learning achievement and satisfaction. The majority of respondents, 74%, thought that achieving a high level of competence in Chinese is difficult, 19% partially agreed and only 7% believed it to be easy. Despite the fact that the majority considered learning Chinese to be a difficult process, the collected data registered a high level of learning satisfaction. Some statements asked students to range their satisfaction regarding teaching method, teaching pace, topics presented, etc. Data from these statements showed that most students' expectations were satisfied. This point seems to be confirmed by students' intentions to continue the study of Chinese. Although respondents gave mostly affirmative answers, the figures showed some discrepancy. 100% of the university group respondents and 96% of the "Liceo Lingusitico Benincasa" respondents claimed they would continue studying Chinese, while only 55% of the "Liceo Scientifico Marconi" respondents and 50% of the "Itis – Technical Secondary School Enrico Mattei" respondents claimed similarly. These results, as previous findings have shown, highlight the difference between respondents enrolled in long-term and short-term courses. Those students attending long-term courses were determined to continue learning Chinese, while those enrolled in short-term courses, were much less determined (a ratio of almost 2:1).

6 Findings and Discussion on Perception and Performance

This section describes the results of comparing perception and performance in the six areas investigated by the research. The cross analysis of these data will allow us to point out which aspects are responsible for student learning frustration/learning motivation during the Chinese language learning process. Focusing on sources of learning frustration, learning motivation factors, as well as the impact of frustration

and motivation on performance, is of fundamental significance for teachers, providing them with the ability to bring teaching strategies in line with precise targets.

Through questionnaire statements and a proficiency test, some light was shed on some aspects of students' preferred cognitive styles (in some parts of the questionnaire there are statements asking students about their preferred method(s) to learn pronunciation and characters); on what they consider to be the more enjoyable aspects of learning; on what the main obstacles are in the learning process. In addition, utilizing two research instruments, in this case a questionnaire and a test, enabled understanding of what students were aware of (perceived difficulties) and, conversely, unaware of.

6.1 Aural Reception

The first area investigated was aural reception. The task students were asked to fulfill matches the abilities required for first-level learners during the first months of learning, specifically concerning the field of phonetics, that is: being able to recognize monosyllables, polysyllables and their tones.

A very common method (Masini et al. 2010; Abbiati 2010; Li 2008) used to teach beginner students during the first period of teaching Chinese phonetics (the length of period varies according to the type of course) is to focus on presenting pronunciation exercises aimed at practicing the whole set of Mandarin Chinese syllables declined in the four tones. This is done in order to make students familiar with sounds they never pronounce in their mother tongue. Presenting phonetics on the basis of the syllable framework, instead of solely through initials and finals, is a method connected to the tradition of the Chinese conceptual framework of phonetics (Sun 2006).

The exercises utilized in this method are solely aimed at reproducing sounds and tones, as well as to train students to become able to identify – in the reception phase – which sound corresponds with the transcription given by the pinyin Romanization system. In this phase, the focus is not on the connection between phonetic and semantic aspects.

Based on this method, which was practiced by all the research respondents, a number of statements were formulated in the questionnaire concerning the difficulty of recognizing monosyllables, polysyllables and tones. As previously mentioned, the preferred learning method for phonetics was also explored.

During the proficiency test exercise, students were asked to listen to a recorded voice and write down what they heard. The content of the listening exercise was made up of five monosyllables (*yǒu; chén; lǜ; xiān; sǎn*) testing some of the critical aspects students come face to face with in the learning process, such as the distinction between the different tones (especially second and third); the distinction between final /ən/ and final /ɤŋ/; and the capacity to recognize and transcribe the final /y/; the transcription of the final /i̯ɛn/ (which Italian students, influenced by their mother tongue, often transcribe as "ien" instead of "ian"). The polysyllables

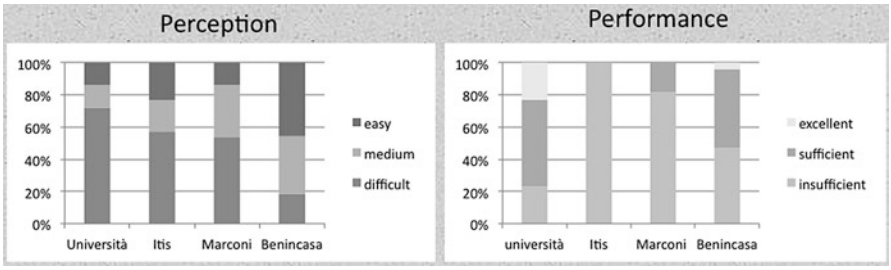


Fig. 1 Aural reception analysis

(*yīfú; shǔjià; yánjiūshēng; gōngjiāochē; zìshíqílì*) were mainly aimed at testing the capacity of students to assemble more syllables and different tones together, to recognize different finals that are transcribed with the same vowel (as in "*zìshíqílì*" where we have /i/ as opposed to /ɯ/) and to see how final pronunciation changes according to the syllable that follows in the same word.

Figure 1 shows two graphs: analyzed and aggregated data from the questionnaire (Perception Graph) on the left, and from the proficiency test (Performance Graph) on the right. The "Perception Graph" shows that students from three out of the four institutions perceive listening as "difficult" or "medium" (except for "Benincasa", where "easy" rated more than double the percentage of "difficult"). The "Performance Graph" shows that, except for "University", the majority of students had fairly high "insufficient" percentage rates.

As a third step, it was necessary to look into the relationship between perception and performance results. Analysis showed that there is a correspondence between perception and performance at three of the four educational institutions. This means that students who declared perceiving listening as "difficult", actually had high insufficiency rates. The only exception is represented by "University" students, as they declared listening "difficult", but still performed very well. This is probably due to the fact that at university level, students are conscious of the difficulty of mastering Chinese phonetics (the reason why they declare it is difficult), but during their courses they have the opportunity to engage in extensive training in this area and they generally put in more effort than secondary school students (which will be hypothesized on later).

In general, it should also be pointed out that for all of the students, as expected, the most challenging task consisted of identifying tones in polysyllabic compounds. Concerning syllabic transcription, the most challenging polysyllable was *yánjiūshēng* as, in order to transcribe it without error, students had to remember three particular features of Chinese phonetics: the sound /i̯ɛn/ must be transcribed as "yan" and not "yen" (a very common mistake); the sound /tɕi̯oʊ̯/ often transcribed as "gio", the final /ɤŋ/ often confused with /ən/.

The final piece of information which emerged from data analysis is that students that perceived listening as difficult and had the worst performance results were the ones attending short-term, non-compulsory courses, lacking a mother-tongue teacher (see Fig. 1: "Marconi" and "Itis").

6.2 Aural Production

This section presents the same characteristics of the previous section for what concerns survey statements and testing. The questionnaire asked how difficult respondents considered the pronunciation of single syllables, polysyllables and their corresponding tones. In the proficiency test, the assigned task was to: "read and pronounce" monosyllables, polysyllables and their tones. Respondents were presented with words written in pinyin on the test sheet, which they had to read aloud. Their responses were recorded.[6] The monosyllables were: *qì, lóng, zhòng, cuǐ*; the polysyllables were: *niǔyuē, shàngkè, fànmàijī, pútáoyárén*.

The most common and widespread mistakes were made with "zhòng" and "cuǐ" – especially the latter, where L1 has a negative interference. In Italian, this word would be pronounced /kui/, consequently many students pronounced /kui/ instead of /tsʰueɪ̯/. As in the previous section, here too, the majority of problems for students had to do with polysyllabic compounds and the majority of them failed to pronounce the correct sequence of tones. This appears clearly in the analysis of the proficiency test results, as we considered "tone" and "syllable" results separately. Pronunciation was generally perceived as easier than listening by students of all the institutions and, despite the mistakes described above, this perception was confirmed by testing results. In fact, in this section, success rate was much higher than before (see Fig. 2 for detailed percentages).

The above figures also show the correspondence between perception and performance, especially at "University" and "Benincasa". The students with the worst performance results were again those attending short-term, non-compulsory courses.

This data allows us to assume that motivation to achieve good competence in basic pronunciation exercises arises not from enjoyment or usefulness in terms of communicative interaction, but rather relies on the commitment to invest in future competence. This hypothesis could explain why the "University" students took this area of learning more seriously (they considered it difficult to acquire a good pronunciation level) and why they generally performed better.

This is also pointed out in Yang and Medwell (2017), where the authors emphasize that, according to their respondents, "listening for understanding is more difficult than speaking" and underlined that sometimes the importance of pinyin is underestimated by students. According to their study, students – although they recognize the importance of pronunciation and tones – very often declare that they do

	UNIVERSITY	ITIS	MARCONI	BENINCASA
PERCEPTION[10]	65%	50%	65%	70%
PERFORMANCE[11]	100%	35%	28%	55%

Fig. 2 Aural production percentages

[6] All of the students were recorded. These recording were listened to and analyzed by the same person, a mother tongue CSL teacher.

not really pay attention to them when speaking and also declare that they have a hard time identifying tones when they are pronounced by someone else.

The information drawn by these data suggests some interesting teaching implications. It has been acknowledged that phonetic exercises do not stimulate motivation, nor do they help basic communicative interaction; besides, awareness exists that long-term students require solid practice of Mandarin Chinese pronunciation. This means that short and long-term courses require different approaches. In the case of short-term courses, it is probably not worth spending time on these types of exercises. With long-term courses, especially when it comes to secondary school students, phonetic exercises should be made more gratifying, using "enjoyability" to enhance motivation.[7]

6.3 Reading

Concerning the area of reading, in the perception phase, questions were asked concerning "reading" a character in terms of understanding/seeing how many strokes it is made up of or which radicals compose it. Questions were also asked regarding recall capacity in terms of pronunciation and meaning (e.g. how difficult it is to recall a characters' pronunciation and/or meaning while reading a simple text). Finally, inquiries were made about deduction capacities, asking whether students would find it easy to deduce the meaning of unknown characters within a familiar context.

The respondents were tested on these abilities during the testing phase. The first exercise asked them to write down (in Chinese) the translation of a word presented in Italian, to write down the stroke order and the number of strokes. The second exercise asked them to identify the radicals composing an unknown character. The third exercise asked them to guess the meaning of unknown characters in a familiar phrase context (Fig. 3).

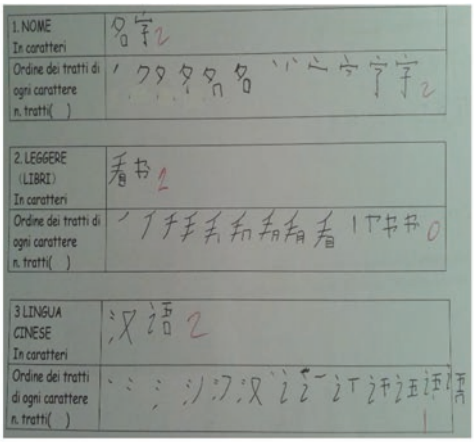
Comparing perception and performance data led to the discovery that there was no correspondence between perception and performance in this area. It was interesting to observe that most students failed to correctly identify character stroke order; it was very rare to find a test sheet with no mistakes at all. This result does not match the perception of students, who, with an average rate of 60%, declared it easy to identify the number of strokes and their order.

On the other hand, in the perception phase, they considered the identification of radicals quite difficult, but, in the proficiency test, the majority of respondents (of all four institutions) was easily capable of identifying radicals, even in unknown characters.

In the perception questionnaire, when asked how difficult it is to guess the meaning of unknown words in a familiar context, students declared it "difficult", yet testing proved their capacity for deduction to be extremely strong (40% excellent, 27% sufficient, 33% insufficient). The majority were able to deduce that the first two words were proper nouns, the third a nationality and that the fourth was a word indicating kinship.

These results lead to a number of important implications for teaching. Students' awareness of their capacity for deduction should be reinforced, while more empha-

[7] For a definition of enjoyability and motivation see Freddi (1990), Balboni (2002), Caon (2004).



What do you think to be the meaning characters in red?
你好！ 你是谁？
我是马克，我是王玉的朋友，我是台湾人，王玉的爸爸也是我的朋友。

Fig. 3 Reading test examples

sis should be placed on radicals. This would result in making radicals even more familiar to students, so that they may utilize radicals, combined with their general capacity for deduction, to strengthen reading skills, as well as their ability to memorize characters, radicals, etc.

6.4 Writing

In the written production area, perception and performance were also found to not correspond. In the perception part, students were asked about the difficulty of writing characters according to precise rules (stroke order and direction, spatial balance). Concerning performance, a number of characteristics were looked at, such as: how many characters they could remember (and consequently write down without any help), whether these characters respected correct dimensions and whether they remembered the rules for writing each character (this data was obtained through the stoke order exercise, used in the previous section).

Students did generally perceive this ability as difficult, but after 4 months of learning, they were capable of writing Chinese to a fairly good degree, although they did make some mistakes. The most frequent mistakes found in the proficiency tests consisted of: not respecting the spatial balance between the radicals composing a character, forgetting to write certain strokes, joining some strokes together, dividing a single stroke into two parts and confusing radicals (for example mixing up the radical for the word “讠” with the radical for heart “忄” or with the radical for person “亻” as in: 请, 情, 倩).

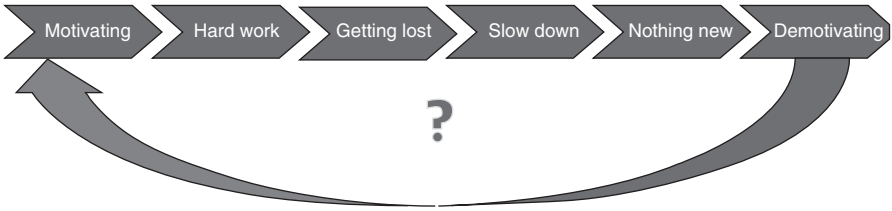


Fig. 4 The "Hanzi Empasse"

The major problem facing many students is that they have a rather hard time memorizing characters. This is a very common situation, described by the authors as the "hanzi empasse", a term invented for the purpose of this study (Fig. 4).

We know that studying characters is one of the reasons why many people take up Chinese language learning. During the first approach to learning the language, characters can be a very appealing and motivating aspect. Later on, when the number of characters grows, memorizing becomes very hard work and it is easy to get lost, especially for secondary school students, who are not as constant in their studies. When the majority of students gets lost, the teacher must slow down. As a result, adding new content becomes difficult, which may lead to learners becoming bored and demotivated. "How to get back to motivation?" is an issue that will require further research. One of the aspects that will need to be focused on in this field is whether it would be necessary and effective for teachers to train their students on specific memorization techniques, in order to provide students a sound method to cement characters in their minds.

In the questionnaire, students were also requested to rate some memorization techniques, from most to least effective. Surprisingly, students prioritized the techniques in the following order:

1. Writing the character several times
2. Writing a sentence containing the character several times
3. Memorizing the radicals composing the character
4. Looking at the character several times, without writing it down.

Students are convinced that repetition can be a good method for memorizing, but, from the teaching side, it is well-known that they do not do so. This can be attributed to various reasons (lack of effort, lack of time, etc.). Although students approve this method, this is probably not the best method for this typology of student (especially referring to secondary school students).

It is hypothesized that working on capacity of deduction (as assumed for reading) and on the fixation of radicals could also be a helpful strategy in the area of written production.

6.5 Grammar

The fifth learning area to be analyzed was grammar. In the perception phase, most students declared to perceive grammar as "easy" and grammar based tasks were not considered challenging. In the performance phase, students were first asked to place words in order to compose sentences, secondly they had to make sentences using the function words: 呢 *ne*, 的 *de*, 吗 *ma*. In fact, in the perception phase, word order and function words were specifically inquired upon.

Here, once more, perception and performance corresponded. Students perceived it as "easy" and performed quite well. It can thus be stated, that at beginner level, grammar is generally not a source of learning frustration. Generally, students performed better with function words, than with word order. Surprisingly, they perceived 呢 *ne* as the most difficult function word to learn. In light of this, perhaps less surprising was the fact that this was the area in which they performed the worst.

The general teaching implication for results gathered in this area is the fact that grammar is easy and can be utilized as a motivating aspect for students. What is more, at this stage, grammar is not an obstacle, which allows focus on other critical aspects.

6.6 Communicative Ability

Concerning communicative ability, in the perception questionnaire, students were asked to state how easy or difficult they would consider some basic communicative tasks (introducing myself, basic classroom conversation with my Chinese teacher, etc.), whereas in the testing phase they were asked to imagine a dialogue among the people represented in the image below. The dialogue could be written both in characters or pinyin, as the task objective was communication (Fig. 5).

In this area, perception and performance once more correspond. This is another area perceived by students as "easy" to master in the questionnaire and matched good performance results for the majority of them. The only exception was the 18-h "Itis" CSL course, as revealed in Fig. 6.

Interestingly, "Marconi" results (the other institute offering a short-term course), show that in the first level classes, as long as the teacher used a communicative teaching method,[8] good results (in terms of capacity of communication) could be achieved, despite the lack of a mother-tongue teacher. In fact, students participating in this course perceived communicative ability as "easy" and in the performance phase, the rate of success (sufficient or excellent) was higher than 70%.

These findings could be related to the results of Yang and Medwell's study (in this volume). They observed that according to students, the ability to converse is considered less important than learning to read and write, suggesting that students "focus more on linguistic forms and written scripts, rather than spoken Chinese". This most

[8] All the students who took part in the research were taught using a method that prefers the communicative based task approach, rather than grammar based task approach.

likely takes place because – as the learning setting emphasizes a communicative teaching approach – students believe writing and reading abilities to be more difficult, as teaching is probably less focused on those abilities (confirming our study 6.3, 6.4).

The teaching implications that can be drawn from these data is that acquiring good competence in communication is a very strong motivational aspect and an important source of satisfaction, which should be used to reinforce the more critical aspects observed above, especially in an L2 environment, where opportunities for authenticity are rare.

7 Conclusions

With respect to the first research question, the study reveals that the majority of respondents are aware that learning Chinese as a second language requires active effort. Despite this, expectations of potential capabilities for learning Chinese are very high. Data shows significant differences between students enrolled in long-term courses, who do not consider study effort an obstacle, and those students enrolled in short-term courses, who believe that effort can play a role in the continuation of their learning. Findings suggest that teachers and researchers should consider differences between short and long-term study periods when planning Chinese language courses, keeping in mind that short-term Chinese courses can influence learners in the direction of low motivation and expectation(s).

Concerning the second goal of the research – finding which linguistic features are perceived as more difficult to learn and might be a cause of learning frustration – results show that these factors are mainly represented by aural reception (listening), written production (writing) and written reception (reading).

The third phase of the study investigated the influence of perceived difficulties on students' performances according to the six areas investigated by the survey. The comparison between perception data and performance results revealed that perception and performance (for all six abilities) do not always completely correspond.

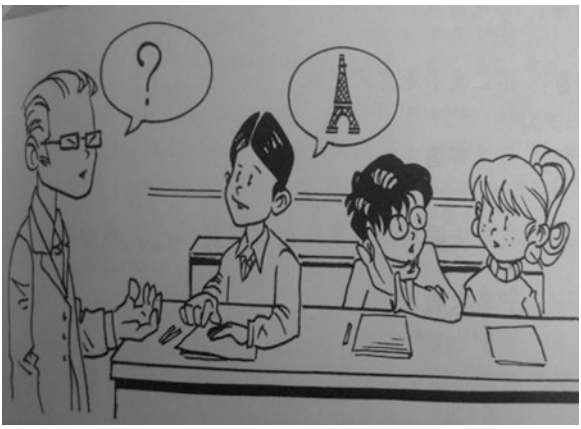


Fig. 5 Picture presented for communicative ability task (Image source: Masini et al. 2010: 59)

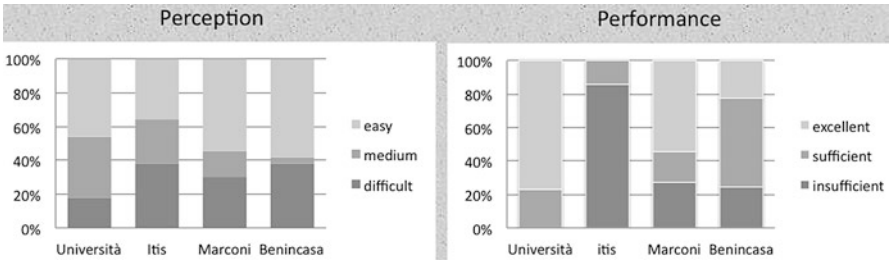


Fig. 6 Data analysis for communicative ability

Aural reception (listening) raises critical points related to the kind of course respondents are attending. Conforming to the general perception of any second language learner, aural reception is perceived as the most difficult ability to achieve (Krashen 1982; Rost 1994) and, effectively, mainly corresponds with bad performance results. According to the results of perception and performance of this ability, it can be assumed that it could be the cause of learning frustration. For this reason, teachers should motivate learners to understand that these efforts should be considered an investment in future competence and to make the acquisition of the ability of aural reception more enjoyable for learners with alternate strategies. In contrast to reception, aural production (speaking) is perceived easier and this perception is confirmed by good performance results.

Unexpectedly, written production and written reception, both perceived as difficult abilities to learn, did not correspond with performance, where students obtained relatively good results. Generally, written abilities – in the perception, as well as production phase – represent both motivating and demotivating aspects. Thus, teachers should focus on strengths, such as radicals and students' capacity for deduction, to reinforce motivation. Grammar is not a reason for concern in the first year of study. The correspondence with good performance results confirms perception data; this is a motivating factor and allows teachers to focus on more critical aspects.

For students, communicative ability is perceived as "easy" to acquire and the proficiency test showed good performance from the majority of the groups. This indicates that, during first-level learning, good performance of communicative skills is not closely related to the presence of a mother-tongue lecturer and represents a significant motivational factor.

Finally, this type of testing process and surveying serves a useful tool for language instructors to better understand their students' difficulties and expectations, and for students themselves to assess and reflect on their expectations, perceptions and performance.

The results of this study – focusing on the analysis of expectations and perceptions of difficulty and performance in CSL learning – are aimed at contributing to research, in order to find ways to facilitate learners in the CSL learning process. Nonetheless, further research is necessary in order to elaborate proper teaching approaches and strategies to confront critical learning stages faced by first-level Chinese language students.

Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire

DIFFICULTIES AND EXPECTATIONS OF FIRST LEVEL CHINESE SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

This questionnaire aims to research expectations and difficulties in first-level Chinese language learning. Respondents' personal information will be kept confidential and will only be used for data elaboration.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name_____ age_____ mother tongue_____ Gender M_____ F_____
School certificate _____
Chinese course type _____
Institution _____
Course length
I have studied Chinese since (indicate period of time):_____

EXPECTATIONS CONCERNING CHINESE LEARNING

Please rate the level you agree with the following statements by choosing from 1 to 5 on the scale. (1) Completely agree, (2) agree, (3) partially agree, (4) disagree, (5) completely disagree.

		1	2	3	4	5
A.1	What I have learned in Chinese to the present day corresponds with expectation I had before starting.					
A.2	What I learned in Chinese to the present day is more than I expected before starting.					
A.3	Attending the whole course will allow me to acquire the linguistic competence I expected.					
A.4	At the end of the first yea,r I expect to be capable of (for example: introducing myself, talking about what I like, etc.): …… …… ……					
A.5	I am satisfied with the pace of the course (the time the teacher spends on each unit)					
A.6	The effort required to learn how to read and write corresponds to the expectations I had before starting.					
A.7	Before starting to learn, I believed Chinese to be more difficult.					
A.8	I can easily acquire the competences presented in the course.					
A.9	I knew some features of Chinese language before starting the course (yes–1, no–5)					

A.10	Which ones? ……					
A.11	I know the following other foreign languages (even at elementary level): 1._____2._____3._____4_____.					
A.12	I think Chinese is similar to other languages I know					
A 13	Which languages?..... In which features?::::::::::					
A.14	Studying Chinese requires the same effort from me as studying other languages like German, English, French or Spanish					
A.15	Attending this course, I expect to acquire the same competences I would acquire attending German, English, French, Spanish courses					
A.16	I think acquiring a good competence in Chinese is difficult					
A.17	I plan to continue studying Chinese					

DIFFICULTIES PERCEIVED IN STUDYING CHINESE

Please rate the level of difficulty related to the following statements by choosing from 1 to 5 on the scale.
(1) Very difficult (2) Difficult (3) Medium (4) Easy (5) Very easy

		1	2	3	4	5
B.1	Ability to recognize the pronunciation of single syllables					
B.2	Ability to recognize the pronunciation of polysyllabic words					
B.3	Ability to recognize tones in single syllables					
B.4	Ability to recognize tones in polysyllabic words					
B.5	What are, according to your experience, the most effective ways to learn the pronunciation of syllables and tone (rate from 1 to 5 the methods given in the tab according to their effectiveness: 1 as the least effective, 5 as the most effective)					
	Listening to my textbook CD and repeat					
	Listening to online materials (YouTube videos, online Chinese lessons)					
	Doing classroom exercises with my Chinese teacher					
	Listening and repeating with my schoolmates					
	Listening to mother tongue friends					
	Others ……					

C.1	Ability to pronounce single syllables					
C.2	Ability to pronounce syllables in polysyllabic words (such as: *xuésheng, lǎoshīmen*)					
C.3	Ability to pronounce tones in single syllables					
C.4	Ability to pronounce tones in polysyllabic words (such as: *xuésheng, lǎoshīmen*)					

D.1	Ability to understand strokes' number and strokes' order of a character					
D.2	Ability to understand of which radicals/parts a character is made of					
D.3	Ability to read a text fluently while recalling the correct pronunciation of characters					
D.4	Ability to recall the meaning of characters while reading					
D.5	Ability to understand the overall meaning of a sentence while reading					
D.6	Ability to deduce the meaning of unknown characters within a familiar context					
D.7	Ability to distinguish the concepts of characters and the concepts of words					

E.1	Ability to write Chinese characters					
E.2	Ability to write a character while maintaining the harmony in space and dimensions					
E.3	Ability to follow the rules for characters writing (arder and direction of strokes)					
E.4	Ability to remember how to write characters					
E.5	What is, according to your experience, the most effective method to remember how to write a character? (rate from 1 to 5 the methods provided in the tab, according to their effectiveness: 1 as the least effective, 5 as the most effective)					
	Write a single character several times					
	Memorize of which radicals/parts a character is made of (for example 他 is composed by 亻 and 也)					
	Write several times a sentence containing that character					
	Look at the character several times without writing it down					
	Other					

F.1	Ability to use the particle 吗					
F.2	Ability to use the particle 呢					
F.3	Ability to use the particle 呢					
F.4	Ability to understand word order in Chinese sentences					
F.5	Which aspect of Chinese grammar that you have studied is easier to understand and employ for you?.....					

G.1	Greet people, ask "how are you?" and respond					
G.2	Ask and give simple personal information (like name, nationality, address, phone number)					
G.3	Interact spontaneously with your Chinese teacher using Chinese for simple classroom conversation					

Appendix B

The Proficiency Test

Student _____ Institution _____

SECTION (B oral production)

1. Read out the following words, paying attention to syllable(s) and tone(s)

qì	lóng	zhòng	cuǐ
niǔyuē	shàngkè	fānmàijī	pútáoyárén

2. Read out the following sentences 我们都是意大利人。我学习中文。她是我的女朋友，她有中文书。

SECTION B (oral reception)

1. Listen and write down the syllable(s) and tone(s) you hear

1_____	2_____	3_____	4_____	5_____
1	2	3	4	5

SECTIONS (D) (E) (F)

1. What is the Chinese for these words? Fill in the blank according to the instructions.

1. NAME In characters	
Stroke order and number ( )	

2. READ (BOOKS) In characters	
Stroke order and number ( )	

3 CHINESE LANGUAGE In characters	
Stroke order and number ( )	

2. Can you identify which radicals/parts the following characters are composed of?

坐	
题	
架	

3. Characters and Words

How many characters are there in the following sentence? How many words? Can you identify some radicals/parts?

你好，我是安娜，我是中国人，我是你们的老师，我们一起看电影吗？

4. What can you deduce?

What is the meaning of the underlined characters?

你好！ 你是谁？

我是马克，我是王玉的朋友，我是台湾人，王玉的爸爸也是我的朋友。

5. Please place the characters in the correct order and form two correct sentences
爸爸 不 他 是 我 老师 的

中国 你 朋友 的 是 吗？ 北京 人

6. Write three sentences using 吗, 的, 呢.

SECTION (G)
1. What are they saying? Imagine a dialogue in Chinese which can fit this picture (you can use characters or pinyin)

Appendix C

Description of Respondents

Institution	Number of students	Age	Type of course	Mother-tongue Lecturer	Course hours	Course Length
1. University Of Urbino	13	20–27	University course Chinese as major	yes	280/year 250/mother tongue lecturer + 30/grammar	3 years
2. Liceo Linguistico Benincasa Secondary school	49 Two classes	15	Compulsory curricular third language	yes	90/year 2 grammar classes + 1 mother tongue class/week	5 years
3. Liceo Scientifico Marconi Secondary school	11 Mixed class 2nd–4th school year	15–17	Elective curricular course	no	50/year	1 year
4. Mattei Technical secondary school	14 3rd–4th school year	16–17	Elective non- curricular course credited	no	18/year	1 year

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