

CHALLENGES IN ITALIAN LISTENING COMPREHENSION: PERSPECTIVES FROM CHINESE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of the Communicative Approach, the primary objective of second or foreign language acquisition is the ability to function effectively in real-world interactions (Balboni, Caon, 2015; Canale, Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). Central to this interaction is listening, a foundational yet often marginalized skill. While successful communication is impossible without oral comprehension, a persistent pedagogical bias exists: both instructors and learners frequently prioritize morpho-syntactic accuracy and oral production over the “invisible” challenges of decoding spoken input (Coonan, 2002: 54). Without robust listening competence, learners may achieve the ability to deliver polished monologues or academic presentations, yet remain fundamentally ill-equipped for the spontaneous, unscripted nature of real-life dialogue.

This paper examines the landscape of Italian language instruction within the university system of the People’s Republic of China (P.R.C.), specifically focusing on students majoring in Italian Studies. The core objective of this qualitative study is to investigate the methodologies and materials currently employed to develop listening comprehension and to identify possible issues. Adopting the paradigm of Action Research (AR) (Lewin, 1946; Kemmis, 1985; Easen, 1985; *inter alia*³), this study utilizes a systematic, bottom-up approach to analyze the educational reality from within the classroom (Coonan, 2000: 12). By diagnosing current issues, the research seeks to propose evidence-based pedagogical interventions. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, data were triangulated through a questionnaire administered to Italian language students across different Chinese universities, alongside semi-structured interviews with three Italian language educators. Through this dual perspective, the study identifies specific matters, culminating in a targeted pedagogical proposal for the Chinese academic context.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This paragraph examines the theoretical frameworks that informed the design of this qualitative study.

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³ While Kurt Lewin is acknowledged as the person who first used the term “action research”, many of his contemporaries contributed to the development of the idea: Collier in 1945, Lippitt and Radke in 1946, and Corey in 1953, to name a few (Hendricks, 2019).

2.1. *Listening comprehension in L2 pedagogy*

Listening comprehension is fundamentally one of the four pillars of language learning, alongside reading, oral, and written production. Nevertheless, it is frequently marginalized as a mere adjunct to speaking, likely due to its volatile, internal nature and a societal bias that overvalues the visible ability to speak (Brown, 2003: 119). From a cognitive perspective, however, listening is an exceptionally dynamic, non-linear process that adapts to situational variables (Aryadoust, Luo, 2022: 7; Imhof, 2010: 97). For all second language learners, but even more for university students majoring in a foreign language, this skill is the vital bridge to authentic interaction. It enables learners to engage in real-life conversations, which rarely follow a predetermined script, rather than simply producing monologues that, while useful in academic settings, fail to prepare them for unavoidable everyday human interaction (Wah, 2019: 24). A critical tension in current pedagogy is the gap between classroom materials and real-world linguistic environments. Spoken language in natural contexts is characterized by hesitations, disfluency, and ambient noise; in contrast, most teaching materials, particularly at lower levels, utilize sanitized, standard language with no background interference (Wagner, 2014: 45; Fujita, 2021: 12). The operationalization of successful listening has been extensively mapped through sub-skills⁴, primarily within testing frameworks (Aryadoust, 2013: 10; Buck, 2001: 31; Buck, Tatsuoka, 1998: 119; Liao, Yao, 2021: 205; O’Grady, 2021: 15). Goh and Aryadoust (2015: 111) synthesize these into a definitive taxonomy: (a) lexico-grammatical decoding (Shin, 2008), (b) understanding explicit information (Field, 2008), (c) recognizing paraphrases (Wagner, 2004), (d) identifying intentions and rhetorical clues (Vandergrift, 2007), (e) making inferences (Tsui, Fullilove, 1998), and (f) drawing conclusions (Liao, 2007; Sawaki *et al.*, 2009). Beyond these metrics, cognitive factors such as attention span and working memory (Bril *et al.*, 2021: 5), alongside psychological attitudes, significantly impact classroom outcomes⁵.

This study moves beyond test-taking purposes to examine how these variables influence second language acquisition in the specific context of Chinese learners. Learners employ diverse strategies to manage the real-time cognitive load of bottom-up decoding and top-down interpretation (O’Malley *et al.*, 1989; Vandergrift, 1997; Ma, 2017). Because oral communication rarely allows for exact repetition, yielding instead a re-statement with different wording (Buck, 2001: 6), the listener must constantly negotiate meaning (Gass, Mackey, 2006; Long, 1996; Nuzzo, Grassi, 2016). When this negotiation fails, it is often due to perception or parsing issues (Goh, 2000: 58), where a lack of prior knowledge or cultural clues prevents the formation of a coherent mental representation. While many instructors utilize pre-adapted materials to facilitate early assimilation (Richards, 2006; Grassi *et al.*, 2003), this study argues for a gradual transition to authentic input. Following Krashen’s (1985: 80) “Input + 1 theory” and the notion that incomprehensible input drives learning through negotiation (Long, 1996: 414), teaching materials must provide enough scaffolding for reflection without being entirely opaque. As Vandergrift and Baker (2015: 390) note, little is known about the variables contributing to L2 listening development. This paper addresses this gap by investigating the perspectives of Chinese university students and teachers of Italian.

⁴ Some made use of eye-tracking and neuroimaging (i.e., Aryadoust *et al.*, 2022; Batty, 2015; Suvorov, 2015). Different models of sub-skill for listening were hypothesized starting from the 70’s: Carroll (1972); Oakeshott-Taylor (1977); Aitken (1978) and Richards (1983); *inter alia*.

⁵ Many studies are concerned with, for example, anxiety (Chen *et al.*, 2021; Kimura, 2019; *inter alia*).

2.2. *Action Research: Bridging Theory and Practice*

To investigate these instructional dynamics, this study adopts an Action Research (AR) framework. Drawing upon Carr and Kemmis (1986: 162), AR is a «form of systematic, self-reflective inquiry undertaken by teachers to improve their own practices and understanding of these practices» that transforms teachers from passive implementers into active agents of pedagogical change. This approach empowers educators to question classroom assumptions and develop a nuanced understanding of their pedagogical choices, ultimately enabling purposeful action to enhance student learning (Capobianco *et al.*, 2004). For AR to be effective, it must follow a rigorous, objective scheme (Henry, Kemmis, 1986: 32). Kemmis and McTaggart (1981: 4) outline a cycle of: Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect, Assess.

In the planning phase, a manageable research issue is defined, followed by an action phase where strategies are implemented in the classroom. The subsequent observation phase gathers evidence through a variety of tools, including logbooks, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The strategic use of multiple data collection instruments is crucial for the triangulation of data, which enhances the validity of the research outcomes. In the reflection and assessment phases, the instructor critically analyzes these findings against the research goals to inform changes in teaching practice. This iterative process underscores a commitment to continuous professional growth. Ultimately, AR is a bottom-up process: it starts in the classroom, explores theoretical foundations, and loops back to improve practice, fostering a necessary change in perspective for the L2 Italian educator.

2.3. *Researchers' positionality*

Researcher positionality is essential for situating the authors' perspectives within the study, acknowledging that no research is entirely devoid of subjectivity (Holmes, 2020: 2; Gurr *et al.*, 2024: 15; Wilson *et al.*, 2022: 8). At the time of this inquiry, the first author served as a lecturer of Italian at Nanjing Normal University in the People's Republic of China, bringing two years of local teaching experience to the project. The second author was a PhD candidate specializing in the pedagogy of Italian as a second/foreign language for Chinese learners. This study originated when it was observed that even high-achieving, advanced students experienced significant hurdles during spontaneous conversation. Despite their academic success, these learners struggled to navigate natural interactions, even on everyday topics, underscoring a critical disconnect between formal assessment and communicative competence.

3. CONTEXT

The following paragraph outlines the context in which the research was conducted.

3.1. *Higher Education in China*

According to statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education,

In 2023, China had 498,300 schools of all levels and types [...]. In total, 291 million students enrolled in all levels and types of educational institutions [...].

The number of higher education institutions across the nation reached a total of 3,074 [...]. Among them, there were 1,242 regular undergraduate schools, including 164 independently run colleges, 33 undergraduate vocational schools, 1,547 three-year vocational colleges, and 252 adult higher education institutions. [...]. The total number of students enrolled in all forms of higher education was 47,631,900 (MOE, 2024⁶).

In order to access Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Chinese students must take the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, called *gāokǎo* (高考), the score of which will determine the university they will be able to attend. Moreover, universities are divided into different levels:

Research universities are typically “Project 985” universities. Project 985 is a national effort to create world class universities for the 21st century. (...). Currently there are 39 Project 985 universities, which are also part of the “Project 211” representing the Chinese government’s endeavour initiated in 1993 to strengthen about 100 HEIs as a national priority for the 21st century. Currently, there are 112 Project 211 institutions. The Project 985 universities are at the top layer of Chinese higher education system. The remaining 73 Project 211 institutions are oriented towards both research and teaching, constituting the second layer. The third layer comprises around 600 (mainly regional) HEIs. They mostly engage in teaching activities but also perform research to a small extent. The remaining over 1,000 HEIs (often tertiary vocational colleges) are at the bottom layer, providing mainly 2-3-year undergraduate programmes (associate degrees) (Cai, Yuan, 2017: 171).

3.2. *The role of the Italian language in the HEI system in the People’s Republic of China*

Within this extensive system, many academic institutions have a foreign language department. Among these, we find the department of the Italian language, considered a less commonly spoken language (*fēi tōngyòngyǔ* 非通用语). Recent data kindly provided by the Italian Cultural Institute (IIC) in Beijing, indicates that 24 higher education institutions in China offer a major in Italian. This cohort comprises 15 universities (*dàxué* 大学) and nine institutes (*xuéyuàn* 学院). Additionally, 27 institutions provide Italian language instruction through elective or non-degree courses. According to Gu (2025: 3), Qu (2021: 726-727), and Yang *et al.* (2025: 188), these providers can be categorized into three distinct institutional frameworks: specialized foreign language or international studies universities, vocational or discipline-specific institutions, and comprehensive multidisciplinary universities. Data for the 2018-2019 academic year indicate that the number of Italian national faculty members in China is 56, while the Chinese nationals are over 160 (Zhang, 2023 in Gu, 2025: 13). This cohort is categorized by recruitment channel: five lecturers were seconded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, MAECI), 12 were appointed via the MAECI-sponsored “Laureati per l’italiano” initiative, and the remaining 39 were recruited directly by individual universities (Yang *et al.*, 2025: 192). According to Yang *et al.* (2025: 189) and Gu (2025: 31), the total enrollment for Italian language programs within Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) exceeded 5,000 students during the 2022-2023 academic year. This population is distributed across three primary tiers: approximately 3,000 students enrolled in undergraduate degree programs, 2,000

⁶ http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/202403/t20240311_1119782.html.

participating in elective or non-degree courses, and roughly 200 situated within vocational institutions. Feng (2019: 369) provides an account of the general Italian course:

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

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

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

Nonetheless, in a later work, Feng (2021: 49) states that in other universities, the situation could be different. For example, at Nanjing Normal University, the organization of the Italian major is dissimilar. From 2015 up to the academic year 2022-2023, the major was organized for a total duration of five years: the first year focused solely on English as a foreign language. From the second year onwards, students began to learn Italian (or other foreign languages, i.e., French or Portuguese). As far as the listening comprehension class is concerned, during the second, third, and fourth years, students attended three hours specifically dedicated to listening, while during the fifth and final year, there was no such dedicated class. However, every year, listening comprehension skills were also engaged during other, more general, classes.

4. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

To capture the multifaceted nature of listening instruction, this study employed a triangulated data collection design, utilizing two distinct tools tailored to the specific participant groups.

4.1. *Student questionnaire: theoretical and practical justification*

A questionnaire was selected as the primary instrument for the student cohort. Beyond the logistical advantages of mobile-app administration and time efficiency, this choice was theoretically grounded in the need for anonymity and the reduction of social desirability bias. In the specific context of Chinese higher education, where the teacher-student hierarchy is traditionally pronounced, students may feel pressured to provide “correct” or favorable answers in face-to-face settings. Anonymity is thus essential for eliciting honest, unbiased reflections on their perceived linguistic failures (Dörnyei, Taguchi, 2009: 7). A

crucial methodological choice was the administration of the questionnaire in a bilingual format (Italian and Chinese). The inclusion of Mandarin Chinese alongside Italian was a deliberate strategy to ensure construct validity and absolute clarity. As noted by Pavlenko (2007: 164), even advanced L2 learners may experience cognitive overload when navigating complex meta-linguistic questions in their second (or third) language. By providing a bilingual version, the researchers aimed to eliminate potential comprehension barriers or ambiguities, ensuring that the students' responses accurately reflected their lived experiences and pedagogical challenges rather than their ability to decode the survey itself. This dual-language approach underscores a commitment to inclusive data collection, guaranteeing that every participant fully grasped the nuances of the inquiries regarding their listening strategies and difficulties.

4.2. *The interviews*

When planning the research, the authors wished to also investigate the teachers' perceptions on the topic by using semi-structured interviews. This qualitative tool was chosen because it simultaneously provides a structure to follow but also allows the interviewer freedom to delve deeper into specific issues if the situation requires (Dörnyei, 2007). Nonetheless, the teachers who agreed to participate in the study asked to answer in written form due to time constraints. Therefore, the questions prepared previously for the interviews were given to them, and they had a couple of weeks to respond. The questions asked were the following:

- What type of materials do you use for the listening comprehension class? How is the listening activity structured?
- On what occasions do you speak Italian during classes?
- In your opinion, what could be done to improve the listening comprehension skills of the students?

The first two questions aimed at understanding the class routines, while the last sought to gather a deeper insight into the topic by uncovering the teachers' opinions. After the three teachers submitted their answers, the authors read them and asked for some parts to be elaborated, using a procedure similar to that of semi-structured interviews.

5. RESULTS

In this section the results of the questionnaire and the interviews will be analyzed.

5.1. *The questionnaire*

This analysis is based on the data collected from n=89 respondents (Italian language students at university level in China). The results are categorized into demographics, classroom practices, extracurricular habits, and perceived difficulties.

5.1.1. *Participant demographics and linguistic profile*

The sample represents students at various stages of their university education. The distribution is as follows:

- years of study: the majority of respondents are in their second year (36.0%, n=32) and fourth year (31.5%, n=28), while first-year students represent 24.7% (n=22) and third-year students 7.9% (n=7)⁷.
- respondents' affiliation: Nanjing Normal University (南京师范大学) (27%, n=24); Chongqing University of Foreign Language and Foreign Affairs (重庆外语外事学院) (19%, n=17); Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学) (19%, n=17); Nankai University (南开大学) (13%, n=12); Peking University (13%, n=12); Shanghai International Studies University (上海外国语大学) (8%, n=7).
- linguistic certification: only a small minority of the cohort (6.7%, n=6) holds an official Italian certification.
- immersion experience: only 19.1% (n=17) of students have visited Italy. For this group, the duration was typically brief, with 65.2% (n=15) staying for less than three months, suggesting limited exposure to authentic immersion environments.

As far as the number of hours dedicated to listening in Italian, data shows that 47% (n=37) spend 1-2 hours per week, and 45% (n=35) spend 3-4 hours per week, totaling 92% of respondents. Only 8% (n=6) spend 5-6 hours per week, and 0% spend more than 7 hours per week. This indicates that the vast majority of participants' weekly time commitment to listening in the Italian language is concentrated at a low level (≤ 4 hours). Moreover, when asked about the interaction with native speakers, of the 89 valid samples, 53.0% (n=47) chose "yes" and 47.0% (n=42) chose "no", which indicates that most people had practical opportunities to use the language, but nearly half still lacked such interaction.

5.1.2. *Classroom instruction and materials*

The data concerning classroom instruction and materials reveals a strong institutional commitment to listening proficiency, yet it simultaneously highlights a persistent reliance on traditional pedagogical tools. A significant majority of the respondents, totaling 83.1% (n=74), are currently enrolled in a dedicated listening course, where the instructional volume is considerable: 47.4% (n=37) of these students attend one to two hours of class per week, while 44.9% (n=35) engage in three to four hours. Within these specialized sessions, the frequency of practice is consistently maintained, with 66.7% (n=52) of the cohort performing listening exercises two to three times weekly. Regarding the nature of the input, textbooks serve as the primary resource in dedicated listening classes for 71.2% (n=57) of the students. Interestingly, a shift in material type is observed in general Italian lessons, where the reported use of authentic materials, such as radio, television, or podcasts, rises to 74.2% (n=66), indicating that native-like input is more frequently integrated into broader linguistic contexts than into targeted listening drills. This reliance on structured materials is reflected in the students' perception of difficulty, as 49.4% (n=44) rate textbook-based audio at a moderate level 3 and 30.3% (n=27) at a more challenging level 4 on a 5-point Likert scale. Conversely, authentic materials were perceived with similar moderate difficulty, as 44.9% (n=40) of respondents placed them at level 3, indicating that while students find non-pedagogical input demanding, they do not necessarily perceive it as inaccessible compared to their standard textbook exercises.

⁷ As the third year typically coincides with the period in which students undertake exchange programs in Italy, this figure may reflect this phenomenon.

5.1.3. Perceived difficulty of listening materials

Utilizing a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Easy) to 5 (Hard), respondents provided a subjective evaluation of the difficulty levels associated with various categories of listening input: textbooks versus authentic materials, and certification listening comprehension exercises. Interestingly, authentic materials, with the presence of natural speech disfluencies, exhibited a similar difficulty profile, with 44.9% (n=40) of the cohort rating them at level 3. This suggests that students do not necessarily perceive unscripted input as exponentially more difficult than pedagogical audio. Similarly, listening tasks designed to simulate official certification exams followed a consistent trend, as 50.6% (n=45) of participants identified level 3 as the representative difficulty for these assessments. Collectively, these figures indicate a homogenized perception of challenge across different material types, with the median difficulty consistently anchored at the midpoint of the scale.

Textbook-based exercises, traditionally the core of classroom instruction, were perceived as moderately challenging, with a significant majority of students situating the difficulty at level 3 (49.4%, n=44) or level 4 (30.3%, n=27). Cross-analysis showed that students who had studied Italian for one year (n=22) gave low scores on listening comprehension (86% scored 1-3, only 14% scored high), and none gave a perfect score of 5, indicating that they generally felt it was quite difficult in the initial learning stage. Students who had studied for two years (n=32) saw an increase in the median score, with the highest percentage scoring 3 (53%), and a small number scoring full marks (3%), generally shifting towards a higher middle range. Students who had studied for three years had a smaller sample size (n=7), with 3 still being the most common score (57%), but the coexistence of high and low scores showed a divergence in their experience. Students who had studied for four years (n=28) still primarily scored 2-3 (82% in total), but the percentage of perfect scores rose to 7%, and the percentage of low scores decreased (only 4% scored 1). Among the six people with certificates, the simulated listening difficulty scores were concentrated at 3 (50%) and 4 (33%), with no extremely low scores (1) or high scores (5), while among the 83 people without certificates, the distribution was more dispersed, with 3 (51%) being the most common, but there were also low scores of 1 (6%) and high scores of 5 (5%). The proportions of the core intervals (2-4) were similar for both groups, and the mean values were both at a medium-to-high level (approximately 3.17 for those with certificates and approximately 3.06 for those without certificates). The large difference in sample size made it impossible to directly compare the absolute number of people, but the proportion structure showed that the perception of difficulty was concentrated at a medium level for both groups, and the presence or absence of certificates did not significantly lower or raise the perception of difficulty, indicating that the correlation between certificate holding and subjective evaluation of listening difficulty was weak, and the difference was not statistically significant.

Noticeably, of the 17 people who had been to Italy, 59% gave the listening comprehension difficulty a score of 2 (less difficult), and 35% gave it a score of 3, totaling 94%. The low scores were the most common, with no one giving a score of 4 or 5, indicating a generally negative overall assessment. Of the 72 people who had never been to Italy, only 28% gave a score of 2, and 47% gave it a score of 3. However, 19% (15% for 4 points and 4% for 5 points) gave higher ratings, indicating a wider range of experiences and slightly higher perception of easiness. The significant difference in the percentage of those who scored 2 or below between the two groups (94% vs. 34%) suggests a negative correlation between personal experience in Italy and perceived difficulty in listening comprehension; those who had been to Italy were more likely to

find it difficult, possibly because the actual language material exceeded classroom expectations or they were more aware of the difficulties.

Cross-analysis revealed significant differences in the “Difficulty in listening comprehension” rating (1=very easy, 5=very difficult) among groups with differing durations of stay in Italy. Of the 15 participants who selected “less than 3 months”, 47% rated it 3, and 40% rated it 2, totaling 87% in the low to moderate range. Only 14% achieved a score of 4 or 5, indicating that beginners generally found it difficult but had already partially adapted. The “3-6 months” group consisted of only 4 participants, with 75% giving it 2 and 25% giving it the lowest score of 1. No one scored above 3, reflecting the highest level of difficulty at this stage, possibly indicating a skill plateau. The “7 months-1 year” group also consisted of only 4 participants, with half rating it 2 and half 3. While this was a slight improvement over the 3-6 months group (no one rated it 1), the participants remained concentrated in the low range, with no increase in the proportion of high scores. The overall trend indicates that as listening time increases, satisfaction does not improve significantly, especially in the medium to long term (more than 3 months), where most participants still chose a low to medium level of difficulty. This suggests that simply accumulating listening time may not reduce the actual difficulty of the listening skill, and targeted training or method optimization may be needed to break through the plateau.

In general, the observation that participants perceive no significant difference in difficulty between authentic materials, pedagogical audio, and certification exams warrants further empirical investigation. In fact, this phenomenon suggests that the participants’ receptive skills may be sufficiently underdeveloped that even simplified pedagogical inputs present a cognitive load comparable to that of more complex, unedited materials.

5.1.4. *Extracurricular interaction and independent learning*

The survey results demonstrate a robust inclination toward autonomous linguistic engagement beyond the formal classroom setting. Data shows that a significant majority of students, 70.8% (n=63), actively listen to native Italian speakers without the aid of subtitles, signaling a high level of confidence in their receptive abilities. This extracurricular consumption is driven primarily by digital media, with videos (83.3%, n=55), films (59.1%, n=39), and music (51.5%, n=34) serving as the principal sources of oral input. Beyond passive consumption, 52.8% (n=48) of respondents have moved toward active communicative engagement by participating in direct conversations with native speakers. These interactions occur most frequently within social circles of friends (42.0%, n=21) or, less commonly, in professional environments (18.0%, n=9). In terms of exposure volume, the vast majority of those who maintain these dialogues, 88.0% (n=44), report a frequency of one to two hours per week. While these real-world interactions are an essential part of the acquisition process, they remain challenging for the learners; when assessing their comprehension during live dialogue, 49.4% (n=44) of students assigned a difficulty rating of level 3 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating a balanced perception of difficulty that is manageable yet demanding.

5.1.5. *Qualitative feedback and emerging themes*

The qualitative feedback gathered from open-ended responses illuminates three primary barriers that impede successful listening comprehension among Chinese learners

of Italian. The most pervasive theme identified was speech velocity; students frequently cited the rapid pace of native speakers as a major obstacle, using descriptions such as “italiano così velocemente” (Italian so fast) (S36, S37 and S38; *inter alia*) and “太快就听不懂” (too fast to understand) (S60) to characterize their frustration. This suggests that even when students possess the necessary grammatical knowledge, the cognitive processing speed required for real-time decoding remains a significant hurdle. Beyond speed, learners highlighted specific phonetic and lexical challenges that complicate the listening process. These hurdles include difficulties in distinguishing subtle phonetic nuances, such as the distinction between /p/ and /b/ or the syllabic union (i.e., *la vocato*, instead of *l'avvocato*) (S39), and a perceived gap in their mastery of idiomatic expressions (S15). Such lexical opacity often leads to a breakdown in comprehension, as students struggle to map unfamiliar strings of sounds to known meanings. Finally, the data reveals a profound authenticity gap between pedagogical materials and real-world interaction. Students observed a marked discrepancy between the controlled clarity of classroom audio and the spontaneous, often fragmented nature of native conversation. Notably, one respondent emphasized that face-to-face communication, which provides access to non-verbal cues and paralinguistic information, is considerably more manageable than audio-only input. This insight underscores the importance of multi-modal support in helping learners bridge the transition from standard academic exercises to authentic linguistic environments. Adding to this, some feedback indicated that communication with a single native speaker is acceptable, but comprehension declines significantly when facing natural conversations with multiple people or involving unfamiliar topics and idioms (S15). A shift in classroom training towards sentence comprehension and contextual understanding is needed.

5.2. *The interviews*

Three teachers from two of the universities mentioned above participated in the research. Two were of Chinese nationality: one held a PhD in Italian Studies from an Italian University, and the other held a Master's degree in Italian. Both had many years of experience teaching Italian to Chinese university students at the university level. The third participant was a MAECI lecturer with over twenty years of experience teaching Italian in Italy and abroad, was studying Chinese, and had been in China for almost two years at the time of the study.

Regarding the first question, the one concerning the materials used to develop listening and comprehension skills, all of the respondents use materials published in Italy⁸. These materials, designed to focus on listening ability, range from structured exercises with standard Italian and no background sounds to native-like dialogues (i.e., featuring different accents and prosody) set in realistic environments. Only for higher-level classes do they select authentic materials such as documentaries and so on⁹.

They all seemed aware of the difficulties encountered by Chinese learners when approaching the study of the Italian language, especially those regarding listening comprehension skills. Moreover, they outlined the strategies they use to select listening materials according to the learners' proficiency level, primarily based on the following aspects: length, speed of speech, presence of accents and/or background noise, and

⁸ The materials mentioned by the respondent teachers are not readily available in the People's Republic of China. In fact, while teaching materials for Italian as a foreign language exist, they are usually written and published by universities with an Italian department, or Chinese versions of textbooks made for the European market can be found (for more details, see Maiella, Scolaro, 2025).

⁹ It is important to note that due to the Great Firewall, a VPN is needed to access most websites outside of China, therefore making it harder to access authentic audio-visual materials.

authenticity of the materials. They reported using more phonologically based listening tasks for lower levels of competence and tasks focusing on global understanding for higher levels. Additionally, they mentioned using pre-listening activities to introduce or review vocabulary and morpho-syntactic structures. Some global understanding activities are used during listening, and all also mentioned post-listening activities they implement to foster language learning, such as summarizing, intercultural reflection, comparison with personal experiences, etc. One teacher also acknowledged discussing with the students the specific difficulties encountered during listening and attempting to facilitate explicit metacognitive reflection on why these aspects might be harder for them.

The second question aimed at understanding the use of the target language in the classroom. The native Italian-speaking teacher affirmed that she almost always uses Italian and only very seldom resorts to English or Chinese, and only if there is zero comprehension on the students' part. The Chinese teachers also admitted that they try to speak as much Italian as they can, but this is more difficult in beginners' classes, so they try to lower their speaking speed. They also reported asking the students to use Italian when answering questions about the listening exercises.

When asked about ways to improve the listening skills of Chinese university students, the respondents confirmed that learners do not receive much input in the target language, and most of it comes from their native Chinese lecturers. All three respondents declared the necessity for more input in Italian. Drawing from her experience, one teacher noted that students are exposed to native-like oral input only starting from the second year of university. Therefore, she suggested seeking collaboration between Italian and Chinese professors to increase Italian input and advocated for the implementation of task-based activities to have students work with the language in realistic situations. Another respondent added that students should do more listening exercises at home with materials suggested by teachers. In her opinion, they should also listen to music and watch videos, TV series, and films in Italian, also under the instructor's guidance, but the learners could choose whether or not to use subtitles. Another teacher proposed the use of learning apps. She also recommended that teachers should speak as much Italian as possible during class time but in a standardized way, trying to avoid regional accents. She added some practical suggestions, mentioning, for example, the shadowing exercise as useful for both listening and pronunciation. She emphasized the importance, when dealing with Chinese students, of being aware of the phenomenon of synalephe, i.e., syllabic union, and working specifically on it for the recognition of vowel sounds. Eventually, she stressed the crucial significance of metacognition in listening activities.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study has highlighted the complex challenges faced by Chinese university students in developing listening skills within the context of Italian language acquisition. Through a comprehensive analysis of both students and teachers perspective, it has become clear that a significant discrepancy exists between the real world authentic linguistic interactions and the pedagogical materials used in the classroom. The findings reveal how participants perceive a similar level of difficulty when listening to various types of inputs, such as textbooks recording, certification exams and real life situations.

Although the data collected in this study is limited, their significance lies in their direct contribution to addressing a noticeable gap in the existing literature on the specific challenges and effective strategies related to the teaching and learning of listening skills among Chinese university students of Italian. The study offers valuable insights by gathering the perceptions of both students (n=89) and teachers (n=3), two key

stakeholder groups whose perspectives are crucial for a holistic understanding of the issue. Specifically, it delves into their experiences and observations regarding the nature and amount of input provided inside and outside the language classroom, the specific difficulties encountered by learners in processing and comprehending spoken Italian, and, importantly, the proposition of concrete and feasible ways to help learners develop this fundamental ability, thereby enhancing their overall communicative competence in the target language.

This survey aimed to understand the current state of listening comprehension among Italian language learners in Chinese universities. Results showed that the learning period was primarily two or four years (67%), with students concentrated in comprehensive universities, foreign language universities, and regionally specialized universities. Over 90% lacked Italian language certificates, and 80% had not visited Italy or had short stays. Classroom listening participation was high (83%), but textbooks were the primary source of instruction, with weekly practice concentrated at 1-4 hours and 2-3 sessions. Extracurricular videos were the main source of information, with over 70% relying on unsubtitled native-speaker listening input, and half able to converse with native speakers. Subjectively, the perceived difficulty of classroom and authentic listening materials was moderate to high, while mock exams were relatively easy. Overall, the ability to understand native speakers and engage in conversations was low. The main difficulties were fast speaking speed, difficulty in pronunciation recognition, a disconnect between classroom and real-life scenarios, and insufficient resources. However, some learners made progress through methodological adjustments. It is recommended that subsequent research expands the sample size, especially for senior students, those with certificates, and those with long-term experience in Italy, to improve statistical power and the reliability of difference analysis. Regarding counterintuitive findings such as those who have been to Italy give more negative evaluations of listening perceived difficulty, qualitative interviews could be added to explore the reasons (e.g., the complexity of real-world data, differences in psychological expectations). Existing cross-analysis reveals a limited correlation between practice frequency, duration, and satisfaction; future research should further subdivide material type, teaching methods, and practice strategies to capture key influencing factors. Measurements of learning motivation, classroom interaction patterns, and self-directed learning paths could be added to form a multi-dimensional causal model.

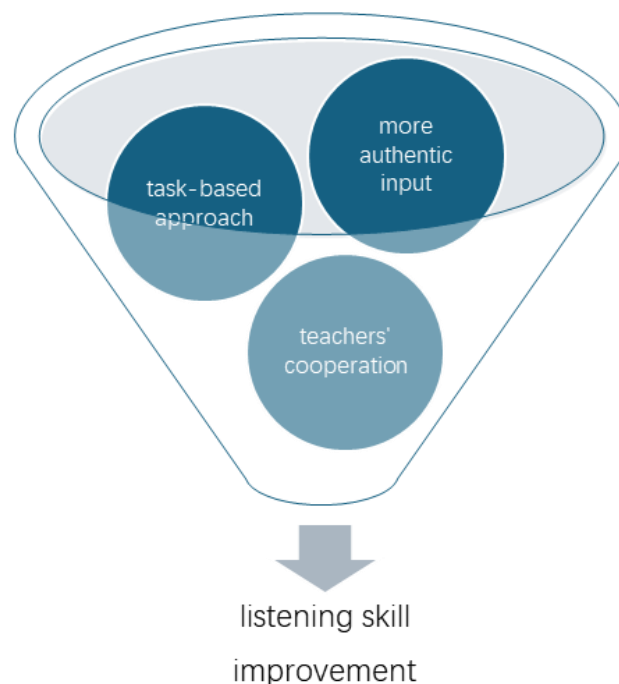
A significant contribution to fostering and enhancing listening skills in second/foreign language learners at the university level, particularly in the Chinese context, could come from increased collaboration and cooperation between non-native and native Italian teachers (Scolaro, Yao, 2025). Native Italian teachers can bring valuable insights into the nuances of the spoken language, including idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and pragmatic features, while non-native teachers often possess a deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by Chinese learners and can provide targeted instruction and support. By working together, these two groups of teachers can create a more comprehensive and effective learning experience for students, combining linguistic accuracy with pedagogical expertise. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the crucial role of teachers in facilitating listening development, the fact that teachers are just one of the elements within the complex dynamic of the learning process cannot be overlooked. Students themselves also need to take ownership of their learning and cultivate a more proactive and engaged attitude towards listening comprehension. This involves developing their metacognitive awareness, their strategic competence, and their motivation to actively engage with spoken Italian both inside and outside the classroom.

However, a growing concern in the field of language education is that students are increasingly relying on and overusing AI-generated instruments to achieve a rapid and

effortless comprehension of the input they receive as well as to perform the tasks that are required from them (Scolaro, De Conto, 2025). These tools, while offering convenience and speed, can often translate in real-time what is being said by the teacher or other speakers, without requiring any active cognitive processing or “thinking process” on the part of the student (Dans, 2023; Spector, Ma, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2023). While these technologies can be valuable tools for language learning when used appropriately and judiciously, their overuse can hinder the development of essential listening skills, such as the ability to segment the speech stream, identify key information, infer meaning from context, and cope with the challenges of authentic spoken language. The potential for these tools to create a sense of learned helplessness and undermine learners’ intrinsic motivation is a serious issue. Indeed, as artificial intelligence (AI) continues to transform the educational landscape, the extent to which it can enhance cognitive skills, motivation, and engagement remains an area that requires further investigation (Wang *et al.*, 2024).

In addition to addressing the quantity and nature of listening input, it is crucial to consider the qualitative aspect of listening instruction. In particular, the development of metacognitive awareness and the explicit teaching of listening strategies are essential for empowering learners to become more effective and autonomous listeners. Metacognitive reflection on the specific listening strategies that learners employ to understand oral input could play a crucial role in stimulating their awareness of these strategies, enabling them to monitor their comprehension, identify areas of difficulty, and select the most appropriate strategies for different listening situations. This metacognitive awareness, in turn, can promote students’ autonomy in language learning, equipping them with the skills and confidence to take control of their own learning and become lifelong language learners (Ghorbani Nejad *et al.*, 2019; Goh, 2008; Janusik, Varner, 2020; Mahdavi, Miri, 2017; Vandergrift *et al.*, 2006; *inter alia*).

Image 1. *Aspects that could positively influence learners’ listening skill*



Finally, this study also emphasizes the importance of Action Research as an integral part of everyday teaching practices, particularly in the context of foreign language

education. Teachers need to move beyond the role of mere transmitters of knowledge and adopt an active and inquiring stance, engaging in systematic and reflective inquiry to identify potential problems, analyze the realities they face in their classrooms with a scientific and evidence-based approach, and implement targeted interventions to address these challenges. The ultimate aim of this process is to improve students' performances, not only for the narrow purpose of passing exams and obtaining certifications, but also, and more importantly, for the broader goal of enabling them to communicate effectively, confidently, and appropriately in real-life situations, fostering their ability to navigate the complexities of intercultural communication and to become successful and engaged users of the target language.

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Appendix

The questionnaire (original version with English translation)

1. Da quanti anni studi italiano all’università? 你在大学学习几年意大利语 1 2 3 4 [Year of Italian study]
2. Università 你在哪所大学读书? [University]
3. Hai una certificazione di italiano? 你有意大利语证书吗? sì 有 / no 没有 [Do you have an Italian language certification? Yes / No]
 - a) Se sì, quale livello? 如果有, 哪个级别 A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 [If yes, at which level? A2, B1, B2, C1, C2]
4. Sei stato/a in Italia? 你去过意大利吗? sì 去过 / no 没去过 [Have you ever been to Italy? Yes / No]
 - a) Se sì, quanto tempo? 如果有的话, 去了多长时间 meno di 3 mesi 没到3个月 / 3-6 mesi / 7 mesi -1 anno 7个月到一年 / più di 1 anno 超过一年 [If yes, for how long? Less than 3 months / 3-6 months / 7 months - 1 year / More than 1 year]
5. Segui il corso di “ascolto”? 你是否正在修读“听力”课程? sì 是 / no 否 [Do you attend a specific “Listening” course? Yes / No]
 - a) se sì, quante ore la settimana? 参加的话, 每周几课时 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / più di 8 超过8个 [If yes, how many hours per week? 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / More than 8]
 - b) se sì, quanti ascolti fate in media alla settimana in questo corso? 参加的话, 你该课程中平均每周进行几次听力练习? 1 / 2-3 / 4-5 / più di 5 超过5次 [If yes, how many listening exercises do you do on average per week in this course? 1 / 2-3 / 4-5 / More than 5]
 - c) se sì, quali materiali utilizzate? 参加的话, 你们使用什么听力教材 [If yes, what materials do you use?]
 - i. libro di testo 教科 [Textbooks]

- ii. materiali autentici (ad esempio programmi radio, tv, podcast, ecc.)真实材料 (例如广播节目、电视节目、播客等) [Authentic materials (e.g., radio programs, TV, podcasts, etc.)]
 - iii. ascolti che vengono da prove di ascolto di una certificazione 来自认证听力测试的听力数据 [Listening tracks from official language certifications]
 - iv. non so 不知道 [I don't know]
6. Oltre al corso di “ascolto” (o se hai risposto no), nelle lezioni di italiano quanti ascolti fate in media alla settimana (pensa a tutte le lezioni di italiano che hai) 除了“听力”课程 (或如果你莫参加该课程), 在其它意大利语课中, 评均每周进行多少次听力练习 (请涵盖你所有的意大利语课程) 1 / 2-3 / 4-5 / più di 5 [Apart from the ‘Listening’ course (or if you answered “No”), how many listening exercises do you do on average per week in your other Italian classes? (Think about all the Italian classes you have) 1 / 2-3 / 4-5 / More than 5]
7. Oltre al corso di “ascolto” o se hai risposto no, nelle lezioni di italiano quali materiali usate per fare gli ascolti? 除了“听力”课程之外, 或者如果你回答“不”, 在意大利语课上你们使用哪些材料进行听力训练? [Apart from the ‘Listening’ course (or if you answered “No”), what materials do you use for listening practice in your Italian classes?]
 - a) il libro di testo 教科 [Textbooks]
 - b) materiali autentici (ad esempio programmi radio, tv, podcast, ecc.)真实材料 (例如广播节目、电视节目、播客等) [Authentic materials (e.g., radio programs, TV, podcasts, etc.)]
 - c) ascolti che vengono da prove di ascolto di una certificazione 来自认证听力测试的听力数据 [Listening tracks from official language certifications]
 - d) non so 不知道 [I don't know]
8. In una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 è difficilissimo e 5 è facilissimo, in generale, come trovi gli ascolti del libro proposti in classe? 在0到3的评分标准中 (1表示极难, 5表示极易), 你总体上如何评价课堂上提出的听力材料? [On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is “very difficult” and 5 is “very easy”), how do you generally find the textbook listening activities proposed in class?]
9. In una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 è difficilissimo e 5 è facilissimo, in generale, come trovi gli ascolti autentici proposti in classe? Se non fai questo tipo di ascolto non rispondere 在1到5的难度等级中 (1代表极难, 5代表极易), 你总体上如何评价课堂上提供的真实听力材料? 若未接触此类听力材料, 请勿作答。 [On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is “very difficult” and 5 is “very easy”), how do you generally find the authentic listening materials proposed in class? (If you do not use this type of material, please do not answer)]
10. In una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 è difficilissimo e 5 è facilissimo, in generale, come trovi gli ascolti usati per le certificazioni proposti in classe? Se non fai questo tipo di ascolto non rispondere 在1到5的难度等级中 (1代表极难, 5代表极易), 你总体如何评价课堂上用于认证的听力材料? 若未接触此类听力材料, 请勿作答。 [On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is “very difficult” and 5 is “very easy”), how do you generally find the certification-based listening materials proposed in class? (If you do not use this type of material, please do not answer)]
11. Oltre alle lezioni ascolti parlanti nativi di italiano senza sottotitoli? 除了课程, 你还会听没有字幕的意大利语母语者讲话吗? sì 会/no 不会 [Outside of class, do you listen to native Italian speakers without subtitles? Yes / No]

- a) Se sì chi? amici/famiglia/ambiente di lavoro/ video/film/musica/podcast/radio... 如果是的话，主要来源是？朋友/家人/同事/视频/电影/音乐/播客/广播..... [If yes, who/what? Friends / Family / Work environment / Videos / Movies / Music / Podcasts / Radio...]
- b) Se sì con che frequenza? 1-2 ore alla settimana, 3-5 ore alla settimana, più di 5 ore alla settimana 果是的话，频率是多少？每星期1-2小时，每星期3-5小时，每星期超过5小时 [If yes, how often? 1-2 hours per week / 3-5 hours per week / More than 5 hours per week]
12. In una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 è difficilissimo e 5 è facilissimo, in generale, come trovi comprendere nativi che parlano in italiano? 在1到5的难度评分中（1表示极难，5表示极易，你总体认为理解说意大利语的母语者有多难？ [On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is “very difficult” and 5 is “very easy”), how difficult do you generally find it to understand native speakers talking in Italian?]
13. Oltre alle lezioni, interagisci in conversazioni con parlanti nativi di italiano? 除了上课之，你是否与意大利语母语者进行过对话交流？ sì 是/no 否 [Outside of class, do you engage in conversations with native Italian speakers? Yes / No]
- a) Se sì chi? amici/famiglia/ambiente di lavoro... 如果是的话，和谁？朋友/家人/工作环境 [If yes, who/what? Friends / Family / Work environment / Videos / Movies / Music / Podcasts / Radio...]
- b) Se sì con che frequenza? 1-2 ore alla settimana, 3-5 ore alla settimana, più di 5 ore alla settimana 如果是，频率如何？每周1-2小时，每周3-5小时，每周超过5小时 [If yes, how often? 1-2 hours per week / 3-5 hours per week / More than 5 hours per week]
14. In una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 è difficilissimo e 5 è facilissimo, in generale, come trovi comprendere nativi con i quali interagisci in italiano? 在1到5的难度等级中（1代表极难，5代表极易），你总体上觉得理解那些与你用意大利语交流的母语者有多难？ [On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is “very difficult” and 5 is “very easy”), how difficult do you generally find it to understand the native speakers you interact with in Italian?]
15. Altro che vuoi aggiungere sulla competenza della comprensione orale in base alla tua esperienza di apprendente dell’italiano all’università 基于你在大学学习意大利语的经，就听力理解补充任何你想说明的内容。 [Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your oral comprehension skills based on your experience as an Italian learner at university?]