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The Relevance of Textbooks in Relation to High School Learning Goals: an Overview of the Choices Made by Italian CFL Teaching Community and Potential Future Developments

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The integration of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) in Italian high school curricula has gradually promoted the publication of specific teaching materials (Gabbianelli 2021) that meet both learners' needs and the requirements set by the Italian regulations. In light of these objectives and considering the relevance of textbooks in the teaching-learning process, the present study aims at collecting data from the Italian CFL teaching community via an online survey to support the development of teaching materials that would increasingly align with national guidelines and teachers' expectations. Data analysis shows a polarization of needs within CFL teachers, split between simplified and more language-authentic materials, basic and advanced vocabulary, outcomes consistent with HSK3 or HSK4[1]. Grammar is highly valued yet underresourced while sourcing contents from a variety of textbooks seems to be the approach that balances accessibility and curricular goals most effectively.

Keywords: CFL Teaching Material Development, Chinese Language Teaching, Teaching-Learning Goals

1. *Introduction*

This preliminary research, the first of its kind in the Italian context, aims to provide empirical data and observations to support the development of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teaching materials for high schools that increasingly align with national guidelines and teachers' expectations.

Starting from the processing of data collected from the Italian CFL teaching community via an online survey featuring both closed and open-ended questions, our contribution expects to highlight the reasons behind the choices (or non-choices) of the textbooks cur-

[1] HSK stands for "Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi" (汉语水平考试), the Chinese Proficiency Test. HSK is an international standardized test for Chinese language proficiency, developed by the Chinese Ministry of Education, that assesses Chinese learners' abilities to use Chinese as a second language through a standardized examination and evaluation system. For further details see https://www.chinesetest.cn/hsk (last accessed February 25, 2026).

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rently available within the Italian publishing industry in order to identify gaps and potential opportunities for the development of CFL teaching materials specifically designed for Italian-speaking high school learners.

The widespread presence of CFL at all levels of education over the past decade has significantly stimulated the production of teaching materials dedicated to its study (Wang Guenier, Li 2022, 40), both in China and internationally; Italy is not an exception (Peracin 2024, 103; Romagnoli 2019). In our country, the number of high school students interested in studying CFL has steadily grown since the early 2000s, and, accordingly, a great variety of textbooks has been published (Masini 2022). Given the undeniable influence that textbooks exert in foreign language education (Sercu 2005, 91, 105) because of their capacity, first and foremost, to "dictate what takes place in classrooms" (Byrnes 1989 in Yu 2009, 76), it becomes essential to understand what teachers think about them. Such an approach enables a more systematic identification of the perceived shortcomings and supports the strategic development of areas which seem to require further advancement.

The paper is organized as follows: in Section 2 we define the theoretical background of the key themes relevant to the study, namely, history and status of CFL in Italian high schools (§ 2.1), regulations and norms concerning the subject within the Italian high school system (§ 2.2), and the role of textbooks in the teaching-learning process (§ 2.3). The research method is described in Section 3, while Section 4 contains an in-depth analysis of the empirical data collected through the research-questionnaire. The analysis presented is divided into sub-sections following the structure of the questionnaire itself: socio-demographic data about respondents and status of the discipline (§ 4.1), textbooks used in the first two years of instruction along with teachers' opinions about them (§ 4.2), textbooks used in the last three years of instruction along with teachers' opinions about them (§ 4.3), and open-ended questions concerning teachers' beliefs about skills to be acquired through textbooks to successfully pass the Final State Exam (§ 4.4). The fifth and last Section (§ 5) presents both the conclusions drawn from the data and the limits of this preliminary investigation.

2. *Theoretical framework*

2.1 CFL in Italian high schools: a recent history

Chinese as a Foreign Language was integrated into Italian high school curricula in 2003 thanks to a bottom-up process (Langé 2018, 22) and by 2017 had spread to over 150 state schools (Masini 2021, 473). Following a growing trend, in 2020/21 CFL has reached 179 secondary institutions all over Italy with only two regions, Basilicata and Molise, that apparently have no CFL classes (Scibetta et al. 2025, 110).

According to the 2024 report from the *National Observatory on School Internationalization and Student Mobility*, Chinese is the fifth most studied foreign language in Italian high schools, after English, French, Spanish, and German (IPSOS 2024) and it has surpassed Russian, which had a 20-year head start in institutional education (Langé 2018). Even if Chinese can also be a curricular subject in technical institutes and increasingly in vocational schools (Scibetta et al. 2025, 113), most schools where Chi-

nese is currently offered as a curricular subject are the so-called *Liceo Linguistico*, the high school track specializing in the study of three foreign languages over five years (Scibetta et al. 2025, 113–114). Consequently, our study will concentrate on this specific category of school due to quantitative factors.

In *Liceo Linguistico*, Chinese is typically offered as a second or third foreign language (out of three) and is studied over a five-year period, with 3 to 4 hours of instruction per week depending on the curricular choices made by individual schools. The teaching is primarily delivered by Italian teachers; however, in this type of school, they are supported by native Chinese-speaking teachers (Gabbianelli 2021, 21) who serve as conversation teachers[2]. By the end of their studies, students are expected to achieve a language proficiency level between B1 and B2, depending on whether Chinese is studied as a second (B2) or third (B1) foreign language (Presidential Decree No. 89 of March 15, 2010).

2.2 Regulatory framework

In Italy, CFL is a discipline taught both in *Licei* (high schools) and in technical institutes. From a regulatory perspective, there are three key references for teaching and learning goals in secondary education. This normative framework does not vary from region to region, as the expected proficiency levels are identical nationwide and all institutions adhere to the same regulatory standards.

The first and most binding one is the Presidential Decree No. 89 of March 15, 2010, a regulation concerning the revision of the regulatory, organizational, and educational structure of high schools. The second reference to be taken into consideration is the National Guidelines for high school education (Decree No. 211 of October 7, 2010)[3], a set of norms containing national guidelines about the specific learning goals related to the activities and subjects included in secondary school curricula. The third, not less imperative, reference is the "Reference Framework for the Design and Implementation of the Second Written Exam for the State Examination" attached to Ministerial Decree No. 769 of November 26, 2018, which provides frameworks and assessment grids for preparing and administering the first and second written tests of the State examination at the end of secondary education. In addition to this, in 2016 the MIUR[4] released a National Syllabus of Chinese Language, a further guideline the teaching community can follow to define the range of knowledge and competence to acquire during and by the end of high school[5].

[2] Conversation teachers are Chinese native teachers with at least a high school diploma in the country where Chinese is the first language. For this reason, they are often not specifically qualified for teaching CFL and do not always have a sufficient familiarity with the Italian educational system (Gabbianelli 2021). Despite teaching only one hour per week in each class (by themselves or together with the Italian teacher), they participate in student assessment and contribute to the development of speaking and listening skills.

[3] 2010 guidelines were republished in a revised and updated version in 2025 and will be in force from 2026/27.

[4] Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (today split into MIM for Education and MUR for University and Research).

[5] For further details see https://scuole.vda.it/images/news/sillabocinese.pdf (last accessed August 20, 2025).

According to Presidential Decree 89/2010, the highest-ranking rule among the above-mentioned references, the communicative competence to be acquired by the end of the five-year course must correspond at least to B2 Level of the Common European Framework of Reference in two foreign languages, and at least to B1 Level in the third (one language). Students' proficiency is ultimately assessed and determined during the final State Exam through reading comprehension of literary or non-literary excerpts, a writing task (Annex to Ministerial Decree 769/2018), and an oral exam.

2.3 The role of textbooks in the teaching-learning process

As just observed, Italy too has been affected by the so-called 'Chinese fever' (*hànyǔ rè* '汉语热') (Romagnoli 2019), and a growing number of Italian students have begun studying CFL in high schools. This trend has led to the incorporation of CFL into the national regulatory framework and has encouraged the publication of teaching materials specifically designed for upper secondary school students.

When Chinese became a curricular subject, and for quite a long time afterward, teachers found themselves in a challenging position because there were no shared guidelines or standard practices both on the pedagogical and regulatory aspects of teaching. Moreover, there were no *ad hoc* textbooks for the high school audience: at that time, teachers had to use university-level textbooks, textbooks published outside Italy, with necessary adjustments and adaptations (Scibetta 2024), or create their own teaching materials, especially when it came to teaching Chinese culture. In fact, until recently, the very few available textbooks were mainly focused on language teaching. This situation has now changed; although the offering is still not comparable to that available for other foreign languages long taught in Italian schools, and materials for teaching literature and developing specific competencies remain inadequate (Gabbianelli 2021, 31–32), according to Conti and Romagnoli (2021) we are witnessing growth and innovation in teaching materials tailored to different levels, types, audiences and learning contexts. Furthermore, alongside language-learning textbooks focused mainly on communicative functions, there are now also textbooks dedicated to the teaching of Chinese "knowledge culture" (Zhang 1990) as well as textbooks which employ only Chinese language to cover Chinese culture.

In pedagogy it is not unusual to speak of the so-called "pedagogical trinity" of student, teacher, and textbook (Kubler 2019, 321), and even if the first two are the most important, as Brown pointed out, "that textbooks have a great deal of power and authority in the language classroom does not seem in doubt" (Brown 2014, 658). Moreover, although foreign language teaching has been gradually supplemented by digital tools and online resources, several studies confirm not only that "textbooks are still crucial in the language classroom" (Gabbianelli 2023, 168), but also that "both teachers and students still rely on textbooks" (Garton, Graves 2014; Tomlinson 2012 in Gabbianelli 2023, 168). In general terms, it can be stated that textbooks play a prominent role in both the teaching and learning processes, catalyzing the achievement of specific goals, up to the point that some researchers have claimed that "without a textbook, it is difficult for teachers to teach systematically" (Ajideh, Panahi 2016 in Yue et al. 2020, 122).

However, as Hsiang stressed, "[i]f textbooks do not provide a good match to what students need to learn or teachers are expected to teach, then their effectiveness is likely to be limited" (Hsiang et al. 2023, 1652). It is probably for this reason that in the field of CFL, researchers are currently raising concerns about whether the CSL and CFL textbook series available today truly meet the needs of both teachers and students (Geng 2017; Gong 2018; Hsiang 2021; Li et al. 2021; Ying et al. 2018 in Hsiang et al. 2023, 1652). Building on this perspective, Gabbianelli (2021, 32) has emphasized the importance of new resources that address both students' needs and interests and help teachers in their curricular choices. In this light, and in order to provide empirical data and observations to support the development of CFL teaching materials, investigating teachers' perspectives is, in our view, of paramount importance.

3. *The research: method and tools*

The present research collects feedback from Italian CFL teaching community about the language and culture textbooks oriented to secondary education. Against the background of the requirements set by the national regulatory framework (§ 2.2), the data will primarily reveal teachers' perspectives on commercially available teaching materials and, through a deeper analysis, will be able to highlight the consistency between the pedagogical needs perceived by the teaching community and the disciplinary objectives pursued by the different textbooks, hence emphasizing their strengths and critical issues. The ultimate aim of this study is to contribute to the development of CFL teaching materials for upper secondary education that are closely aligned with national guidelines and responsive to teachers' needs.

The data that are shown in Section 4 were collected through a Google Form distributed between April and May 2025 to two professional figures within the CFL teaching community: teachers of Chinese language and culture (affiliated with class A22, as defined by the Italian national teaching qualification framework), and conversation teachers (class BI02), both working in Italian secondary schools. As clarified in 2.1, both categories of teachers worked together in CFL classes. This is the reason why we took into consideration both figures: even if with different roles and teaching hours, they both are responsible for the construction of students' communicative competence.

The questionnaire[6], which could be completed online using smart devices (smartphones, PCs, tablets) was sent to teachers with the support of ANIC[7] and via the authors' personal networks. The 18 questions of the survey (most of which are multiple-choice questions) were developed by the authors on the basis of their own personal teaching and academic experience, taking into account the objectives of the research and the areas of interest to be explored and, not least, drawing on input and feedback from the CFL teaching community emerged during training sessions, dedicated symposiums and exchange platforms. To

[6] https://forms.gle/nKMwaJj3n4jt1gsi7

[7] ANIC (Associazione Nazionale Insegnanti di Cinese, 意大利汉语教师协会 *Yìdàlì hànyǔ jiàoshī xiéhuì*) is the National Association of Chinese Teachers founded in 2017. For more info see: https://anicdocentidicinese.wordpress.com (last accessed August 12, 2025).

ensure better understanding of the questions by the respondents and to guarantee orderly and systematic data collection, the survey has been divided into four consecutive sections: the first (Questions 1–4) collects respondents' socio-demographic information. The second (Questions 5–10) addresses the textbooks employed for Chinese language, culture, and grammar[8] instruction during the first two years of study, as well as teachers' reasons for choosing these teaching materials. The third Section (Questions 11–15) mirrors the structure of the second but focuses on textbooks used in the final three years of education, along with the reasons behind their selection. According to the National Guidelines (§ 2.2), the linguistic and cultural objectives for students enrolled in high schools are conventionally divided between the first cycle (the first two years of study) and the second cycle (the final three years). This distinction exists because several aspects tend to change from one cycle to the other, such as the number of subjects in the curriculum, the number of teaching hours, their epistemological dimension, and consequently the teaching approach and the materials used. The questionnaire administered to teachers, therefore, follows this natural distinction and reflects the division into the two cycles.

The final Section (Questions 16–18) concentrates on the skills[9] to be acquired for the Final State Examination and investigates teachers' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the currently adopted textbooks in supporting students toward this objective. The State Examination represents the concluding moment of the secondary education cycle and requires the student to apply all the skills and competencies acquired over the years in a structured and coordinated way. It constitutes an important reference objective in the educational and training context, identical nationwide and regulated by multiple legal provisions (§ 2.2), and as such it is also highly taken into consideration in the structuring of the content and format of many textbooks. For these reasons, it was deemed appropriate to include a questionnaire section entirely dedicated to this topic. These last three Questions, along with n. 9 and n. 15, are open-ended questions while all the others are multiple-choice questions, even if in some cases (Questions n. 6, 8, 12, and 14) respondents can also express their opinions.

As far as the analysis of data is concerned, in order to have a clear understanding of the situation and to ensure clearly interpretable data, in the case of closed questions we relied both on aggregate data and on single answers. For example, for the first 4 questions we only relied on aggregate data, while for questions like n. 5, n.7, n.10, n.11, and n.13 we analyzed every single answer because the mere use of aggregate data obscured important patterns and did not provide a clear picture of the phenomenon under study.

[8] We use the expression 'Language textbooks' to refer to those books focused on the acquisition of language structures and communicative functions; these are the 'course-books' used as main support of the in-class teaching activity. 'Culture textbooks' are those that cover cultural contents (in Italian or in Chinese), while 'Grammar textbooks' are textbooks specifically designed to deliver grammar points.

[9] According to Ministerial Decree No. 769 of November 26, 2018 and Decree No. 127 of September 9, 2025, the Final State Exam requires students to master a set of competences. As for the written exam, students are required to go through a B1-level reading comprehension and a written production; as for the speaking part, they are supposed to discuss in Chinese (level B1 approximately) and/or answer questions about topics related to culture, history or literature covered during the last school year.

For open-ended questions, instead, we used open coding (Maykut, Morehouse 1994 in Asay et al. 2019). Hence, similar responses, analyzed one by one, were grouped into categories, and the number of responses in each category was tallied.

4. *Results*

4.1 Socio-demographic data

It should first be noted that the survey was filled out by a total of 44 participants. Given the importance of textbooks in the teaching and learning process stated earlier (§ 2.3), we had hoped for a higher number of responses; however, the feedback received still represents a meaningful sample for our analysis, especially in highlighting the teaching community's perception of textbooks available on the Italian publishing market and the potential areas for improvement.

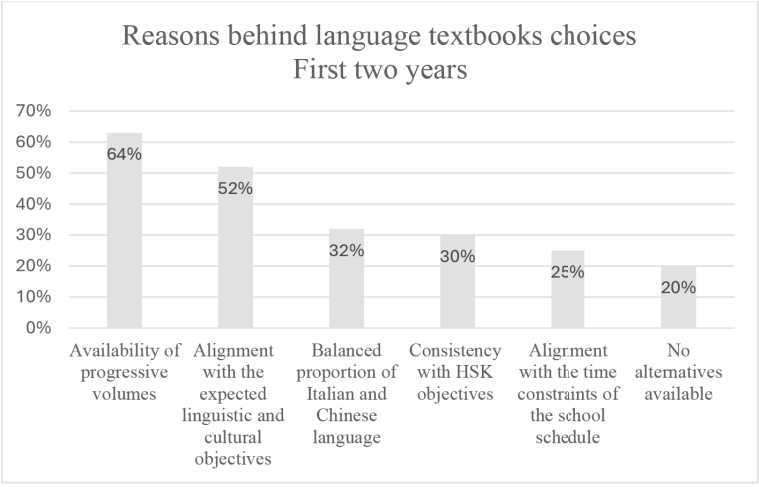
The first four questions of the questionnaire provide some information about the teachers and the status of the discipline: among the 44 respondents, 93% are teachers of Chinese language and culture, while 7% work as conversation teachers. The majority (82%) teach or have taught in *Liceo Linguistico*, 7% in *Convitto* (boarding schools) and 4% in Technical Institutes. Teaching experience of Chinese language and culture in Italian high schools ranges from less than one year to over 20 years, with an average of 8.6 years (range: <1–20; M = 8.6 years). The regions where respondents reported having taught most consistently are Veneto, Lombardy, and Emilia-Romagna (18% each), followed by Lazio, Tuscany, and Marche (7% each). Notably, no respondents reported having worked or currently working in Abruzzo, Basilicata, Molise, Trentino Alto Adige, and Valle d'Aosta. The geographical distribution of the respondents is useful only for identifying the Italian regions with the highest concentration of Chinese language teaching positions. However, it will not be used to detect different perceptions or needs at the territorial level, since all the secondary schools – public, private, and state-accredited – are subject to the same regulatory framework and to the same curricular objectives (§ 2.2).

4.2 First cycle of secondary education: textbooks and teachers' feedback

Shifting the focus to the core of the research, textbooks, in response to the fifth question of the questionnaire – "Which language textbook do you use or have you used in the first two years of instruction?" –, 36% of respondents report using *Parliamo Cinese, Vol. I* (Masini et al. 2018a), while 23% report using more than one textbook, sometimes published outside Italy. The only possible explanation for this last figure is that teachers probably adopt one textbook for students to use in class and then integrate it with several different materials taken from other textbooks that students do not have to buy. Another 16% report using both *Parliamo Cinese Vol. I* and *Parliamo Cinese, Vol. II* (Masini et al. 2018b); this third option suggests that some teachers probably start using the second volume of *Parliamo Cinese* during the second year. A noteworthy finding is that only one participant reports using a university-level textbook, rather than a high school one, as the basis for self-produced teaching material.

As for the reasons behind teachers' choices of the language textbooks (question n. 6), it can be stated that they are varied and reflect both pedagogical priorities and practical considerations. Considering that respondents were allowed to select multiple answers in the survey, the most frequently cited motivations are as follows: 64% of the teachers appreciate the possibility of adopting progressive volumes from the same series; 52% value alignment with the expected linguistic and cultural objectives, while 32% of respondents express appreciation for the balanced proportion of Italian (language) and Chinese (language). Another 30% value consistency with HSK[10] requirements, 25% think that textbooks are structured into compact teaching units, including word maps, tables and schemes, which align with the time constraints of the school schedule, and 20% underline the absence of alternative textbooks on the market. The high value placed on progressive volumes and curricular coherence suggests that teachers prioritize continuity and seek materials that support long-term language development. At the same time, the importance attributed to the presence of both languages, the alignment with HSK standards and textbooks' compact unit design reflect a practical concern about usability within the school context and alignment with institutional goals.

Fig. 1



Alongside this feedback, one particularly concerning finding that warrants attention is that nearly a quarter of the teachers, when asked to explain their language textbook choices, include among their reasons the fact that they have "no available alternative" – a response that reflects a broader sense of dissatisfaction with the textbooks currently on the market.

[10] The HSK is recognized worldwide as the official standard for certifying proficiency in Mandarin Chinese for non-native speakers. It has long been used as an official reference for acquired language competence in academic contexts, within the school system, and across various professional sectors. Consequently, many linguistic and cultural references contained in textbooks are related to the HSK standard, and numerous exercises are structured and graded according to the HSK grading system. Its major relevance therefore makes it an object of analysis within the questionnaire of this research as well.

As for the culture textbooks used in the first two years of high school (question n.7), the data show that 23% of respondents use *Destinazione Cina* (Buchetti, Man 2023) – a textbook that is approximately 40% in Chinese and 60% in Italian –, while 11% use either *Cina da scoprire* (Buchetti 2018) – roughly 90% in Italian –, or *Scopri e conosci la Cina* (Rossi, Rambaldini 2021) – 90% in Chinese. This last finding raises an immediate question: how is it possible to adopt a textbook primarily written in Chinese for students with upper-intermediate to advanced proficiency in the first two years of instruction?

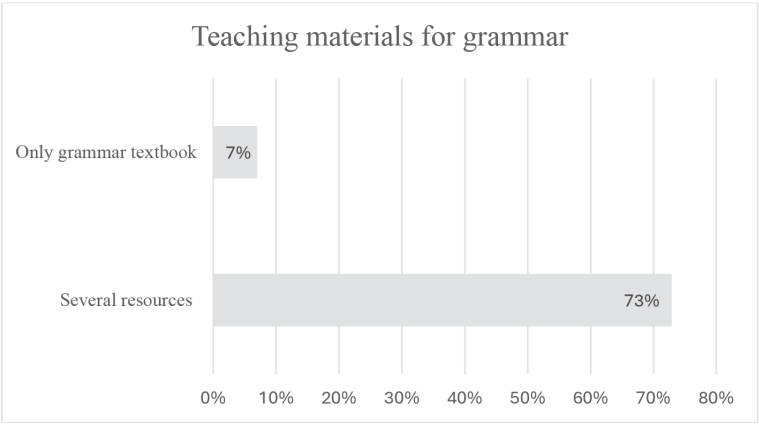
Beyond this concern, a couple of additional findings merit closer attention: 18% of teachers report using more than one textbook simultaneously, regardless of the language they are written in. However, considering the national budget limit for textbooks[11], it is fairly unlikely that students buy more than one culture book per year; hence, this figure suggests that teachers probably edit their own material drawing contents from all the books they state to adopt, but students probably buy just one or even none. Finally, 32% of respondents declare that they do not use any culture textbook at all in the first school cycle, which is not an encouraging result if we consider that "Culture is particularly crucial for CFL education" (Chen 2020, 18). In fact, since the 1980s, scholars have reflected on the role of culture teaching within the context of CSL pedagogy (Orton, Scrimgeour 2019; Qiao 2009, 215; Xing 2006) and have emphasized that not only are language and culture inseparable, but also that culture supports learners in developing intercultural communicative competence, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries (Zhang 2022, 2–61). The two most prominent reasons provided by teachers for not using a 'culture textbook' are, on one hand, that during the first two years the focus is mainly on language learning; on the other, that the budget limit does not allow the purchase of two books (question n. 9).

Further discussing the reasons behind textbook selection, the main factors cited by teachers for choosing the textbooks mentioned earlier (question n. 8) are as follows: 36% appreciate the good balance between the two languages (Italian and Chinese); 34% value the balanced combination of linguistic and cultural content; and 23% consider the contents sufficiently comprehensive, with no need for additional resources.

With regard to grammar textbooks (question n. 10), 39% of teachers report editing and adapting contents from a variety of resources (online, taken from other high school or university textbooks, or self-designed), often without even purchasing a grammar manual; 18% report using both language textbook and other materials drawn from various resources, another 18% report adopting a specific grammar manual, whereof more than half of them declare to integrate it with other materials. Figures thus show that only 7% of the respondents rely exclusively on a dedicated grammar textbook. Once again, the data lead us to believe that the materials currently available for grammar teaching do not fully meet teachers' needs or, alternatively, and probably this is the main reason, that the national budget limit, as in the case of culture textbooks, does not allow to buy an additional grammar textbook.

[11] The annual spending cap for textbooks to be adopted in lower and upper secondary school is established each year by Ministerial Decree. For example, the one for the 2025/2026 school year is established by Ministerial Decree No. 58 of March 19, 2025. See: https://www.mim.gov.it/-/decreto-ministeriale-n-58-del-19-marzo-2025 (last accessed June 12, 2026).

Fig. 2



4.3 Last three years of secondary education: textbooks and teachers' feedback

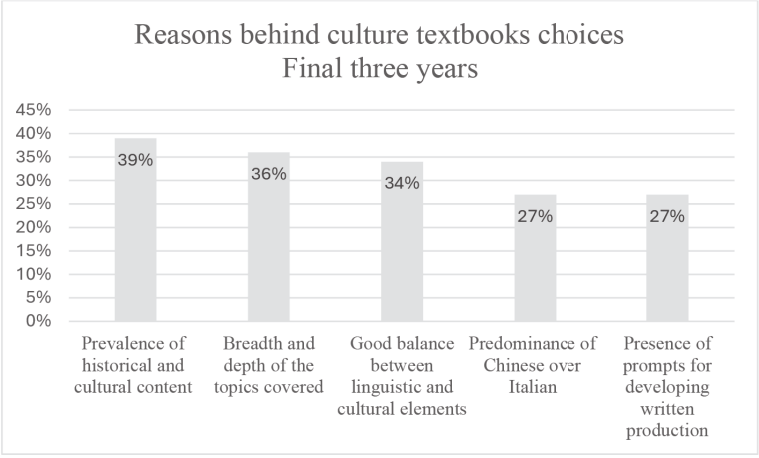
The data concerning the language textbooks chosen in the last three years of high school (question n. 11) show three main trends: over 36% of respondents report using the second volume of *Parliamo Cinese*, while 11% state they use both the second and third volumes of the same series. An interesting figure is that more than 20% of respondents report using a selection of volumes, probably requiring students to buy just one of them and selecting some supplemental material from other books if necessary.

As was the case in the first two years of high school, the respondents stated numerous reasons behind their choices (question n. 12): 39% of them report that a key factor is the availability of multiple volumes within the same series, while 34% highlight, on one hand, the importance of a good balance between Italian and Chinese language, and on the other hand, alignment with HSK objectives. 32% of respondents say that the chosen textbooks are consistent with the objectives of the last three years as outlined in the curriculum guidelines, and an additional 29% emphasize the good balance between linguistic and cultural elements. In light of these findings, it is worth noting that no respondent considers it important to choose textbooks in which Chinese predominates over Italian, or which place a strong emphasis on character writing. Likewise, only 9% of respondents consider the presence of inclusive elements for special educational needs to be relevant in the books.

In the section regarding culture textbooks, 36% of respondents report adopting *Scopri e Conosci la Cina*, 16% use *Destinazione Cina*, and 11% use both of these texts together (question n. 13). The survey reveals two additional noteworthy points: on one hand, over 20% of respondents report using a variety of textbooks (perhaps in an integrated way and not all officially adopted by students); on the other hand, 11% of respondents state that they do not use any textbook at all. These last two figures suggest that a large share of the teaching community uses materials drawn from various sources, adapting and reshaping them to suit the classroom context in which they work. Again, the reasons given are numerous (question n. 14): over 39% of respondents mention the prevalence of historical and cultural content in the books used, while 36%

state that the value lies in the breadth and depth of the topics covered. 34% highlight the good balance between linguistic and cultural elements, while 27% emphasize both the predominance of Chinese over Italian, as well as the presence of prompts for developing written production[12] and a fresher and more advanced lexical selection, capable of fostering a more authentic linguistic competence. Notably, at the lower end of the scale, no respondent underlines the relevance of the Italian language; only 2% find it important for the books to be inclusive and special educational needs oriented; and, finally, just one respondent openly states to use self-produced materials.

Fig. 3



4.4 Skills to be acquired through textbooks to successfully pass the Final State Exam

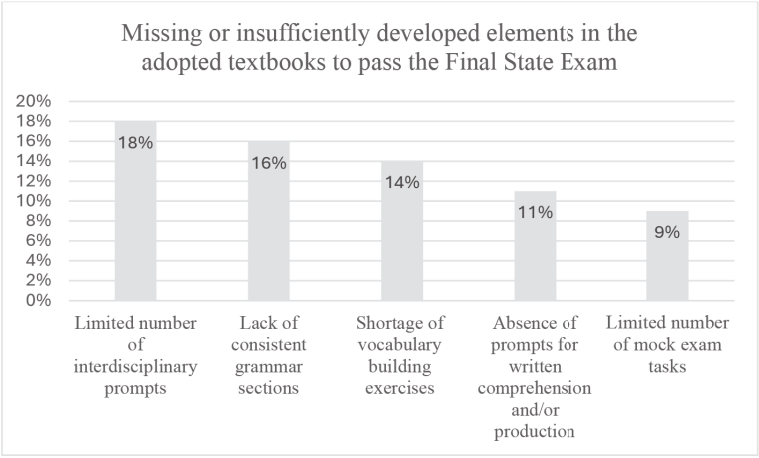
As stated earlier, the last section of the survey includes three open-ended questions which could provide an overview of the teaching community's perceptions and expectations. The first question (n. 16) inquiries about what teachers believe are the essential skills their students should acquire by the end of the fifth year in order to successfully pass the Chinese language and culture test in the Final State Exam. The Figures show three main strands, on the one hand, the triad of oral production (48%), reading comprehension (39%), and written production (36%); on the other, lexical and graphic skills (27%); and finally, knowledge of historical, cultural, and current affairs (25%). It is interesting to note that the skills mentioned by teachers closely mirror the structure of the State Exam itself: a written test focused on the comprehension and production of literary and non-literary texts, followed by an oral exam covering historical, cultural, and current topics (§ 2.2). This suggests a strong alignment between what the exam actually requires and what teachers believe students need in order to succeed.

[12] By 'written production' we mean the ability to compose a text of various types and lengths, based on a given prompt or a quotation to comment on. The present study does not specifically address characters handwriting, as, although this is a fundamental skill (Peracin, Rambaldini 2026), it is not an objective explicitly mentioned in the current regulations nor included in the reference frameworks for the State Examination.

The second open-ended question (n. 17) inquiries about the features teachers consider most useful in textbooks for developing the skills needed to pass the Chinese language tests in the Final State Exam. 29% of respondents underline that the key feature lies in the effective progression of grammar and vocabulary. The second most cited relevant factor, for almost 14% of respondents, is the presence of passages or texts on historical-cultural topics and current affairs; finally, 11% also indicate the presence of listening exercises as a significant feature. According to these figures, it is clear that respondents considered both language and culture textbooks in their feedback. Moreover, the data reveal a significant discrepancy concerning the importance of grammar in the teaching-learning process: while most respondents consider grammatical competence highly relevant for the Final State Exam, only 4% (first cycle) and 9% (second cycle) of them regard grammar as a key element in selecting language textbooks for the whole high school cycle, or have students purchase a dedicated grammar textbook (18%).

The third and final open-ended question (n. 18) investigates which elements are missing or insufficiently developed in the adopted textbooks. In this case, the most commonly cited shortcomings appear to be the limited number of interdisciplinary prompts[13] (18%), the lack of consistent grammar sections (16%), the shortage of vocabulary building exercises (14%), the absence of prompts for written comprehension and/or production (11%), and the limited number of mock exam tasks (9%). Once again, teachers' remarks seem perfectly aligned with the previous findings: what emerges in this case is a need for stronger grammar components and, with the Final Exam in mind, an increasing demand for books comprising a variety of approaches, as interdisciplinary as possible.

Fig. 4



[13] By 'interdisciplinary prompts' we refer to those resources found in textbooks that support students in establishing connections among the disciplines they study; these prompts may take various forms, such as images, excerpts, links to videos, and other similar materials. Their presence is linked to one of the requests of the Final State Exam as it was till the school year 2024/25: during the oral test students were required to establish connections among the disciplines on the basis of a prompt provided by the examination committee.

5. *Conclusions and future prospects*

From a global perspective, data analysis reveals significant heterogeneity of needs and perceptions within Italian CFL teaching community. In terms of language learning, a considerable percentage of respondents emphasize the need for simplified texts, more suitable to students' level, as the textbooks currently available on the market are considered too challenging. Nevertheless, a significant number of respondents would prefer more content-rich textbooks, possibly written in a more authentic Chinese.

Similarly, as for lexical competence, the teaching community appears divided between those who request texts with simpler vocabulary, organized schematically in word maps, and those who instead prefer texts with more advanced vocabulary and a faster progression. This discrepancy is also evident in various references made by respondents to the HSK certification system: many of them consider HSK3 the target level, while others indicate HSK4 as the expected outcome. This significant divergence can lead to two reflections: on the one hand, it seems that for many, the HSK system is still the benchmark for assessing CFL learning outcomes; on the other hand, regardless of the debate on the equivalence between HSK and the CEFR (Paternicò 2016)[14], there appear to be differences in the proficiency levels targeted by teachers by the end of the whole high school cycle. This difference is likely attributable to the placement of CFL within the curriculum – that is, whether CFL is offered as a second or third foreign language – and therefore associated with more or less advanced learning outcomes. As previously stated (§ 2.1, 2.2), in fact, students are expected to attain a level of language proficiency ranging from B1 to B2, depending on whether Chinese is studied as a second or third foreign language (Presidential Decree No. 89 of March 15, 2010).

As previously mentioned, grammar learning is also a point of contention. While many consider it a key competence for passing the Final State Exam, very few openly declare using specific grammar textbooks, despite acknowledging the scarcity of grammatical content in the main textbooks currently available. Another relevant aspect emerging from the analysis is the growing tendency, in line with end-of-cycle objectives, to favor an interdisciplinary approach and opt for textbooks able to integrate language learning with cultural knowledge.

Finally, one fifth of teachers report drawing on a variety of sources for both language and culture teaching. This could indicate a partial dissatisfaction with the current textbooks available on the market or suggest a widespread need to adopt a pluralistic teaching approach. According to this second interpretation, teachers would not necessarily rely on a single guidebook but rather be inclined to select the strengths of various textbooks in order to optimize and tailor their teaching approach more effectively.

The figures revealed by the analysis, along with the descriptive feedback and remarks provided by the respondents, may contribute to shaping editorial directions for secondary

[14] The different teaching and learning process for CFL compared to other European languages do not allow perfect correspondence between frameworks developed with distinct objectives, methodologies, and contextual applications (Paternicò 2016). For this reason, even if also the *National Syllabus of Chinese Language* gives a general indication of the target proficiency level for each school year, on the basis of the CEFR and HSK, the reference is purely indicative (National Syllabus of Chinese language 2016, 5).

school. In this manner, didactic publications will be able to render the teaching and learning processes more consistent and effective at the national level, more closely attuned to the specific needs of Chinese language learners and better aligned with the national guidelines for foreign language education.

Authorship Contributions

This work is the result of close collaboration between the two authors. For the concerns of the Italian academic evaluation processes, the writing of the article was divided as follows: Cristina Caterina Rambaldini is mainly responsible for Sections 1, 2.1, 2.3, 3, 4.1 and 4.2, while Tommaso Rossi is mainly responsible for Sections 2.2, 4.3, 4.4 and 5.

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