"Second Language Teaching with Refugees: Educational Experiences and Welcoming Environments"

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Abstract: This qualitative research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between previous schooling experiences and second language learning among a group of adult refugees and asylum seekers. Refugees and asylum seekers present unique challenges to educators in host countries. Issues related to forced migration, low literacy levels, cultural estrangement are among the many challenges encountered (Shapiro et al., 2019). These multiple small case studies were conducted at a school in Northern Italy. The paper examines the refugees' educational histories and explores how humanizing teaching practices can facilitate both teaching and learning (Freire, 1970/2018; Pasquarella et al., 2022). Through one-on-one interviews and a focus group, the authors found that the refugees' educational backgrounds were markedly different. The analysis reveals that previous schooling experiences and challenging living conditions shaped the refugees' attitudes toward education. Despite these challenges, participants affirmed that the humanistic approach adopted by the teachers was effective in alleviating the anxieties and fears about language learning of many refugees, helping to bridge an important gap in language teaching across cultures.
Keywords: Humanizing language teaching practices with refugees, refugees' language teaching, refugees' language learning, humanizing pedagogy, refugees well-being in the language classroom

This work presents the results of multiple small case studies held in an Italian language school for adult refugees and asylum seekers. The aim was to understand if and how the learner's previous educational experiences in their countries of origin shape the way they perceive school and second language acquisition[3], and to investigate the importance of a welcoming environment and the potential provided by the utilization of humanizing practices. In regards to migration and language acquisition, it is necessary to remember the vast variability between the socio-cultural environments of individuals in their countries of origin and in those of their host countries, and how each person's previous experience and knowledge significantly influences outcomes in language acquisition (Pasquarella et al., 2022).

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[3] In this work, when the authors use 'second language' they mean the language of the host country, recognizing the plurilingualism of the subjects who are the focus of this study.

Who are "refugees" and "asylum seekers"?

The first definition of "refugee" can be found in the Geneva Convention, adopted in 1951. It contains the internationally accepted definition of refugee, and defines the kind of protection and assistance a refugee is entitled to receive from the host country. In 1967, a protocol was added to the convention to include not only Second World War European refugees but anyone in the world to whom the definition might be applicable.

Specifically, "asylum seekers" are individuals that arrive in a host country claiming to have forcibly left their country of origin, and declare that they seek international protection, requesting the host country to recognize their refugee status, or other forms of international protection. Then, if granted the status or other forms of protection (§2.1), they become "refugees", and are allowed to remain temporarily (even for many years) in the country of asylum and therefore need to learn the language of their host country in order to integrate.

Refugees' Background and Factors Influencing Language Learning

For the purposes of this paper and to aid in understanding the current situation, it is relevant to present some key information on migration and the number of applications for refugee and asylum seeker status in Europe and Italy.

Refugees' Migration in Europe and Italy

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency in 2023, 117.3 million (UNHCR, 2024) people were forcibly displaced, of these 32.6 million were refugees and 64.5 million were internally displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations. Most refugees are hosted in border countries, but considering Europe, the data (European Commission, 2024) shows that there were 3.4 million first visa permits issued in 2022 and of these more than 60% were asylum-related with people coming from 140 countries (European Commission, 2024; Eurostat, 2024); in fact, data from the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA, 2024) shows that in 2023, EU countries along with Norway and Switzerland logged over 1,140,000 applications for asylum, an increase of 18 % compared to 2022, reaching a seven-year high.

Italy, in terms of refugee reception, can be considered 4th ranked in the EU: in 2023 Germany accounted for 31.4 % of all first-time asylum applicants in the EU, with 329,035 applicants registered, followed by Spain (160,460, or 15.3 %), France (145,095, or 13.8 %) and Italy (130,565, or 12.4 %).

In Italy, 8.5 percent of the population is foreigner. Of these, about 350,000 (0.6 percent of the population) are refugees or have other forms of protection. Italian law recognizes three main forms of protection (Law 286/1998; Decree law 251/2007): (1) asylum, following the Geneva Convention, (2) subsidiary protection for those that do not qualify for asylum but would be at risk of suffering serious harm if they returned to their country of origin, and (3) "humanitarian" or "special" protection (the latest defined in law 132/2018), for other kinds of humanitarian reasons, such as health or age, famine or environmental crises, being the victim of serious political instability, episodes of violence or insufficient respect for human rights, labor exploitation, domestic violence or the absence of family ties in the country of origin, and other reasons for social protection.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers Literacy Levels

According to the statistics published by UNESCO (2024), 86% of the world's population is literate, nonetheless there are more than 760 million people who cannot read or write. Data on literacy can be inconsistent from country to country, due primarily to disparities in the definition given to the term "literacy" which is more stringent in Western Europe and North America. The inconsistencies are further exacerbated by divergences in methodologies used in gathering and analyzing data (World Population Review, 2024). Still, it can be noted that the poorest countries with less stable forms of government have lower levels of literacy.

Acknowledging the huge variability of individual experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds among refugees, in Europe, learners with limited schooling are almost exclusively refugees.

In addition to "low-educated", other terms are used depending on the country, the context or the author(s): "adults with limited or interrupted literacy education", "adults with limited or interrupted formal schooling", "literacy learners", "pre-entry learners" and "A0" (in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, a level below its six A1–C2 levels) (Haznedar et al., 2018, p. 156). Indeed, a Companion Volume was added to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages in 2018, introducing descriptors for abilities below the A1 proficiency level, the new "pre-A1" level (COE, 2020). In the same year, the Council of Europe issued a reference guide called "Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LASLLIAM)", developed by a group of experts and the Council of Europe Education Department with the aim to support learning environments for non- and low-literate migrants.

In fact, teaching a second language while simultaneously teaching reading and writing to an adult learner presents specific challenges, requiring dedicated teaching techniques and an attention to the individual learner and their previously acquired competencies.

In 2018 (more recent data are not available), the average level of schooling detected among the beneficiaries in the Reception and Integration System (*Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione*, SAI, §3.1) projects in Italy was predominantly low or medium: 12 percent had no schooling at all, 37 percent had attended primary school, 26 percent had a middle school diploma, 19 percent a high school diploma, and 6 percent a college degree (*Rapporto annuale SPRAR/SIPROIMI*, 2018). However, after the conflict between Russia and Ukraine started, an influx of highly literate refugees was seen.

Immigrants' Language Skills and Previous Schooling Influence

In Europe, an immigrant's language skills are perceived as a key factor for social inclusion and integration (Campion, 2018; Duchêne, et al., 2013; Gurer, 2019; Harrison et al., 2019; Hokkinen & Barner-Rasmussen, 2023), but, as stated by Young-Scholten and Naeb (2009) "adults who have no prior print-text literacy face a unique set of challenges as they develop literacy skills for the first time" and many scholars and teachers have noted the beneficial effects of previous schooling experiences, however diverse (Tarone & Bigelow, 2005; Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006; inter alia).

Another crucial factor linked with previous schooling experience is that adults who have attended primary and secondary school have also learned, regardless of their culture of origin, a way to behave in a school environment and the ways one interacts with classmates, teachers and other school staff (Benseman, 2014; Fernie, 1988). Furthermore, school promotes a series of

cognitive activities, in particular the ability to use prior knowledge and skills (Carlsson et al., 2015). On the other hand, those who have little education and/or have interrupted their studies (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education, SLIFE; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010) often do not possess this "know-how" and moreover, despite the limited literature on the matter, it appears that students with limited schooling face additional difficulties in formally learning a second language (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; Browder, 2015; Field & Ryan, 2022; Ryan et al., 2022), among which is the impact of the migratory experience, in particular course attendance and attention in class (Kaplan et al., 2016; Søndergaard, 2017). Nonetheless, it is necessary to take into account that among the factors mentioned above, the personality of individual learners also has a strong impact on learning, at times, independently of previous schooling experiences (Benseman, 2014; Browder, 2015; inter alia).

Refugees and Second Language Learning

Circumscribing the discourse to adult refugees learning the language of their host country, there has recently been a proliferation of pertinent studies. The Council of Europe has published a multi-language toolkit designed to assist organizations providing language support for adult refugees (COE, 2017). Studies have also been published regarding the teaching/learning of Italian (Borri et al., 2014; Galli, 2017; Nitti, 2019; Vecchiato, 2019; Brichese et al., 2020; Caviglia & Viale, 2022).[4] Recently much of the research on the educational experience has focussed on the impact of previous schooling on second language acquisition among refugees, especially among those with no or low literacy in their own native-language (Bigelow & Watson, 2012; Brown et al., 2006; Klein & Martohardjono, 2015; Tarone et al., 2009; inter alia), but they do not explore the repercussion that it can have on the way learners perceive how schooling should be. As far as teaching goes, the commonly used methods in contemporary language schools in Italy are often inspired by communicative approach, task-based learning and other active, student-centered methods. Though these methods have been proved effective in promoting second language learning, they frequently differ greatly from the teaching methods adult refugees have experienced as children in their countries of origin (§6). Bertolotto (2013) notes that:

> The centrality of the learner and the disappearance of the teacher's directive role can, then, cause a culture shock in learners who bring with them preconceived notions of teaching models where the teacher is at the heart of the process. This is the case of foreigners learning a second language, who come from systems in which schooling is still based on rather traditional and directive models (p. 696).[5]

This inconsistency can lead to a lack of confidence in the teacher and in the proposed method, prompting conflicts or even dropping-out of the courses, as stated by Albert et al. (1998):

> experience shows that in adult education courses there is an immediate drop-out whenever there is a conflict between how, what and how much

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[4] It goes beyond the scope of this paper to fully present all the research on refugees and host country language acquisition in detail. The interested reader can find some of these studies in the references suggested.

[5] *La centralità dell'apprendente e il venir meno del ruolo direttivo dell'insegnante possono, poi, causare uno shock culturale negli apprendenti che portano con sé reminiscenze di modelli di insegnamento nei quali l'insegnante è il fulcro del processo. È il caso degli stranieri che apprendono una L2 e che vengono da sistemi nei quali la scuola è ancora basata su modelli piuttosto tradizionali e direttivi.* (translated by the authors)

the institution proposes to teach and how, what and how much the 'student' considers it in his or her interest to learn (p. 10).[6]

The role of the teacher is fundamental here: it is necessary for the teacher to build a trusting relationship with the learners, framing an implicit educational agreement.

Accordingly, this research was carried out to fill the gap in research about the connection between students' educational diversity or disrupted educational histories and teaching practices in the host country.

The Context of the Study

The present multiple small case studies were conducted between July and November 2023 in a reception project for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Italy.

The Reception System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Italy

The public system for the reception of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy was established in 2001, and it involves funding from the Italian government for projects spread across the country which are managed by various local authorities.
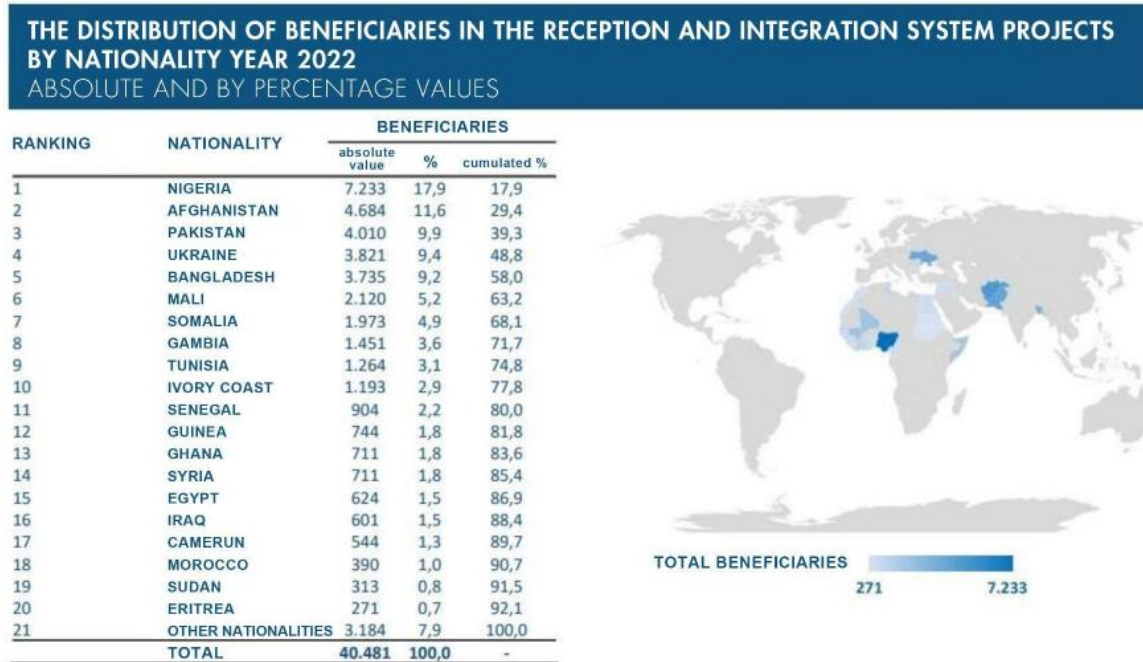
The system is currently called "*Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione*" (Reception and Integration System; from now on referred to as "SAI" and has about 38,000 sites (SAI, 2024). Local authorities who decide to host refugees in their territories, and entrust the management of the services provided for these people to Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). Beneficiaries can be housed by the project for a period of six months or more depending on the individual case, then they must become autonomous and find employment and accommodation of their own volition. SAI hosts adults and families with minors, and includes specific provisions for unaccompanied minors.

In the year 2022 (latest data available), the nationality of beneficiaries in the SAI were mainly from four geographical areas: 38.7 percent from South Central Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh), 36.3 percent from Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Mali, Somalia, Gambia), 15.4 percent from North Africa and the Middle East (Tunisia, Egypt), and 9.6 percent from Ukraine. More than 100 nationalities are represented in total (SAI, 2023).

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[6] (...) *l'esperienza insegna che nei corsi per adulti, si determina immediatamente l'abbandono delle lezioni ogniqualvolta si profila una conflittualità tra come, cosa e quanto l'istituzione si propone di insegnare e come, cosa e quanto l''allievo' ritiene suo interesse imparare.*(translated by the authors)

Image 1
Country of origins of SAI beneficiaries in 2022. (Source: SAI annual report, 2023).

Within SAI projects, beneficiaries receive food, housing, orientation services, legal assistance, and services aimed at employment and housing integration, as well as Italian language courses. However, SAI does not have sufficient capacity to accommodate all asylum seekers and refugees who arrive in Italy. In fact, while 130,000 asylum seekers arrived in Italy in 2023 (Eurostat, 2023), there are only about 38,000 places in the regular reception system. Therefore, an emergency reception system, called *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria*, (Extraordinary Reception Centers, CAS), was created alongside the SAI. It currently hosts about 100,000 asylum seekers (*Ministero dell'Interno*, 2024). Within the CAS system, the quality standards of the reception services are generally lower than in ordinary SAI reception.

Each EU country has a different system for hosting asylum seekers and refugees. The Reception Conditions Directive (Directive 2013/33/EU) sets minimum standards for the material reception conditions in every country, but still leaves a margin of discretion to each member state to choose the most adequate way to provide it.

The Italian Language School

The research took place at the Italian school of the Association "*Il Mondo nella Città*" (The world in the city) based in the town of Schio, in Northern Italy, hereinafter referred to as "the School". The association runs an SAI project, providing all the services to the beneficiaries. At the time of writing, it hosted 89 refugees and asylum seekers, single adults, families with children, or single parents with children. The Italian language school has been organizing courses for adults since 2012, providing lessons for the project's beneficiaries and other courses and services for other groups of migrants. The school currently employs four teachers, all qualified and specialized in Italian Teaching as a Foreign/Second Language, and with many years of experience with this specific target group.

Having trained professional instructors makes a significant difference since the field of adult education for migrants in Italy is still often entrusted to volunteers or non-specialized teachers, due to the lack of resources, and/or lack of specialized teachers.

The method used in the school is inspired by communicative and humanistic-affective approaches; it often employs autobiographical and self-narrative activities (Demetrio, 1996). The teachers strive to create a welcoming and peaceful environment, and to respond to students' individual needs. The students are divided in small groups (up to 12 students) depending on their linguistic level; illiterate or low-literate students attend specific classes. They attend the school four or five days a week, for three hours of lessons. In fact, in SAI projects beneficiaries are entitled to receive 15 hours a week of language lessons, that can be provided both in internal dedicated courses or by enrolling them in external courses.

Attendance in the School is usually high. Though, there are little to no repercussions for those who do not attend the courses.

Methodology

The present research is a multiple case study methodology (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2017), thus enabling analysis of analogous cases that are similar in nature. It involved a small number of participants (§ 4.1) and the instruments used for the research were: (1) semi-structured interviews between one of the researchers, a participant in the study and, when the interviewee's Italian language proficiency level was too low, a mediator; (2) a focus group. The positionality of the researchers (Gurr et al., 2024) has been considered by distinguishing their roles in conducting the interviews. One researcher is involved in the SAI project and contributed to the interviews by recruiting participants and assisting in the design of the questions. The other, a university researcher, conducted the interviews, thereby enabling the participants to express their opinions and impressions about the school as freely as possible.

Even though qualitative research is subjective in itself, the two instruments, the interviews and the focus group, were chosen in order to give the participants the possibility to speak about their own experiences without undue influence from the researcher. On one hand, the single participants' interviews gave the authors information about each individual and their experiences as a human being without being conditioned by other people's ideas or mental representations, while on the other the focus group allowed a discussion that could further the reflection on the topic. Therefore, the data gathered could be compared and help drive a deeper understanding of the phenomena. All the participants and the mediators, who helped translate during the interviews, were informed on the research's aims and methodology and signed a consent form allowing the researchers to record their voices and to anonymously use personal socio-linguistic data for the purposes of the study, in compliance with the European law on Research Ethics pursuant to art. 13 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation, aka "GDPR", European Commission, 2013) before the study began. The participants' names were pseudonymized using numbers and therefore there is no traceability. For privacy reasons here only the pseudonym of the interviewees will be released in this account.

The Interviews

The ten interviews were all conducted in Italian language which was chosen because the participants spoke different languages from the researchers. Mediators were used only for those whose Italian language proficiency was not sufficient and to help in translating questions and answers during the face-to-face interview. On a few occasions, the mediators also added some reflections from their own experience. Some interviewees were attending the School at the time of the interview, while others had attended the School in the past.

Respondents were selected based on origin, to reflect as closely as possible the nationalities most represented in the national reception system. Another selection criterion was previous schooling: people with different educational backgrounds and degrees were interviewed, to broaden the viewpoints included.

Table 1

Interviewees' data

Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender	Age	Schooling
I1	Somalia	M	22	5 years Koranic school
I2	Afghanistan	M	16	6 years
I3	Ethiopia	F	23	10 years
I4	Ukraine	F	32	15 years
I5	Tunisia	M	37	7 years (primary + 1 year)
I6	Syria	M	26	10 years
I7	Nigeria	F	26	13 years
I8	Burkina Faso	M	27	8 years
I9	Ivory Coast	M	26	10 years
I10	Bangladesh	M	19	8 years

All interviews were conducted in person at the School, except one which was done online. The single session interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes, depending on if a mediator was employed. The use of a mediator translating and relaying information caused those interviews to go longer. The interviewees were made aware of the study prior to the interview session and the questions were given to them beforehand. If needed it was possible for them to use devices or other instruments to translate or find words to better convey their experiences or thoughts, but nobody did. The interviewer tried her best to make the interviewees feel at ease before starting and during the interview and to keep a good balance between neutrality and empathy given that the interview is a co-constructed social exchange. All interviews were recorded. One disadvantage to using recordings is that non-verbal cues, such as eye movements, are lost, nevertheless audio recordings were opted for as a less stressful way to collect data from the participants. The interviews were semi-structured, which allows some freedom but gives a framework to work within. The same questions were asked of all participants whilst the order was not always the same and some further questions were asked to elaborate more deeply on specific issues that arose during the dialogue.

The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1. The first part aimed at collecting personal information, the second part focused on the participants' educational background in their country of origin, while the third concerned the experiences of their schooling in the host country.

The Focus Group

The focus group was conducted at the School, the goal was to compare the previous schooling systems and experiences of the participants with their experiences in the Italian as a second language course. There were no mediators during the focus group. The eight participants were given prompts by the researchers to facilitate a brainstorming exercise in which the participants shared their previous educational experiences and perceptions in their home countries. This was to create "a synergistic environment that results in a deep and insightful discussion" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 144) and a reflection on the teaching practices in the School.

The sample of participants was as heterogeneous as could be found, given the nationalities of the students attending the school at the moment the focus group took place. It included three nationalities (Burkina Faso, Ukraine, Nigeria). In the introductory phase the moderator welcomed the participants and presented the aim and the method of the focus group and of the project and obtained the informed consent of the participants. It was followed by a round of presentations. The first input for discussion was a video on the daily routine in a school in China. The video was chosen because it featured a school system with marked differences from the school systems known by the participants, in order to stimulate a discussion in terms of cross-cultural comparison, and it could be understood by viewers regardless of their language competence, providing limited linguistic input.

After viewing the video, a picture book comparing school system routines of different countries around the world was shown to the participants. The discussion group was led by the authors and was recorded for data analysis with the consent of the participants. The students were encouraged to share their comments about the input materials, and their experiences in the schools they had attended. It was a type of stimulated recall of previous schooling experiences and at the same time a comparative reflection on their present educational experience.

The moderator who facilitated the discussion encouraged everyone to be part of the group, even the shy participant, to feel free to share their thoughts and experiences. From the researcher's perspective, it seemed as though the participants enjoyed taking part in the focus group: they were collaborative and talkative about the presented topics.

Data Analysis

The interviews and the focus group recording were transcribed *verbatim* and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013) with the software for qualitative analysis MAXQDA[7]. The thematic analysis was top-down driven focusing on the relationship between the participants' previous educational backgrounds and the language teaching practices in the host country. Using the six-phase framework for thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the authors first listened to the recordings of the interviews and the focus group, and read the transcriptions multiple times to become familiar with the data. They also exchanged initial impressions (Step 1). Next, the researchers independently applied open coding to each segment of data that was relevant to or highlighted something significant related to the research question (Step

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[7] The mediators' comments were taken into consideration for the analysis.

2). Afterwards, the coded sections were compared, and preliminary codes were developed, which can be found in Appendix 2.

Subsequently, the codes were further discussed and refined in search of broader themes, such as feelings related to schooling in the country of origin, schooling in Italy, etc. (Step 3). The authors then reviewed the coded sections to determine if any codes overlapped and needed to be merged, and whether they truly supported the themes to which they were linked. Some codes were removed (e.g., "guard") because they were deemed irrelevant for the current research (Step 4). The (re)definition of themes helped the researchers consolidate the points discussed in the findings below (§6) (Steps 5 and 6). The following table displays the main themes, their subthemes, and their frequency across the different documents.

Table 2

Themes and subthemes of the thematic analysis and their distribution among the documents (created by MAXQDA24)

Sistema dei codici	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9	I10	focus...
feelings											
fear before starting				■	■	■				■	
tranquillity/trust they can learn	■				■						
motivation						■			■		
estrangment											
description of the school in Italy											
little respect for the teachers in Italy		■							■		
good teachers			■	■	■				■		
welcoming environment			■	■	■						
positive relationships in the classroom				■							
Italian method					■						■
self-learning											
precariousness of the school in Italy											
reflection on schools not yet developed							■				
dropout reasons										■	
objectives						■	■		■		
description in the country of origin	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
teacher profile in the country of origin		■		■	■				■		
family pressure									■		
memory	■										
male and female divided											
school fee		■									
school equipment		■							■		
foreign languages in the country of origin							■		■	■	
rituals							■				
standing up											
punishment			■		■		■				■
homework											
uniform				■							
number of students	■						■				
Koranic school	■										

Findings

In this section, the themes identified during the thematic analysis are presented, along with examples in the participants' own words.

School Systems and Rituals in Countries of Origin

One of the broader topics was the school system in the participants' countries of origin. Mandatory public schools are generally free of charge, but families have to pay for a uniform and in some places also for books. In addition to the varying school system structure country to country, a recurrent feature is the high number of students per class, commonly from 50 to 100 (but in Ukraine, Tunisia and Bangladesh the number was lower, generally around 20-30 students), featuring rows of desks that could hold 2-3 or more students. Many interviewees reported the lack of technological equipment and some even a lack of books and stationery. One, referring to the Afghani situation, mentioned the fact that sometimes classes are held in big tents and pupils sit on rugs on the floor and write on wooden boards. Pupils show signs of respect for the teachers, like standing up when they enter the classrooms. There are also some rituals at the beginning of the school day such as singing the national anthem or praying. Students are also asked to help clean the school premises in shifts. Most school systems involve memorization as a big part of their methodology, especially in the Koranic schools (Akkari, 2004). Further, many schools include corporal punishment for misconduct, and can take the form of beating students with a stick or having students stand on their head for a period of time (the length depending on the degree of the misbehavior). Three participants reported the pressure from their family to attend school and pass examinations was very high. One participant recounted:

> My father bought me a dress for the next year and when my father told me, he said: "When you don't do well on your exam, you don't pass to the next year, this dress you will wear it as your dead dress. I will make you dead!" [*il mio babbo ha comprato un vestito per l'anno dopo e quando il mio babbo hai detto ha detto: "Quando tu non fare l'esame bene, non passi l'anno prossimo, questa vestiti tu fare (lo metti) da morto. Io faccio morto tu!"*].[8]

In the interviews it became very apparent that families generally agree with the use of physical punishment in the schools. Non-verbal communication can give a much deeper insight into the matter: it is worthy of note that when speaking about punishment, interviewees often giggled or told them in an amusing way. It is suspected that this behavior stems from ambivalence, avoidance or a desire to disassociate from the experience.

All focus group participants had studied at least one second language in school. In some cases, these were colonial languages which were used as the medium of instruction. The participants are not particularly clear when speaking about the methodology used to teach languages. Notwithstanding this some do relay that there was a lot of grammar, while others mention a more communicative approach.

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[8] It should be noted that for the purposes of this research, when translating the participants' quotes from Italian to English no effort was made to correct grammatical errors as the authors wanted the quotes to reflect the language competency level as it was spoken.

Drop Out

Aside from the Ukrainian respondent who has two bachelors (obtained concurrently), all the others dropped out of school for reasons such as poverty (6), war (2), the death of one of their parents (1):

> - I left school because war started [*ho lasciato la scuola perché è iniziata la guerra*];
> - Because my mother died and my father didn't have the money only to do other things, and the school finished for me… I was also a little… how to say it?... Oh my God, I don't know how to say it, I was angry, I was worried because of life, I don't want to go anymore, I said enough (of it) [*Perché un po' la mia mamma è morta e mio papà non ce l'ha soldi solo per fare altre cose, e la scuola è finita per me… anche io ero un po'… come si dice …Oddio non so come si dice, sono arrabbiata, sono preoccupata dalla vita, non voglio andare più, ho detto basta*].

Emotions Related to the Language Course in Italy

In contrast, when speaking of the school in Italy, the primary theme was the attitude and behavior of the Italian teachers who were regarded as especially nice, welcoming and patient. The students stated how the instructors helped them to feel welcome and allay their pre-class anxieties and start understanding Italian from the first lesson. One participant said:

> In my head there was the question: how can I study if the teacher doesn't speak Ukrainian? [*Nella mia testa c'era la domanda come studio, se insegnante non parla ucraino?*]

For others it is the fear of going back to the classroom as an adult:

> I go back to 20 years ago. I'm still a student. No, it's the first day, it was a little like this, I wasn't dreadful but I was scared that I go back to the classroom like 20 years ago, with the notebook…It's different as an adult compared to a child [*Torno a 20 anni fa. E sempre studente. No, il primo giorno è stato un po' così, non ho paura ma sono spaventato che io torno come vent'anni fa nell'aula, con il quaderno…è diverso da adulto e da bambino*].

One said that their head was spinning around and around after the course: "my head spins, spins" [*la mia testa gira, gira*], and one was eager to learn as fast as they could: "I am not scared, because I was in a hurry to learn" [*non ho paura, perché avevo fretta di iniziare*]. Nevertheless, all of the participants declared having felt reassured at the end of the day, they felt they could understand and it was possible for them to learn the new language:

> But later no, as I liked to study the language, I liked to do it, and to know it, I came (to school) and I am really happy [*ma dopo no, come lingua gli piaceva di farla, anche conoscerla. Io vengo contento proprio*].

Another underlined feeling calm and relaxed when attending lessons, and appreciated the fact that the lessons are non-mandatory for students:

> I come to school really calm, relaxed, to learn, I'm not stressed, or obligated.
> I'm a little free to come here to learn and acquire a new language [*Io vengo proprio tranquillo, rilassato, per imparare, non sono stressato, o obbligato.*

> *Sono un po' libero di venire qua a imparare e apprendere una lingua nuova*].

Some (3) reported having a strong intrinsic motivation that helps in learning Italian:

> I said to myself: "No, never easy, not easy, difficult!". But slowly slowly, one month, two months, it's like this. I do school also at home, I've done it for six months, everyday, even at home every day I studied and studied. And like this, slowly slowly (I've learned)". [*Ho detto: "No, mai facile e non facile, difficile!" Ma piano piano, un mese, due mesi, è così. Faccio anche a casa scuola, ho fatto per sei mesi, ogni giorno anche a casa faccio faccio… E così piano piano.*].

Some (2) have also spoken of using technologies, such as apps or videos on Youtube for self-study.

Objectives in Studying Italian

When asked about their goals in studying the language, four participants mentioned work-related reasons, three cited the desire to interact with others and become autonomous in the host country, and two mentioned their goal of completing middle school within the Italian educational system.

> I like the school here also. But not for me it is important to do the job, do the job and no more school. Learn only language, yes, I like. Other schools of university or like that not, because there is no time [*Anche a me mi piace qui la scuola. Solo adesso per me è importante fare il lavoro, faccio il lavoro e basta scuola. Imparare solo di lingua, sì, mi piace. Altra scuola di università o così no, perché non c'è tempo*].

For some, the aims are less clear: one participant explicitly stated that he does not know, while another said that her intention is to return to her home country as soon as possible, nonetheless she still wants to learn Italian to accomplish what she has started.

School environment in Italy

Many (8) described the school environment in Italy as welcoming not just in terms of the teachers but also the surroundings and the interaction with classmates. Some participants stated:

> - (talking about the poster hanging on the classroom walls), this is a good idea, that this is done by the students [*questa è una bella idea, che questo fatto studenti*];
> - freedom, that the teacher is not racist, for the teacher in their method of teaching Italian we are all equals [*la libertà, che il prof non c'è il razzismo, per il prof nel suo metodo di imparare la lingua italiana siamo tutti uguali*];
> - we've learned with much patience. It is not difficult when someone teaches you with the heart. When you listen to them with the heart and you want to learn it is not difficult [*Abbiamo imparato con tanta pazienza. Non è difficile quando qualcuno ti insegna qualcosa con il cuore. Quando l'ascolti con il cuore e vuoi imparare non è difficile]*.

Intercultural Relationships at School[9]

When speaking about relationships in the classroom, the participants described having a good rapport among students and point out the intercultural aspects of being in contact with people coming from different backgrounds:

- Yes, I liked this very much because I've always been interested in learning something new and having classes with many cultures and different people [*Sì, mi è piaciuto questo molto perché mi sono interessato sempre imparare qualcosa di nuovo e preparare le lezioni con tante culture e gente diversa*];
- their stories are interesting, how they come here, how they live in different countries, for me, so much interesting, it's the first time I've seen people that came by boat, for instance. For me, very interesting [*sono interessanti le loro storie, come loro arrivano qua, come loro vivono in paesi altri, per me, così tanto tanto interessante, è la prima volta che ho visto persone che arrivano in barca, ad esempio. Mi tanto interessante*];
- even if you make a mistake speaking, nobody laughs at you, nobody makes fun of you, really nobody! [*anche se tu parli in modo sbagliato, nessuno ride, nessuno ti prende in giro nessuno, davvero nessuno!*].

Discontinuous Attendance and Respect Issues

Still, some interviewees (3) noted that the attendance in the School is not very stable: not everyone comes to school every day, not all the people stay together in this classroom; and there are different people every month. They come to school for two months, then he finds a job and then they don't come any more [*non tutti le persone arrivano a scuola ogni giorni, non tutte le persone sono insieme in questa classe; e ci sono persone (diverse) ogni mese. Due mesi arrivano a scuola, dopo lui trova lavoro e dopo non arrivano più*].

Another recurring theme mentioned by interviewees was the perceived lack of respect towards the teachers (4) in the Italian school. Some stated that sometimes students go to the market instead of coming to class. While others discussed the lack of respect for teachers in the Italian public school system. They reported that there is little homework and no punishment for misconduct, which according to those participants only exacerbates the issue. This view is likely a relic of the strictness experienced by the participants in their home countries.

Comparing School Systems and Teaching Methodologies

When asked to compare the teaching methodologies of their home country to those they have experienced in Italy, it appears that most of the interviewees are not used to critically reflecting and analyzing their own learning processes and the teaching methods they had partaken in. While the answers to the questions regarding their experiences were often quite long and articulated, the answers regarding the comparison between systems or reflections on methods were often shorter and less articulated. Some answers were quite vague, the respondents' words showed no previous

[9] It should not be assumed that there are necessarily positive relationships among the learners in the classroom. Although they are often viewed as a single group, 'the refugees', they are individuals with diverse backgrounds and cultures, which may sometimes be in conflict.

reflection on this topic, such as: "I don't remember… I have to think about it" [*non mi ricordo più… Mi devi pensare a questo.*]. Nonetheless, some interviewees (2) and one mediator expressed appreciations for the Italian teaching method:

> - in my country if you study in a private school you can do everything, if you spend money you can do everything, but here in Italy it's a little bit different, regulations are valid for all, I saw this thing, this thing is very well [*nel mio paese se sei a studiare di privato puoi fare tutto, perché ci sono tante opportunità per privato, se spendi soldi quindi puoi fare tutto, ma invece in Italia un po' diverso, un regolamento uguale per tutti, ho visto questa cosa, questa cosa è molto benissimo*];
> - the school here in Italy I like it in the pedagogical ethos. I like it, because I studied pedagogy. Here the pupil is not under too much stress [*la scuola qua in Italia mi piace nel metodo pedagogico. Mi piace, perché ho studiato pedagogia. Qua non si forza tanto l'alunno*].

Strikingly enough, one participant mentioned the fact that Italian schools are inclusive for disabled children:

> (in my country) disabled children always stay at home, they don't go to school, but here I see many children with wheelchairs, they send these children to school, they understand, (the school) helps them a lot [*bambini disabili stanno sempre a casa, non vanno a scuola, invece qui io vedo tanti bambini con carrello, portano anche i bambini e capiscono, aiutano qui tanto*].

Discussion and Conclusions

Previous studies in relation to refugees have focused on the impact of the host country language proficiency on integration (Campion, 2018; Duchêne et al., 2013; Harrison et al., 2019; Ratini, 2019) or on host country language learning (Browder, 2019; Caviglia & Viale, 2022; Vecchiato, 2019; van de Craats, 2006; inter alia). Others have focussed on literacy learning for migrant adults (Minuz, 2005; Young-Scholten & Naeb, 2009, Caon & Brichese, 2019). Nonetheless, the authors of this study are unaware of previous research which seeks to investigate the relationship between the experiences of previous schooling in the country of origin of refugees and language teaching practices in the host country. The aim of this research was therefore to start understanding these aspects.

The main limitation of this case study is the small number of participants. However, this also allowed trust to be built between the researchers and the refugees, which is essential for this type of research. This trust facilitated the collection of qualitative data reflecting the participants' perceptions and, in the focus group, enabled the sharing of experiences and a form of negotiation among them. By gathering the authentic words of the refugees, the participants' perspectives are prioritized, providing deeper insights and strengthening the research.

Several recurring points were identified in the interviews and the focus group. Regarding the schools in the countries of origin, many participants described the highly ritualized routines and signs of respect, physical punishments at school, and the pressure from families for good academic performance. Some interviewees also cited reasons for dropping out related to war, poverty, or traumatic family events.

The interviewees often lack awareness and in-depth reflection on teaching methods, and some of them even the aim of their language learning. The conflict between educational methods,

if there is one, often remains unspoken. It is also evident in the day-to-day experience of the teachers at the School. If some students drop-out with no job or family schedule related reasons, they can not explain exactly why, they just stop attending the School. This can be caused by the lack of abstract thinking typical of low literacy adults (Luria, 1976; Demetrio & Moroni, 1980; Minuz, 2005) or of those who "dropping-out of school and doing manual jobs which do not require writing and the faculty of reasoning, but the manipulation of objects and the habit of communicating orally, favored the consolidation of cognitive styles for which the formal reasoning procedures are not usual" (Albert et al., 1998, p. 14).[10] In fact, in the interviews conducted with mediators, the mediators themselves had a much greater awareness about the differences and similarities between the schooling methods in Italy and those in their countries of origin. What could be crucial is the length of stay in Italy and the amount of opportunities for contact with the school system. Perhaps interviewing refugees of recent migration exposed the fact that they have not yet had time to get to know, and reflect on, their new reality, in its various aspects, from an intercultural perspective.

Moreover, some interviewees mentioned that returning to school as adults is challenging, even when the motivation to communicate in the host country's language is strong. This difficulty stems from the fact that it challenges their self-perception as adults, possibly because their concept of "school", shaped by childhood experiences in their countries of origin, is associated with rituals and punishments, a place meant for children, not for adults. This issue is recognized in research, particularly for adults coming from cultures with limited awareness of Lifelong Learning practices and/or cultures in which the only role considered suitable for an adult man is that of the "breadwinner" for the family. Adults can

> experience the learning activity with a potential social shame, related to their age: the adult learner (...) sees themself as a non-learner and is seen as such by the society to which they refer, and this failure to internalize themself as a potential learner is seen as a substantial obstacle to the adult's ability to learn and to continue learning. (Bertolotti, 2014, p.117)[11]

This aspect should be taken into account in humanizing pedagogy. In fact, data from this study shows how the kindness and the patience of the teachers are seen as one of the main strengths in the Italian language School, together with non-racist practices and respect for the students as well as language acquisition time. It can be stated that the teachers' attitude promotes well-being in the language classroom (Menegale, 2022; Mercer et al., 2018; Oxford, 2016). Given these considerations, it could be suggested that to prevent this kind of student from dropping out, explaining the method and stating an explicit educational agreement could not always prove effective.

In the interviews, the main reasons for leaving language courses are related to practical necessities related to living as adult refugees in a host country, such as finding a job, moving to another town to find work, housing, or being moved to other reception projects for administrative or family reasons such as pregnancies or having small children. These reasons are true for all adult migrants in general, but are even more valid for new arrival refugees and asylum seekers that

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[10] *L'abbandono della scuola, la collocazione in lavori per lo più manuali che non richiedono l'uso della scrittura e facoltà di ragionamento, ma manipolazione di oggetti e l'abitudine alla comunicazione orale hanno favorito il consolidarsi di stili cognitivi per i quali le procedure del ragionamento formale non sono un riferimento usuale.* (translated by the authors)

[11] (*L'adulto) vive anche l'attività di apprendimento con un potenziale pudore sociale legato alla sua età anagrafica: (...) viene visto come un non discente da sé stesso e dalla società a cui fa riferimento, e questa mancata interiorizzazione di sé come potenziale apprendente viene considerata un freno sostanziale alla possibilità dell'adulto di imparare e di continuare a imparare.* (translated by the authors)

encounter insecure living conditions, due to having recently migrated and not yet being settled in the host country. Because of that, intensive and modular courses are recommended to prevent dropping-out and promote effective learning. (Albert et al., 1998, pp. 28-30). What could truly make the difference is to establish trust in the teacher, through a welcoming attitude, kindness and understanding, and to practically demonstrate to the students the progress they are making.

Language courses could (and it can be suggested that they even should) be not only places for learning a language, but also places for personal and social growth, exchange, mutual knowledge and support, among students and between students and teachers, especially in context where the learners are vulnerable migrants with traumatic past experiences and often a precarious future. Freire's (1970/2018) insight about teaching *with* students, and not *to* students, originally developed in the context of literacy teaching to same-language adults as well as stimulating conscientization, could be applied in the context of second language teaching with adult refugees, and could be crucial in shaping the teachers approach in these contexts, with the aim of moving towards a mutual humanization. Therefore, a more humanizing educational approach seems to be both more respectful and more effective in engaging in language learning for refugees and asylum seekers.

The uniqueness of the study lies in collecting newly arrived refugees' autobiographical narratives of schooling in their home country and relating these experiences to how they perceive second language teaching/learning in the host country.

In further studies, it could be interesting to expand the research collecting not only autobiographical experiences but also literature on schools' systems in refugees' primary countries of origin. Moreover, conducting similar studies in other contexts (different schools, other countries) could help further contextualize the themes that emerged, as second language teaching is organized very differently in various contexts within Italy and in other countries. For the reasons mentioned earlier, another promising field of research could involve collecting experiences and reflections on the investigated themes from refugees who have been living in the host country for a long time, as they could provide deeper and more contextualized knowledge and insights that complement the perspective of newcomers.

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Notes on Contributors

Silvia Scolaro is a PhD candidate in Language Sciences at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, where she had previously worked for the Department of Comparative Linguistic and Cultural Studies as a researcher from 2019 to 2023 and as a lecturer at the School for International Education. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Oriental Languages at Ca' Foscari and Master's degrees (I and II level) in Teaching Italian to Foreigners at the ITALS Laboratory. Prior to this she has worked at other Italian Universities (Pavia, Modena, Reggio Emilia) teaching Italian language to foreign students. From 2006 to 2012 she worked in the People's Republic of China teaching the Italian language.

Matilde Tomasi is a teacher, specialized in teaching Italian as a second language. She graduated in Intercultural studies with a focus on language teaching, at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. She has been teaching adults since 2011 and has mainly taught vulnerable migrants, such as refugees, asylum seekers, and foreign women. Her main interests in the field of adult education are autobiographical and narrative methods and literacy teaching for illiterate adult migrants. She often attends further training and conferences. She has collaborated with Silvia Scolaro to publish some papers.

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Appendix 1

The semi-structured interview

Part 1 - Personal information
1. name and age
2. country of origin
3. length of stay in Italy
4. length of schooling in country of origin

Part 2 - Schooling in the country of origin
1. What is the school system in the country you come from like?
2. At what age do children start school?
3. Is it mandatory?
4. Is it free?
5. Why did you quit?
6. Can you describe the school in your country (number of students per class, materials, classroom equipment, etc.)
7. Were there rituals when starting/finishing school?
8. What rules did you have? What were the punishments?
9. How is the teacher considered?
10. What are the relationships between the school and the families?
11. Did you study a foreign language?
12. What methodology was mainly used in school?

Part 3 - Schooling in host country
1. What is your experience of the school in Italy? What do you like/dislike? What do you think is strange? (other similar questions)
2. Is the school in Italy different from that in your country/from your expectations of a school?
3. Can you tell us about the teacher?
4. Can you tell us about the first day in school? How did you feel? Did these feelings change over time?
5. What is your motivation in studying the Italian language?

Appendix 2

Coding system

Sistema dei codici/Coding system	Frequenza/Frequency
Sistema dei codici/Coding system	216
maschi e femmine divisi/ male and female divided	3
scuola a pagamento/ school fee	1
attrezzatura scuola/ school equipment	9
spaesamento/ estrangement	1
riflessione su scuole ancora non sviluppata/ reflection on schools not yet developed	2
LS in Paese origine/ foreign languages in the country of origin	6
precarietà frequenza scuola It/ precariousness in the school in Italy	2
motivazione imparare prima-dopo/ motivation to learn before–after	6
impegno/ effort	2
severità in famiglia/ strictness in the family	4
uso app per imparare/autoapprendimento/ use of APP to learn/self-learning	3
ansia di imparare/della scuola anxiety to learn/of the school	2
metodo italiano/ Italian method	7
rituali/ rituals	11
punizione/ punishment	23
motivi drop out/ dropout reasons	7
compiti per casa/ homework	3

obiettivi/ objectives	11
relazioni positive in classe/ positive relationships in the classroom	6
ambiente accogliente/ welcoming environment	9
poco rispetto verso docenti in It/ little respect towards the teachers in Italy	6
tranquillità/fiducia possono imparare/ tranquillity/trust they can learn	8
docenti bene/ good teachers	17
paura prima di inizio/ fear before starting	11
severità/disciplina/ strictness/discipline	6
paura dei docenti/ fear of teachers	2
formalità/ formality	1
insegnante/ teacher	1
guardia/ guard	1
alzarsi per salutare/ standing up to greet	6
uniforme/ uniform	9
memoria/ memory	10
n. studenti/ number of students	12
descrizione scuola nel paese/ description of the school in the country of origin	1
università/ university	1
scuola coranica/ Koranic school	6