GAZE AND TIME PERCEPTION AS TWO KEY ELEMENTS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE
Their use and interpretation in the Italian L2 classroom

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Abstract – Non-verbal language is strongly influenced by the speaker's culture of origin. In intercultural communication, when non-verbal codes are not correctly interpreted, communication breakdowns and misunderstandings might arise. In the foreign language classroom L2 teachers are exposed to their students' non-verbal codes on a daily basis. Drawing from focus groups and interviews with Italian L2 teachers, this paper aims to investigate how migrant students' non-verbal codes, and particularly time perception and organization and gaze, may not always be interpreted correctly by Italian L2 teachers, and this may create discomfort and misunderstanding in daily interactions. This study calls for greater attention and training on less-investigated elements of non-verbal intercultural communication, such as time and gaze, for teachers of Italian L2.

Keywords: Italian L2; non-verbal communication; migration; gaze; time perception and organization.

1. Introduction

It is known that culture affects the use and interpretation of non-verbal language. Intercultural differences in non-verbal codes may lead to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings, and particularly in situations where non-native speakers tend to rely heavily on non-verbal codes to compensate for their lack of fluency in the foreign language. One such situation is the L2 language classroom environment, in which non-verbal communication plays a crucial role (Damnet 2008; Shi, Fan 2010; Wahyuni 2018). For this reason, the adoption of a non-verbal perspective has been gaining wider recognition in the area of foreign language teaching, with a growing number of studies concentrating on the didactics of culture specific non-verbal codes (Pan 2014; Surkamp 2014). However, interest has been focused on gestures (Balboni 2004, 2018; Matsumoto, Dobs 2017), while little emphasis has been placed on other aspects of non-verbal communication such as gaze and time perception, which play an equally important role in interactions. Moreover, only a few studies (Lallana, Pilar 2020; Rey Arranz 2017) have examined foreign language teachers' interpretation of their students' non-verbal language. Yet, teachers' awareness of culture-specific non-verbal language seems to be fundamental in multicultural classrooms to increase the comprehension of cultural diversity and eliminate prejudice and inequalities that might arise from it (Baraldi 2012).

The aim of this paper is to investigate, on the basis of data collected through focus groups and interviews, the perception and interpretation of gaze and time as non-verbal codes of communication in the interactions between teachers of Italian as a second language (L2) and migrants living in Italy and learning the Italian language.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section reviews previous studies on non-verbal communication in the area of Italian L2 teachers' intercultural competence; the second section presents the study methods; the third reports the study results; the fourth draws the study conclusions. The present investigation shows that migrant students'

use of gaze and time are not always interpreted correctly by Italian L2 teachers, and this may create discomfort and misunderstanding, which, in the long term, may hinder integration and inclusion processes. For this reason, it is argued that greater attention and training on less-investigated elements of non-verbal communication, including gaze and time management, are needed for teachers of Italian L2.

2. Non-verbal communication in the foreign language classroom

In the context of foreign language teaching, verbal communication is traditionally emphasized, while non-verbal codes are given a role of secondary importance. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) mentions only sporadically that non-verbal communication is part of the language-related competences that students should acquire. In addition, CEFRL only refers to some non-verbal codes, such as gestures, i.e., pointing and mimicking as a support for verbal communication, but does not include a structured and systematic description of all non-verbal competences. This is also reflected in the majority of foreign language teaching manuals, which do not include materials on non-verbal codes of communication in the foreign language (Özkul 2012; Surkamp 2014). For this reason, a few studies (Caon 2010; Giovannini 2014; Mariani 2015) lament the lack of material on the didactics of non-verbal codes of communication and underscore the need to develop research including non-verbal communication in the L2 classroom to facilitate students' learning processes. Neu (1990) assesses the role of non-verbal communication in the acquisition of communicative competence in L2. Benattabou (2020) recommends including non-verbal codes of communication among the existing teaching materials in order to foster Moroccan students' intercultural non-verbal competence in English as a foreign language. Damnet and Borland (2007) propose using American and Australian movies to implement Thai students' acquisition of English as a foreign language.

The need to incorporate non-verbal codes of communication in the foreign language classroom has been addressed also in the context of Italian L2. For instance, Caon (2010) creates a dictionary of Italian gestures which could help both teachers and foreign students. Giovannini (2012) suggests using dialogues from Italian movies to teach intercultural competence, with a specific focus on chronemics and silence to raise students' awareness on how these vary depending on culture. Giovannini (2014) also addresses the lack of material on kinesics in Italian textbooks and proposes the development of didactic activities where lexical and non-verbal elements are used simultaneously. Mariani (2015) examines the sociopragmatic aspects of learning a foreign language and suggests talking about intercultural competence in the classroom, by including culture-specific aspects of communication such as non-verbal codes, values and behaviors. Embracing verbal and non-verbal communication can help promote positive classroom interactions and reduce discomfort and miscommunication that might arise from it.

2.1. Gaze and time as two crucial aspects in intercultural interactions

Non-verbal communication refers to a set of codes produced non-verbally. It includes (1) kinesics (gestures, facial expressions and gaze); (2) proxemics (speakers' organization of space during interactions); (3) chronemics (time perception); (4) paralinguistics (voice tone, volume, speech rate, etc.); (5) haptics (speakers' physical contact during

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interactions); (6) codes provided via appearance such as clothes, make-up and tattoos, and (7) olfactory, or codes relating to smell (Moore et al. 2010).

In addressing the importance of non-verbal codes in communication, most studies have focused on gestures and facial expressions (Ekman, Friesen 1971; Ekman et al. 1987; Kendon 1981, 2004; McNeill 1992; Poggi 2006;). Other non-verbal codes such as perception and interpretation of gaze and time have received less attention. Yet, these codes play a fundamental role in intercultural interactions. As for gaze, people from different cultures may follow different norms as regards the use of direct vs indirect gaze in communication. In intercultural settings, speakers' different expectations with regard to gaze may be misinterpreted and attributed erroneously to lack of respect or attention. As for time, cultures view it through different frames and differ in what they consider time-appropriate responses. For example, punctuality, schedules and deadlines may be assigned different values. Similarly to gaze, different cultural expectations with regard to time-appropriate responses, if not correctly interpreted, may be the cause of frustration, disrespect and annoyance. In the foreign language classrooms, differences in gaze and time dynamics could potentially disrupt the teacher-student relationship by creating misunderstandings. As Baraldi (2012) points out, teachers' intercultural awareness is fundamental in multicultural settings because very often teachers' relations with migrant students seem to rely on prejudices (De Ruiter 2006; Pugliese 2005) and reproduce stereotypes.

2.1.1. Gaze and culture

Gaze plays a fundamental role in face-to-face communication. Like all components of non-verbal language, the dynamics of eye contact differ between cultures, based on multiple factors. Every culture has specific rules regarding the use of gaze as a tool to regulate verbal turns or to signal attention and interest during a communicative interaction. These rules may also differ depending on the speakers' gender and social roles, as well as individual habits and types of discourse/communicative situation. For example, in many European cultures direct eye contact is considered a sign of participation and interest and, if not maintained during a conversation, it can be interpreted as a sign of rudeness. On the other hand, in many Asian and African cultures it is direct eye contact that can be understood as a sign of rudeness, while avoiding gaze is interpreted as a sign of respect for the other person, especially if s/he is older or holds a higher social role (Sadri, Flammia 2011; Watson, 1970).

In L2 classrooms the presence of students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds may affect how gaze is used and interpreted in teacher-student interactions. This is why the surge of interest in multimodality in social interactions has also led to an increase in studies on the dynamics of gaze, as it is used in the L2 classroom. For example, Sert (2019) examines students' attempts to establish mutual gaze with their EFL teachers. Waring and Carpenter (2019) investigate how teachers can shift their gaze to manage their students' attention and recipiency. Tuncay et al. (2021) examine students' use of gaze to request clarifications. McDonough et al. (2021) analyze L2 speakers' gaze to signal attention and understanding. However, much is still to be learned about the use and interpretation of gaze in the L2 classroom and, to the authors' knowledge, research is lacking on how teachers deal and perceive differences in gaze dynamics when students have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

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2.1.2. Time and culture

The perception and organization of time is an element of non-verbal communication. Similarly to gaze, it is culturally influenced. The way speakers organize time, perceive punctuality and carry out one or more activities at a certain time is determined by the culture they belong to or they have been exposed to. In general, cultures can be divided into two macro categories: monochronic and polychronic (Hall 1984). Monochronic cultures see time as a concrete entity, they tend to organize it and plan it into small units; punctuality is considered important, and lateness is interpreted as a lack of respect. Polychronic cultures view time as a fluid element, and punctuality is not a priority. Despite many studies have addressed the importance of understanding cultural differences in time perception and organization, time as a variable in class communication has not been the object of extensive research.

3. The project: data collection and participants

The study reported in this paper was carried out within the project Integrazione dei Migranti con Politiche e Azioni Coprogettate sul Territorio [Integration of Migrants through Policies and Actions Codesigned on the Territory] (IMPACT), co-funded by the European Union through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the Italian Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (Italian Ministry of Employment and Welfare). One of the beneficiaries of this action was the Veneto Region. Within this project, the objective of the authors' investigation was the collection of data on interactions between Italians and migrants, aimed at creating guidelines for facilitating migrants' inclusion and integration in the Italian society. As part of this study a site was created that can be found at the link https://culturemigranti.disll.unipd.it/.

This paper explores the perception and interpretation of gaze and time in intercultural interactions between Italian L2 teachers and their migrant students. The study was planned before but carried out during the 2020 COVID pandemic, which greatly affected the methodology procedure that had been designed to carry out the study. Because of this, the amount of data collected is limited and the study should be considered preliminary in nature. This study presents Italian L2 teachers' opinions (perceptions and interpretations) of the gaze and time differences in intercultural interactions with their students. We are aware that the teachers' opinions may reflect only a partial view of the communication dynamics with the students, since it is well-known that when teachers are focused on their teaching process they may not pay attention to some of their students' cues in the classroom. Also, the study does not include variables relating to the teacher-student relationship, the context of the interaction, as well as the students' perspective, which may be the object of further research. In spite of these limitations, the general aim of the present study, that is, collecting information regarding non-verbal interactions between teachers and students in the L2 classroom, can be considered valuable in raising awareness on the importance of this topic.

3.1. Participants

60 teachers of Italian L2, with ages ranging from 30 to 50 years old participated in this study. All of them are Italian citizens, from the north of Italy (Veneto and Emilia Romagna regions), use Italian as their native language and have experience teaching

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Italian L2 to migrants. 18 participants (15 from Padova and 3 from Modena) work as teachers of Italian in Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti (Provincial Centers for Adults Education); 37 (25 from Padova, 5 from Venice, 4 from Belluno, 1 from Vicenza and 2 from Forlì Cesena) work in non-profit organizations of social utility; 5 work in the Council and Province organizations; and one works in a middle school in Padova.

The participants teach Italian L2 to groups of students that are heterogenous both in nationality and age. As part of the interview that was preliminary to the present study, the participants were asked about the number of migrants they work with and the migrants' country of origin. This allowed us to get a measure of the size and type of the migrant sample on which the participants based their responses. The migrant sample consists of 137 people coming from 30 different countries. Table 1 shows the geographical areas from which the migrants are from and how they are divided percentally. 44% of the students include migrants from various countries in Africa; 26% are from Asian, including both east and south Asian, countries; 21% come from Eastern Europe, including Albania, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Ukraine; a small percentage (9%) includes students from Latin America, more specifically from Brazil and Ecuador.

Geographical area	Countries (in order of migrants' presence)	Percentages
Africa	Morocco, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Senegal, Tunisia, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Eritrea	44%
Asia	Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, China, Philippines, Syria	26%
East Europe	Moldova, Romania, Albania, Ukraine, Serbia, Kosovo, Russia	21%
Latin America	Brazil, Ecuador	9%

Table 1
Migrant students' countries of origin.

With regard to the students' age groups, Table 2 shows that 70% of the students are between 19 and 35 years old, 16% are between 36 and 50, 10% are under 18, and 5% are older than 50.
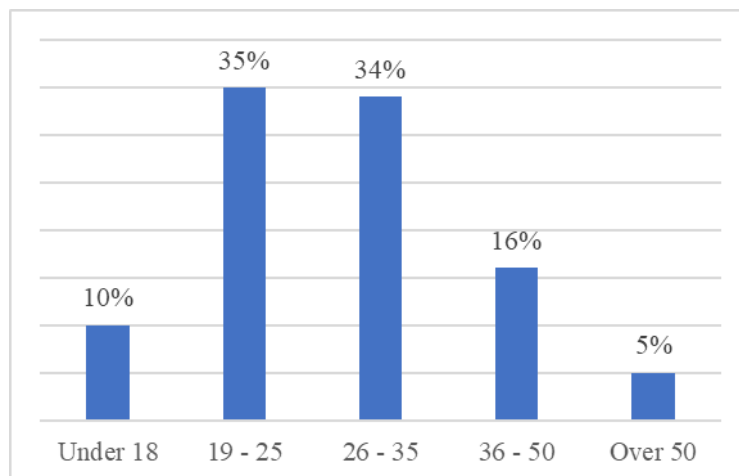
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Figure 1
Migrant students' age.

As for the languages used by the migrants and their degree of literacy and education, it was rather difficult for the participants to generalize on the migrants' personal history. The participants reported that, because the students attended the Italian classes on a volunteer rather than a mandatory basis, their class attendance patterns were quite varied. Some students would suddenly not show up in class after attending quite regularly for some time; some students would just appear in class a few times and then disappear; and some students would attend classes on a regular basis. It is understandable that migrants may find themselves in the position of having to prioritize aspects of their daily life to learning the language. However, this made it impossible for the participants to generalize about issues such as main language spoken, education level, etc. Overall, the participants said that the students speak their mother tongue and some of them also speak English and French and use these two languages for interacting with the teachers. All the students are alphabetized in their mother tongue. The students differ widely with regard to how long they have been in Italy, but, in general, they express the desire to settle in Italy and, for this reason, they are attending the Italian language course.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The data reported in this paper is qualitative and it was collected through focus groups and interviews distributed to teachers of Italian as L2 whose students are migrants currently living in Italy.

The participants (i.e., the teachers) were first recruited via e-mail through a questionnaire that aimed at collecting preliminary information regarding the participants' role as Italian L2 teachers to migrants, the context in which they work, as well as some information on the students, such as their country of origin and age. The questionnaires were distributed between January and February 2022, through Google Forms.

The participants were then contacted a second time and were asked to take part in focus groups and interviews (both online and in presence) which were aimed at collecting information on various aspects of their interactions with their migrant students.

A total of 20 focus groups and interviews, with 60 participants, were conducted between February and March 2022. Out of the 20 focus groups and interviews, 10 were carried out with one participant, while in the remaining 10 the number of participants varied between 5 and 15 people. The teachers were invited to answer questions relating to

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their perception and interpretation of the use of gaze and time by the migrant students they work with. 10 questions concerned differences in the perception of time and aimed at investigating concepts such as punctuality (both in formal and informal meetings), perception of deadlines (such as handing over class assignments on time), the priority given to work vs free time, the importance of cultural values and tradition. 10 questions concerned gaze: 5 questions investigated the use of gaze between the participants and their students of the same gender in formal and informal settings, and 5 questions investigated the use of gaze with students of different gender. Both sets of questions also aimed at investigating if the perception of time and the use of gaze changed according to the duration of the students' stay in Italy.

Each participant was asked to answer according to his or her personal experience, to indicate the students' culture and, when relevant, the students' gender.

The focus groups and interviews were semi-structured; the interviewers asked open-ended questions to the participants in order to allow them to answer freely, share their experiences and attitudes. The questions were created considering both the existing literature and the previous data collected as part of the IMPACT project (Busà, Notaro and Liotto 2022). The group discussions and interviews lasted about two hours. Half of these were taken in presence and the other half were collected through phone calls and video calls. The data collected was treated carefully in order to guarantee the anonymity of the individuals involved in the study.

The data collected through the focus groups and interviews was transcribed and analyzed using the Qualitative Content Analysis framework (Mayring 2000; Ji and Eun-Hee 2014). Qualitative Content Analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of recurrent patterns or categories (words, themes, or concepts) within the data collected. This analytical lens is organized in several steps (Silverman 2001). The first step consists in a read-through of the transcribed text to understand the sense of the whole. The second step includes the creation of categories or codes. In this step, after a second reading, the researcher starts to identify recurrent patterns or themes that emerge in the data and assigns a code to each theme or pattern. In some cases, sub-categories can also be identified. In the following step, the researcher understands the themes that appear to be more frequent. In the final step, after a careful recheck of the categories or codes, the researcher makes inferences about the messages that emerge in the data (Elo et al. 2014).

In what follows, section 4 discusses time perception and section 5 discusses gaze. In each section, the data presentation reflects what emerged in the analysis: in some cases, the data is presented according to the students' cultures, in other cases according to other elements such as gender, duration of the students' stay in Italy, etc.

4. Data on time perception and organization

This section presents the data relating to time perception and organization. Two patterns or categories in the participants' experiences were identified, roughly corresponding to two geographical areas of the students' countries of origin (students from Sub Saharan countries and students from Bangladesh and China). Though we are aware that using large geographical labels groups together people with extremely diverse languages and cultures, we also think that, at the present stage of this preliminary investigation, this grouping allows us to make some useful generalizations, which however need to be verified in future studies.

4.1. Dealing with cultural time differences in the Italian L2 classroom

In general, most participants reported observing that time is not perceived the same way across cultures. They also reported their difficulty in dealing with students that have dissimilar time perception and organization and said that having different ideas of punctuality may be a problem and a limit to integration. The participants also said that they believed that acquiring a knowledge on cultural perceptions of time would be beneficial for both teachers and migrants. Some of the teachers' comments are given in examples 1-3 below:

1. Punctuality is a big problem that teachers face and this is a limit to integration. It is important to know and understand how different cultures organize time, especially free time.

2. I would like to understand my migrant students' time organization during the day. How do they manage their time when they still do not have the linguistic competence or they do not have a job, how do they manage time in their everyday life? Sometimes I plan a one-hour activity for the class, and for me it's a lot but for them it's nothing.

3. In many trainings they talk about punctuality but they do not talk about how people manage free time. I don't know what it means for migrants to waste time.

4.1.1. Use of time by students from Sub Saharan Africa

The participants observed that migrants from different areas of Sub-Saharan Africa use time in a completely different way with respect to what would be the Italian expectations. In general, the teachers explained that they perceived students from Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular from Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Nigeria, as less punctual than students from other cultural backgrounds. The teachers also believed that Sub-Saharan African students have a concept of time that is slow and focused on the present rather than on the future. According to the teachers, Sub-Saharan African students are patient and can wait for weeks, months or years to reach their goal, like, for example, learning the Italian language. Some of the teachers' comments are reported in examples 4-8 below:

4. We know that it is legitimate to have different ideas of time and, in our school context, we work a lot in order to transmit our concept of time. [...] In general Sub-Saharan Africa is not punctual and, by not punctual, I mean even one hour and a half late.

5. Students from Mali tend to give more importance to the action or the duty they want to complete rather than the time spent to achieve it. It seems that for Sub-Saharan African students, especially the ones without long term plans, present is the only time that should be taken into account.

6. Even the duration of the interactions changes, meetings with students from Mali were really long because for migrants the time was perceived as the necessary time to finish the matter, not a time calculated according to the minutes but according to the goal.

7. I was always surprised by the migrants' patience. They wait for 5 years for a document. I think it is that we try to make things stay 'inside time', for instance we say 'I'm giving myself one year to wait for the permit of stay', instead they think in another way 'I am here to get this document and this is my goal'.

8. We run because we have projects whereas many migrants do not have projects and they live in the present.

The teachers observed a difference in time perception and organization also in relation to

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the time spent for greetings. A teacher reported that students from Sub-Saharan Africa tend to spend 15/20 minutes to ask their interlocutor about their health and family. One comment along these lines is shown in 9 below:

9. Even the time used to greet is different. In Sub-Saharan Africa it is common to ask a series of questions about family… it is fundamental.

4.1.2. Use of time by students from Bangladesh and China

According to the teachers, students from Bangladesh perceive time differently than Italians. Bangladeshi students' understanding of punctuality is also different from that of Sub-Saharan Africa students. In the teachers' opinion, Bangladeshi students do not know Italian time organization and tend to be late for meetings, but they are not as late as students from Sub-Saharan Africa. This is reported in example 10 below:

10. As for Bangladesh, it depends, they are not punctual, but more punctual compared to Africans.

Teachers expect migrant students to organize time according to western norms. Bangladeshi students know that time is perceived differently in Italy, but they still take their time to do their things. As for Chinese students, a participant said that they tend to be punctual, and they show up early to meetings, as stated in example 11 below:

11. Regarding China, if the appointment is at 2 pm they will arrive at 1.55 pm, they are very punctual.

4.2. Considerations on the differences in time perception and organization

Time perception and organization is deeply influenced by culture. Teachers experience students' different understandings, interpretation and use of time on a daily basis. As their statements have shown, they have learned from experience that international students use and organize time in different ways. These differences affect classroom management and student-teacher relationships and, as reported by the teachers themselves, might pose a problem for integration.

5. Data on the use of gaze

This section presents the data relating to the use of gaze. The analysis allowed us to distinguish categories such as migrants' use of low gaze and direct gaze, as well as some of the factors that influence the use of gaze, such as gender, age, status, relationship between speakers, and religion.

5.1. Interpreting students' gaze in the Italian L2 classroom

During the focus groups and interviews, the teachers were asked questions in relation to eye contact, and particularly whether they noticed differences in their own and the migrant students' eye contact patterns. In addition, they were encouraged to share personal experiences in relation to the students' gaze. The sections below report the teachers' opinions and comments.

5.1.1. Low gaze

The teachers said that situations of discomfort emerged in interactions with the students because of the students' use of low, indirect gaze. In general, the students' use of low gaze is interpreted negatively by the teachers (see examples 15-16 below). Specifically, not being looked directly in the eyes may make the teacher feel disrespected or not paid attention to (see examples 13, 15, 16). Lack of eye contact can also be interpreted as a sign of lack of interest in the class activities (12, 14,) or a sign that the students feels inadequate (17).

12. At first, I used to interpret students' low gaze as a lack of interest.

13. Students were not looking at me and I took it as meaning that they were not considering me.

14. Newly arrived Albanian students tend to avoid looking at the teacher in the eyes and this is perceived as a lack of interest for the class.

15. I noticed that during class activities Asian women tend to keep their gaze low and, as a teacher, I got upset.

16. I noticed that Chinese kids tend to avoid looking at you in the eyes and this can be perceived negatively by teachers.

17. I observed that the majority of Chinese and African students use an indirect gaze and they tend to avoid looking at the teacher during class activities. I interpreted this as a feeling of not being good enough or as shame. It was my personal interpretation.

Clearly, the mismatch arises from the different meanings given to the use of direct vs indirect gaze in different cultures. As reviewed in 2.1.1 above, in many Asian and African cultures avoiding gaze is considered a sign of respect for the other person, especially if s/he is older or holds a higher social role. According to these cultures teachers should be addressed with indirect eye contact. This is not interpreted correctly by the Italian teachers and creates the basis for miscommunication.

In some situations, however, indirect and/or lowered gaze may be associated with lying or hiding the truth, as is shown in 18 below:

18. Once I attended a course on Western and European non-verbal communication and I learned that when a person says something untrue, he/she tends to avoid eye contact.

5.1.2. Factors affecting the use of direct gaze

5.1.3. Gender

As seen in 2.1.1, gender is a factor that may determine the type of gaze used in interactions. Some teachers' statements indicate that gender affects many students' gaze patterns. Some examples are reported in 19-23 below:

19. [female teacher] Sub-Saharan male students were using an indirect gaze with me, and they specified that this is a common non-verbal code of Mali culture with interlocutors of a different gender.

20. [female teacher] On many occasions students were not looking at me in the eyes and I could not understand why, I thought it's shyness. Then a guy from Mali explained that it was me, that I should not have looked at him, at least according to his culture, and that he feels weird that even girls tend to use eye contact. We discussed it very politely but neither of us changed our minds, always with reciprocal respect, he didn't expect

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me to change my behavior.

21. I noticed that when no male presence is there, African women tend to use a direct gaze, whereas if their husband is present, women tend to avoid direct eye contact.

22. African girls tend to be more discreet and keep their gaze low.

23. When Macedonian women are in a situation of submission at home, they tend to keep their gaze low when they speak, especially if they are in presence of their husband.

Unlike students from other Sub-Saharan African cultures, Nigeria tend to use direct eye contact with the teacher even though she is a woman (example 24).

24. I worked with foreign families for many years. I observed that Nigerian men, compared to people from other cultures, tend to look a lot at the teacher in the eyes, even in situations of discomfort and despite the teacher's gender.

5.1.4. Age

Age also seems to play a role with regard to the use of eye gaze. Our data shows that this occurs in Sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan. The teachers said that the students tend to use a semi-direct gaze with an older teacher; but, if the student is the same age as the teacher, the student will tend to use direct eye contact. An example is reported in 25 below:

25. It is hard to make generalizations, but during these years there were some boys [from Sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan] that were not looking at the teachers in the eyes. They were mainly young; I could feel that they wanted to show respect because of the age difference. [...] When they were interacting with teachers of the same age, they were looking at them in the eyes.

5.1.5. Status

The speakers' status, in particular the teacher's role, also seems to affect the use of gaze. Lowering the gaze in sign of respect in an educational setting is an attitude that is shared not only by students from Africa, including Mali, Marocco, Tunisia but also Bangladesh. The observations and comments in 26-30 show how gaze is used in the students' interactions with the teachers and in the school environment. The use of indirect gaze may soften with time, as students become more familiar with the teacher and the school context.

26. I remember a guy from Mali. He was keeping his head down and at some point, I had to ask the cultural mediator if the guy was ok or if I had been too sharp. I was worried. Then the mediator said that in the Malian culture this is a sign of respect. Later we discussed this element with him because if he had to go and find a home, this kind of behavior could be misinterpreted. For us it was important to understand it, because it would have created misunderstandings.

27. During the first meetings with male students from North Africa, they used to keep their gaze low with us teachers and, with time, they started using a more direct eye contact.

28. I observed that students from Bangladesh avoid eye contact inside the classroom but outside the school context they use direct gaze.

29. In my opinion Bangladeshi boys don't look at you in the eyes in the school context, but then if you have coffee with them they look at you in the eyes.
30. It happened with a Moroccan or Tunisian man. In the first meetings he was using an indirect gaze, then after a while, since he was coming often, he broke his inhibitions, and started to look at me in the eyes.

5.1.6. Religion

Finally, religion has an impact on gaze as well. In particular, the teachers report instances in which they notice differences in the use of gaze between Muslim men and women (examples 31 and 32). They also show awareness of the fact that during Ramadan it is advised to avoid eye contact since this is regarded as a way to disrupt the purity of the holy month (examples 33, 34 and 35).

31. If the meeting is between a male and a female Muslim student, she will use an indirect gaze or a very fast direct gaze.
32. With Moroccan, Senegalese and Guinean students the gaze is indirect. If the meeting is between a man and a Muslim woman the gaze is indirect: a brief gaze, very respectful and the gaze gets lowered again. For women, direct gaze is really very short.
33. An anecdote that comes to my mind is with a person I have a great confidence in, and that happened the day after the beginning of the Ramadan. I didn't know it, and for a week the person didn't look at me in the eyes. I personally got upset because I thought what did I do wrong?
34. During Ramadan, students of both genders avoid direct eye contact.
35. Ramadan is the moment in which, despite being important or not important, despite being a man or a woman, I won't be looked at, but maybe the day after I will be looked at. The same person, the same role can change according to the time of the day. The roles inside a family, if I'm talking alone to a woman is one thing, maybe we have a close relationship, but when the husband arrives, she's not the same woman anymore. [...] I think the gaze is the most fluid behavior.

5.1.7. Lying

Patterns of gaze use may also differ interculturally in relation to lying. The observations in 36 and 37 below, in which the participants say that male students from Ivory Coast, Mali and Nigeria use prolonged direct gaze when lying, suggest that this kind of gaze is noticed because it is unusual or different from what teachers would expect.

36. I noticed that when Africans tell a lie, they look at you in the eyes to convince you. I knew it was a lie. I noticed this with students from Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, but only men.
37. With men, and I'm specifically thinking of a Nigerian man, I also noticed that they used to use direct eye contact. I'm thinking of a guy that just after saying something untrue can look at you in the eyes and say 'of course!!' then maybe he laughs. It is partially true that eye contact is used even for something that is clearly untrue.

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5.2. Being aware of different uses of gaze

The teachers' observations reported above show that the misinterpretation of the students' use of gaze is a cause for misunderstandings. However, only few participants reported being aware that the use of gaze varies on the basis of culture. Two examples (38-39) are reported below.

38. It occurred many times that students were not looking at me in the eyes. I was aware that this depends on cultural non-verbal behavior, this is why it didn't create any discomfort.

39. It happened to me that a Chinese student wasn't looking at me in the eyes, but once I understood this behavior is a way of showing respect, I accepted it positively.

As the examples show, the awareness of the existence of cultural differences in gaze behavior helps speakers develop better relationships and avoid misunderstandings.

5.3. Considerations on the differences in the use of gaze

The data show, as expected, that people's gaze dynamics are influenced by culture. In the Italian L2 classroom teachers are exposed to a variety of different uses of gaze, which are affected by the students' cultural backgrounds, and interpreting their meaning is not always an easy task. The teachers often do not understand their students' eye contact behavior, and this may lead the former to question both their own roles and capacities as teachers as well as their students' interest and motivation in the class activities. Thus, intercultural differences in gaze dynamics may cause problems at a communication level. By working with the students, the teachers seem to become aware that there are cultural variations in the use of eye contact and that various factors, such as gender or school settings, may play a role in determining the type of gaze students use.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Speakers' cultural background conditions their non-verbal communication. This paper focuses on intercultural differences in time perception and organization and on the use and interpretation of gaze. The paper shows that teachers of L2 Italian are hardly aware that students from different cultural backgrounds rely on different non-verbal communication strategies in relation to time and gaze. Thus, they tend to interpret the students' use of time and gaze based on their own (Italian) non-verbal norms. This may become an issue in classroom interactions. First of all, it could disrupt the teacher-student relationship. For example, as reported by the teachers, the students' concept of time and use of gaze may be interpreted as a lack of interest in the class activities, and this may lead teachers to question their own abilities as teachers. Secondly, the misinterpretation of the students' behavior -originating from the different use of time and gaze- may potentially create prejudice and produce stereotypes (Baraldi 2012).

The present investigation is only preliminary and makes no claim of providing statistically significant generalizations, and the data may not reflect all Italian L2 teachers-migrant students' dynamics. However, given the lack of research on the topic, the present findings may well represent a useful starting point for future research. Also, they can be considered valuable in raising awareness on the importance of addressing factors such as time and gaze in intercultural interactions, which may undermine good rapport. All in all,

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we suggest that L2 teachers should be trained on recognizing non-verbal aspects of their target students' cultures, as intercultural competence embracing both verbal and non-verbal communication can help promote positive classroom interactions and, in general, migrant students' integration and inclusion in the society.

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