Teacher beliefs about teaching French as a foreign language in a Chinese university: a multilingual perspective

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ABSTRACT: While French is an important European language being taught in Chinese universities, not much is known about French language teachers' beliefs about its teaching as a foreign language, particularly not from a multilingual perspective. Adopting a multiple-case design, this study examined 5 French language teachers' beliefs about the French language and the learner. Analysing data collected via interviews, the study revealed that teachers' beliefs reflected neither the linguistic landscape of the French language nor the learner's existing level of multilingualism. However, the teachers' monolingual ideology as reflected in their beliefs seemed to co-exist with beliefs that reflected their multilingual ideology; the cultural capital brought by learning French as a foreign language prevailed in teachers' beliefs about the language with reference to the value of French learning in their students' future international communication in a multilingual world, and the teachers also perceived their students as French learners with English learning experience that could lend support to their French learning.
Keywords: Teacher belief, French as a foreign language, language education, French teaching, multilingualism.

Creencias de los profesores sobre la enseñanza del francés como lengua extranjera en una universidad china: una perspectiva multilingüe

RESUMEN: Si bien el francés es un idioma europeo importante que se enseña en las universidades chinas, no se sabe mucho sobre las creencias de los profesores de francés sobre su enseñanza como lengua extranjera, particularmente no desde una perspectiva multilingüe. Adoptando un diseño de casos múltiples, este estudio examinó las creencias de 5 profesores de francés sobre el idioma francés y el alumno. Al analizar los datos recopilados a través de

entrevistas, el estudio reveló que las creencias de los docentes no reflejaban ni el panorama lingüístico de la lengua francesa ni el nivel actual de multilingüismo del alumno. Sin embargo, la ideología monolingüe de los docentes, que se refleja en tales creencias, parecía coexistir con las creencias que reflejaban su ideología multilingüe: el capital cultural aportado por el aprendizaje del francés como lengua extranjera prevalecía en las creencias de los profesores sobre el idioma con referencia al valor del aprendizaje del francés en la futura comunicación internacional de los estudiantes en un mundo multilingüe; los profesores también percibían a sus estudiantes como estudiantes de francés con experiencia en el aprendizaje del inglés que podría ayudar al aprendizaje del francés.

Palabras clave: Creencia del profesor, francés como lengua extranjera, enseñanza de idiomas, enseñanza del francés, multilingüismo.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade growing importance has been attached to the teaching of European languages in China's universities (Gao & Zheng, 2019). A great many undergraduate programmes have been launched to promote the learning of European languages as foreign languages. For instance, in Beijing Foreign Studies University, one of the major higher education institutes in China dedicated to training foreign language talents, 35 European languages are being taught as undergraduate majors or courses, while only about twenty languages such as French, Spanish, and German were taught a decade ago (Wang & Xu, 2023). Unfortunately, however, the drastic increase in the number of European languages being taught does not seem to be supported by a closely coordinated faculty development scheme. Consequently, besides teacher shortages, in-service teachers' professional development, particularly regarding their teaching abilities, poses an enormous challenge to the sustainable development of European language education (Guo *et al.*, 2021).

As to the French language among the many other European languages, insufficient attention to teacher development is already reflected in the existing literature on French teaching and learning as a foreign language in the Chinese context. Although research that examines European language teachers' professional experiences and development has started to emerge (e.g. Kang *et al.*, 2022), the vast majority of studies have focused on teaching and learning per se, carrying limited implications for teacher development. For instance, in Zhu's (2021) critique of the *approche actionnelle dans l'enseignement du français* [action-oriented method of French teaching] or in Li's (2016) illustration of *exposé* [oral presentation] as a specific classroom activity, little was discussed regarding what is required of teachers as they adopt such methods or implement such activities. Similarly, in research on student learning and materials development (e.g. Chen & Rocher, 2019; Li, 2021), in which teachers' professional development plays a crucial role, discussions on how teachers' professionalism influences these issues are generally lacking. Even in the most recent historic review of French teaching in China (Dai, 2020), which dates back to as early as 1849, teacher development is far from being at the forefront of attention.

Thus, it is imperative to add this teacher development perspective in enquiries into the teaching of French as a European language. This study is a preliminary effort aiming to explore French teachers' professional development through the lens of teacher beliefs. Teacher beliefs are important ideas based on which we can capture and understand their

thought processes, teaching methods, and engagement in learning to teach (Zheng, 2009). Teacher beliefs also constitute a complex system characterised by dynamic interaction between belief elements that pertain to various facets of teaching (Zheng, 2015). In terms of foreign language teaching, such facets include how teachers view the language being taught (Andrews, 2003) and how they view their students as multilingual learners (Lv *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, teacher beliefs can serve as a versatile tool, enabling us to examine both how teachers perceive and conceive these different aspects of French teaching, and how their beliefs interact within the complex systems that impact on their teaching practices (Chen & Xu, 2015).

More importantly, since French is most often learnt and taught in China as a second foreign language, teachers' beliefs also need to be examined in terms of how they view French teaching and learning as a process of building learners' multi-competence, particularly against the backdrop of "a pluralistic curriculum in a monolingual context" (Lundberg, 2019b, p. 2). In the Chinese context many teachers and learners alike take foreign languages as school subjects or university majors, and they tend to view the acquisition of foreign languages as a way to accumulate cultural capital (Shan & Xu, 2022). Thus, the learning of French as a second foreign language at university could also be taken as an additional project after learning English, with aim of gaining something valuable that can be later exchanged for other benefits in the linguistic market (Xu, 2019).

This all means that the learning of foreign languages in China is characterised by a monolingual ideology, which differs from the multilingual ideology that advocates the enrichment of learners' multilingual repertoire in its own right. Therefore, a multilingual perspective is also necessary as it helps to reveal teachers' beliefs in contexts where monolingualism may prevail, and about the complex and dynamic interactions, as social phenomena, between the multiple foreign languages the learner has learnt and is learning (Lundberg, 2019a). This study thus attempts to answer the following research question:

What are French language teachers' beliefs about teaching French as a foreign language in a Chinese university, as viewed from a multilingual perspective?

The answer to this question may not only shed light upon French language teachers' cognitions about teaching French as a foreign language, but may also unravel their explicit or hidden ideologies about French teaching and learning as a means to promote multilingualism, which obviously creates a research gap.

2. A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALSING TEACHER'S BELIEFS

Language teacher beliefs have been extensively investigated in the past two decades, particularly in the domain of teacher cognition (Borg, 2003). Research has shed significant light upon what beliefs language teachers have (e.g. Odo, 2017), how those beliefs develop (e.g. Ma & Liu, 2022), how they interact with teaching practices (e.g. Espinosa, 2014), and how they interact with teacher learning (e.g. Xu, 2015). Nonetheless, most studies seem to have focused on a specific facet of belief or on a particular type of belief, as well as how the belief interacts with other internal and external factors such as teacher emotion and teach-

ing practices (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2017; Li, 2022). While such endeavours have provided illuminating insights into the nature and features of the belief in focus and how it interacts with other factors, they have not illustrated the overarching facets of teacher beliefs with reference to the language(s) and the learner the teacher teaches, which constitute the central issues in the multilingual perspective (Curran & Chern, 2017). Therefore, the current study intends to investigate French language teachers' beliefs with a particular focus on how they view the French language and their learners.

Beliefs about the language being taught are generally considered to play a pivotal role in language teachers' general beliefs about language teaching (Melo-Pfeifer & Chik, 2022). As shown in the existing literature, beliefs about the language being taught are most often reflected in teachers' attitudes towards it (Wang, 2015). Although teachers' beliefs about the particular language(s) they teach, as manifested in their attitudes, do not necessarily translate into corresponding teaching behaviours (Lee & Choe, 2021), it is clear that such beliefs are highly impacted by the dominant language ideologies surrounding the teachers (Zhunussova, 2021). For instance, a recent study involving 820 Finnish teachers revealed that their beliefs about linguistic diversity are markedly influenced by the co-existence of monolingual and multilingual ideologies (Alisaari *et al.*, 2019). Teachers' beliefs about a language are also found to be influenced by the content delivered by that language through accessible mediums (Rose *et al.*, 2021).

To summarise, previous research has explored teachers' beliefs about the language being taught as influenced by the social realities it represents and the linguistic ideologies it conforms to. However, what seems to be missing is the social benefit the learning of a language brings (Shan & Xu, 2022), as well as the linguistic features of that language, particularly as opposed to other languages the learner has previously learnt (Bell *et al.*, 2020). Thus, this study shall be particularly dedicated to unravelling teachers' beliefs about the French language in terms of its unique linguistic features, and the value of learning it in the Chinese context.

Teachers' beliefs about the learner can be about their linguistic resources such as their home language (Stille *et al.*, 2016). They can also relate to learners' linguistic and social contexts (Haim & Tannenbaum, 2022), particularly the prevailing language ideologies that surround learners and teachers alike (Hee, 2021). These studies thus elucidate how learners' individual multi-competence and their multilingual contexts impact on teachers' beliefs. However, other learner features do not seem to have been sufficiently addressed – for instance, learners' past learning experiences, which may also be processed to inform teachers' beliefs (Calafato, 2020). In other words, what teachers know about their students' learning history and how they view this history with reference to the students' current learning should also be taken into serious consideration as we examine teachers' beliefs about the learner.

To summarise, teachers' beliefs about both the language being taught and their learners need to be further investigated, in order to shed light on issues that have not been adequately addressed from a multilingual perspective. This study can thus provide more insights into teachers' ideologies about learning and teaching French as a foreign language, as manifested in their beliefs about the language and the learner (Falk & Lindqvist, 2022).

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

To address the research purpose outlined above, this qualitative study adopted a multiple-case design to investigate French teachers' beliefs. Because the case study approach is suitable for enquiries that require extensive and in-depth description (Yin, 2018), it is compatible with the current study which aims to provide a comprehensive and revealing analysis of teachers' beliefs. Specifically, a group of French language teachers at a Chinese university were recruited as research participants, with whom we conducted individual interviews. Data analysis followed the strategy of content analysis as proposed by Cohen *et al.* (2018).

3.2. Context and participants

All the five participants, Béatrice, Clémence, Grégoire, Inès and Noémie (all pseudonyms), taught undergraduate students who majored in the French language at a Chinese university well known for foreign language education and studies. They were purposively recruited to participate in the study as they shared similar experiences of French learning and teaching, thus making a relatively homogenous sample of multiple cases. All of them had Ph.D. degrees in French language and literature, except Clémence who was a Ph.D. candidate. Four of them had graduated from the French undergraduate programme at this university, the other from the French programme at a university in the same city.

During the past five years they had been teaching an integrated French course called Intensive Reading to first- and second-year students who were beginning learners of French, their first two years at university being designated as the elementary learning phase of the curriculum. The teachers' total years of teaching experience varied, however: Grégoire had taught for 7 years, Béatrice for 11 years, both Clémence and Noémie for 16 years, and Inès for 27 years (an average of 15.4 years). All the participants gave formal consent to their participation in the study, prior to which ethical approval had been obtained from the corresponding author's institution.

3.3. Data collection

The major source of data of this study was individual interviews with the participants. We conducted two interviews with each of the five participants, totalling 10 interviews. In the first interviews, which ranged in length from 49 minutes to 1 hour, we tried to obtain data regarding the participants' understandings and practices related to teaching French as a foreign language, focusing on what classroom activities they implemented and how they assessed students' performance and progress. Below are some examples of the interview questions that aimed to encourage the participants to narrate their practices of teaching and assessment:

When did you start to teach the Intensive Reading course?
What are the objectives of this course?

How would you describe the students you have taught and are teaching now?
What classroom activities do you use?
How do you evaluate the students' work?
What assessment criteria do you draw on?

Based on our initial analysis of the interview data, we generated more individualised questions to ask the participants in the second interviews, which ranged in length from 30 minutes to 47 minutes, seeking further clarification of or elaboration on issues that remained unclear. We also tried to confirm with the participants about their views of the French language and the learners they taught, based on our initial analysis of the data obtained from the first interviews. Examples of some second-round interview questions are as follows

What kind of language do you think French is? How would you describe it?
What advantages do you think your students have in terms of language abilities as they enter university? What about weaknesses?
How do these advantages and weaknesses influence them in their French learning?
What classroom activities do you think are more effective?
What teaching traditions do you think merit passing on? What needs innovating?

All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, with occasional use of French and English as the interviewer and interviewees mentioned certain concepts that were less accessible in Chinese. Interviews were audiotaped with the participants' permission, and then transcribed. The transcribed data for the first interviews amounted to 54,433 Chinese characters, and that for the second interviews 38,110 characters, combined into a total of 92,543 characters, approximately equivalent to 57,839 English words in translation.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis followed the strategy of content analysis proposed by Cohen *et al.* (2018) involving a three-step analysis based on "theme-category-relationship", since this strategy could better help the researcher identify the substance of the participants' views and opinions. Specifically, three rounds of data analysis were conducted. In the first round we meticulously read through the data and identified excerpts that might pertain to the participants' belief or beliefs about any one or more of the three aspects of enquiry, i.e. the French language, the learner, and teaching. As we tried to identify their beliefs we were particularly cautious about their narratives that contained ideas that they cited from other people. In other words, we only included ideas that were obviously held by the participants themselves to be further analysed in the second round.

The second round focused on a componential analysis of those identified excerpts. Each excerpt contained one or more beliefs, but each belief was classified as belonging to only one of the two categories corresponding to the two aspects of beliefs. Based on the data, subcategories of the two major categories were further delineated:

Beliefs about the language: characteristics of the French language, global status of French, benefits of learning French, …
Beliefs about the learner: language learning habits, former learners of English, personalities and characters, …

The third round of analysis then attempted to reveal the relationships, if any, between different categories or subcategories of beliefs, as situated in the teaching practices reported by the participants. This last round of data analysis was dedicated to unveiling the underlying ideologies the participants had about French learning and teaching as a process of promoting their learners' multilingualism.

4. Findings and discussion

In this section we will present and analyse, respectively, the participants' beliefs about the French language and their beliefs about the French learners they taught. A discussion will follow that particularly focuses on the nature and features of these beliefs as viewed from a multilingual perspective.

4.1. A precise, complex language as cultural capital

When asked about how they viewed French as a language, most of the participants believed that the French language was precise and complex, compared to some other languages such as English. For instance, Noémie mentioned in the interview the *harmonie* [harmony] that characterised the French sentence as illustrated in its gender agreement. Inès further pointed out that "French was precise precisely because it is complex, governed by a large number of rules." Grégoire did not hope to exaggerate such a view though, because "compared to many other European languages, you can't really say that French is more accurate, more complex, or more romantic … likewise, you can't say that Spanish is not accurate, not complex, and not romantic." However, he did illustrate a lexical feature of French as evidence for its precision:

> Although there are many inflectional changes to French verbs, the verbs themselves are simple … Unlike English which has two sets of verbs such as abandon and give up, French only has *abandonner*, without an equivalent phrasal verb.

The participants' beliefs about French as a precise and complex language seemed to reinforce a teaching belief that "beginning learners of French", as they deal with the complex rules, "may encounter more difficulties than beginning learners of English do" (Béatrice).

As to participants' beliefs about the French language learners, more seemed to be mentioned regarding its value as a foreign language to them. This value mostly belonged to what Bourdieu (1979) conceptualises as cultural capital, i.e., the knowledge, skills etc. an individual possesses to demonstrate her/his cultural competence and to exchange for social benefits. For instance, in the extracts below the participants explained how learning French could be useful in increasing the learners' cultural capital:

> Practically, or more specifically in terms of finding a job, to learn French well means to acquire a tool that can provide an advantage for a job that requires the use of French. (Clémence)

> As China tries to enhance its *présence* [presence] in international organisations, those who have learnt French well can more easily find a position. Besides, as a key member of

the European Union, France is also a country where good jobs can be landed for French learners. (Béatrice)

As can be seen, a good job was generally seen as a typical social benefit that might be obtained via the mastery of French as cultural capital. However, this benefit was "undeniably not as substantial as that brought about by the mastery of English … but the mastery of French gives you an extra point, increasing the cordial feeling at work. It is like the Chanel black dress Hepburn wears – an extra point, not a must though" (Inès). Although some participants also mentioned that learning French could elevate the learner's spirit by increasing their knowledge of the cultures of France and other French-speaking countries, the social benefits associated with a career still stood out as the most important cultural capital that was tied up in French learning.

4.2. "Former" English learners with "bad" habits

The participants generally considered the students they taught to be "diligent" (Béatrice) and with "strong abilities as can be seen from the high marks they got in the college entrance examination" (Inès). However, with reference to foreign language learning their beliefs about the learners became more negative, particularly with reference to their language learning habits:

> I think their weakness in language learning can be traced back to their English learning. When they learnt English in secondary school, they formed some habits that now become fetters for French learning. … They tend to work out a formula whenever they come across a new language phenomenon. … They have a kind of resistance to "exceptions" which they do need to understand as such. Instead, they are obsessed with a rule that can explain everything. (Inès)

> They have problems with their language learning methods and views of language. They are over-confident about the exam stuff acquired from the exam-oriented education in secondary school. They are confident about their English, as they may have got 140 [out of 150] points in the college entrance examination. Then, so what? How much input have you really got? How many books have you read in English? How large is your English vocabulary? Your competence is not calculated according to your marks. … Sometimes I would burst the bubble for them. (Grégoire)

Obviously, the participants believed that their learners' previous English learning experience had a negative influence on their multilingual awareness, i.e. the multilingual learner's "consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language" (Carter, 2003, p. 64). This awareness, reflected in their obsession with rules without exception and their illusionary "bubble" of confidence, then "fettered" their learning of French as a new foreign language. The participants also directly and specifically pointed out how English negatively influenced the learners' French learning; for instance, "their English intonation and pronunciation have been too deeply ingrained to get rid of" (Béatrice). This could also have been the case for other aspects of language learning, such as verb tense: "I am now very straightforward telling them not to compare the verb tenses of English and French. Just think in the French way" (Inès).

However, the participants also appreciated the benefits of English learning. They all mentioned the alphabetic system shared by English and French that facilitated the learning of French pronunciation and spelling. Importantly, the participants believed that English could serve as a tool to facilitate French teaching and learning, as can be seen from the extracts below:

> Their conceptions in English are accurate. So, in most cases I can use English to explain French. They can thus understand the French accurately. (Grégoire)

> I don't think I intentionally refuse to utilise English in my teaching. … If a French expression happens to concur with one in English, and if it can be explained in English, then *pourquoi pas* [why not]? (Noémie)

In summary, the participants generally viewed the students as "former" English learners with some "bad" habits that negatively influenced their French learning, although English was in some ways helpful in classroom teaching.

4.3. Discussion

So far we have examined the French teachers' beliefs about the French language and their beliefs about the learner. In terms of their beliefs about the language, we particularly focused on how the teachers viewed the linguistic and social properties of French as a foreign language. The teachers recognised that some linguistic properties (e.g. grammatical complexity) influenced the level of difficulty they thought the learners might encounter in learning the French language.

However, the teachers' beliefs about the social properties of French did not seem to be closely associated with their beliefs about its linguistic properties. The teachers saw French as an important international language, though not as dominant as English, and they also saw French learning as a means for learners to acquire cultural capital of moderate rather than primary value. We also found that the learners' French competence as cultural capital seemed to be detached from their multilingual repertoires, which included their knowledge of English. Their French competence seemed to stand alone, strongly indicative of the teachers' monolingual ideology. Interestingly, teachers' beliefs about French did not seem to relate to the various varieties of French spoken in different parts of the world, which contribute to the presence and significance of *français international* [Global French] in the international linguistic landscape (Reutner, 2017). In summary, teachers' beliefs about the French language reflected a dissonance between the multilingual ideology, as a means for the learner to acquire cultural capital for international communication, and the monolingual ideology, which sees learners' French competence as being detached from competence in other languages such as English.

In terms of the learners, teachers' beliefs also seemed to be underpinned by a contradiction. On one hand, the teachers noted that their students had developed "bad" habits of language learning as "former" English learners, while on the other hand they seemed to neglect the linguistic and non-linguistic resources the students had accumulated in the process of learning English. This apparent contradiction in their beliefs may have resulted from the strong monolingual curricular logic that was imposed on them in the particular

teaching context of the university (Xu & Pu, 2020). This curricular logic is not uncommon in many Chinese universities that teach European languages as foreign languages, which require that students should take a step-by-step approach to acquiring a new foreign language regardless of whether certain "steps" have already been accomplished in previous foreign language learning experiences. This may be a key factor that constrains the cultivation of a multilingual posture (Zheng *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, some teachers did believe in the usefulness of previously learning English as a foreign language in promoting their students' French learning, which obviously conforms to a multilingual ideology. This shows that teachers' beliefs about their learners, like those about the French language, were characterised by the co-existence of multilingual and monolingual ideologies.

As can be seen, the two kinds of beliefs held by the French teachers have distinctive features. The nature of their beliefs about French as a foreign language was generally determined by the dominant monolingual language ideology in the contemporary Chinese context. With foreign language learning primarily viewed as a means to acquire cultural capital (Morrison & Lui, 2000), French is mostly seen as a social tool, e.g. for job hunting and career development, and its other properties are seen as secondary. This may help to explain why teachers seem less sensitive to issues related to *français international*. Meanwhile, the teachers' beliefs about their learners were highly influenced by the language teaching traditions of their university. They seem accustomed to the predetermined and proceduralised curriculum which is believed to have produced a large number of foreign language talents in the university's history (Zhou, 2011).

To summarise, although we have not examined how the French teachers' beliefs and practices interact, this study unveils how teachers' beliefs about the French language and their learners are characterised by the co-existence of or dissonance between monolingual and multilingual ideologies. It seems likely that the language teachers' monolingual and multilingual ideologies will separately influence their beliefs about the language and the learner, creating a belief system with sub-systems that may operate independently. Furthermore, the study has also demonstrated how French teachers' language ideologies can be observed via their beliefs about different dimensions such as the language and the learner. Although their various beliefs showed distinctive features, they were all underpinned by the combination of monolingual and multilingual ideologies.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study we examined French language teachers' beliefs about French and their learners. Adopting a multiple-case design, this qualitative study collected data via interviews with 5 French language teachers who taught integrated courses to beginning learners majoring in French in a Chinese university. Using content analysis, the study revealed that the cultural capital brought by learning French prevailed in teachers' beliefs about the language, and the teachers perceived their students more as French learners who used to learn English in school than as multilingual learners. This analysis seems to indicate that teachers' beliefs about the language and about the learner, though promoting effective teaching behaviours, reflected neither the global linguistic landscape of the French language nor their learners existing level of multilingualism. However, the teachers' beliefs also reflected their multi-

lingual ideology with relation to the utility of their students' French competence in their future language use in a multilingual world, as well as the usefulness of English learning experience in their French learning.

The findings of the study carry some implications for both the teaching of French as a foreign language and research on the professional development for teachers of European languages, particularly in the Chinese context. French teaching needs to innovate at both the curricular and pedagogical levels. The curriculum may need to be reformed in order to better respond to *français international* as a significant presence in the French linguistic landscape, and pedagogical innovations are also needed to fully utilise the students' prior foreign language experience and treat them as multilingual learners rather than "transformers" from English to French. This requires significant reflection on the teaching habitus, which developed at a time when multilingualism was far less prominent in the language education context. As to research on teacher development, more efforts are needed to elucidate the unique developmental trajectories of teachers of European languages such as French. Such efforts must include a broadening research agenda on teachers' beliefs, particularly in terms of how they interact with teachers' practices.

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