Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the Chinese Language Teaching in France and in Belgium

An intermediate report on the current situation of Chinese LLCE undergraduate programmes / bachelors’s degree in Chinese language, literature and civilisation

Bernard ALLANIC, University Rennes2

“(this) programme aims to educate students to become future specialists in Chinese language and contemporary China, and prepare them for further studies in these fields. The students are to complete the entire programme through various courses which will provide them with a firm grounding in Chinese language, literature and civilisation.”

A. The place of Chinese language courses in these programmes

Up until now (in May 2011), seven universities in France have created undergraduate programmes (bachelors’s degree) in Chinese language, literature and civilisation (LLCE Chinois). Normally students in these Chinese Majors must have the longest hours of Chinese language courses, since they are supposed to attain, after three years of study, a high level of proficiency in both written and spoken Chinese.

However, as the undergraduate programmes should also provide students with the knowledge of Chinese traditional culture and that of contemporary Chinese society, some teaching hours are also distributed to the courses of Chinese history, geography and literature (which are mostly taught in French for at least the first two years, considering that most of the students are beginners in Year 1). As a result, the class hours for language courses can rarely exceed 10 hours a week.

The Table 1, which you may find in the document handed out to you earlier, shows the number of teaching hours for Chinese language courses per year and per week in the seven universities in France and Ghent University in Belgium, the only Belgian university which has completed our questionnaire. As we may see, the teaching hours for language courses vary between 7 hours per week at the least (in the case of University of Rennes 2 in Year 1, Semester 1) and 13 hours per week at the most (in the case of two universities in Year 3). Two facts should be considered here. First, because each university has its own teaching schedule and there is no official programme dictating the minimum teaching hours, there are differences among the eight universities in terms of the total number of hours for Chinese language courses (from 656 hours to 910 hours!, that is to say, the students in one programme may have 25% more time to practice Chinese language in class). The second fact, which should particularly draw our attention, is that the teaching hours for Chinese language courses in Europe are quite insufficient (as compared to the Chinese teaching as a secondary language in China, which has 4 hours per day).

On the right of the Table 1 is the proportion of the Chinese language courses in the undergraduate programme. We may notice that in all the above mentioned universities, Chinese language courses account only half of the total European Credits. Therefore, the students must dedicate a considerable amount of time to the disciplines other than the study of Chinese language.

1 a level still to be defined by the European Framework
The typical case is that a first-year beginner of Chinese in a Chinese LLCE undergraduate (bachelor’s degree) programme has between 9 and 10 hours a week of Chinese language courses, which represents half of the total ECTS Credits (53%) and almost half of his time in class.

**B. Absence of an official syllabus for Chinese teaching in the Higher Education: the great dependence on textbooks**

Since 2002, an official syllabus has been in use for the Chinese teaching in secondary schools in France. It gives a precise description on the teaching content for each year, setting the framework and benchmarks for the teaching and learning progression. (My colleague Wan Yan will talk about it later through the case of a High School in the city of Rennes). However, such an official syllabus for Chinese teaching does not exist in the Higher Education. It seems that it is the textbook used during the language courses which decides the progression, at the rate of one lesson per week in general. But such a system has three major problems:

1) With regard to the duality of the Chinese teaching between spoken Chinese and written Chinese, one textbook may differ greatly from another in its contents and in its teaching approaches. For example, some textbooks make the distinction between the teaching of characters and the teaching of words (as in the textbook of Monique HOA) and others do not (as in certain textbooks from Taiwan or mainland China in which characters and words are taught together as “the vocabulary”). The difference also exists in their ways to treat active/passive characters, or their tolerance of the use of pinyin... The diversity of textbooks makes it very difficult to coordinate the teaching and learning progression, be it in the acquisition of words and characters, or in the progressive learning of different speech acts. Therefore there is a lack of objective criteria for assessments.

2) How to compensate for the lack of reference textbooks for the third-year? As Joël Bellassen noted in a conference paper in 2009, the Chinese syllabus in many universities is the synonym of “a list of lessons compiled together”, and the learning of vocabulary (through the texts) is in such a random and scattered way which consequently puts the learning of characters in an equal disorder.

_These first two problems have made it difficult for us to find clear answers to our survey question “What is an Estimated Number of Chinese Characters and Words Taught in a Year”, especially for the Year Three (due to the lack of a reference textbook). We have so far gathered quite different answers. For example, the total number of characters taught within three years fluctuates between 1700 and 2300, the teaching hours being more or less the same !_

3) The Chinese textbooks don’t take into account the **Task-based Approach pedagogy** which is advocated by the European Framework. The teaching approach peddled by the major Chinese textbooks is of a very traditional kind, based mainly on the translation of a text by learning its vocabulary and analysing its grammar points. This type of approach, composed mainly of translation and grammar courses, is still prevalent. It is far away from the spirit of the Framework, embodied by the Task-based Approach. The advantage of the Task-based Approach is that the learners can learn the language by accomplishing realistic tasks either in connexion with their real life with a professional life which they may encounter later.
C. Three current attempts to link Chinese language programme with the European Framework

According to our survey, the majority of the Chinese undergraduate programmes are not related to the European Framework. However, many teachers have answered “Yes” to the question “Is it helpful and necessary to link Chinese language programme to CEFR?” Their comments also reflect their interest in our project, for example, in “having objective criteria for evaluation” (Bordeaux 3) or in “changing the ways of teaching” (Rennes 2). They are quite aware of the difficulty of this project caused by the specificity of written Chinese, which requires more learning time than European alphabetic written languages.

Nevertheless, there are three current attempts which link Chinese language programme with the European Framework: two universities have named the European Framework in their programme objectives, and the French national language certificate tests, which rely on the CEFR standards and are based on realistic scenarios, have also included Chinese language in their testing system.

1) The University of Provence sets the Level A1 as the objective of Year 1, Level A2 as the objective of Year 2, and finally Level B1 as the objective of Year 3 in its Chinese undergraduate programme (for the students starting Chinese in universities). It is written in their prospectus:

“In terms of language skills, students should attain at the end of the three-year programme a level of autonomy in both written and spoken language (Level B1 of CEFR) which allows him/her to accompany a person or a group of people in a trip to China, or to help receive a Chinese delegation in France, and to provide simple and occasional interpreting services. As for the Chinese writing, he/she should be capable to summarise a text or a newspaper article of intermediate difficulty, to type a text in Chinese characters using keyboard, and to communicate in Chinese through letters and e-mails.”

2) The University of Rennes 2 sets the Level B1 as the objective of Year 1 (it is for the students who have already learned Chinese before entering the university), Level B2 (designated here as “the autonomous level”) as the objective of Year 2, and finally Level C1, “the fluent level”, as the objective of Year 3.

Comments on these two attempts: It appears that these two universities do not make distinctions between different language skills (comprehension / production / speaking / writing). However, the benchmarks given by both teams for Chinese writing are quite similar: 500 or 600 characters to acquire during one year of study. It is a number which we could remember for the next step of our project, for it seems to reflect the normal speed of character acquisition in the teaching-learning conditions described above.

3) The integration of Chinese language into the French national foreign language certificate tests CLES and DCL

- Experimentations for CLES 1 (Certificate of Language for Higher Education corresponding to Level B1) since 2009
- Organisation of the first exam of the Chinese DCL in February 2011 (Cf. the annexe in another document)