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The impact of multilingual education policy on university language teachers' professional development

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Abstract. This article reports on a case study that investigated language teachers' perceptions of a newly launched multilingual programme in a Chinese university. Forty-one teachers from the university were interviewed. Data analysis reveals that the teachers perceived the new programme as an administration-dominated initiative that would impact on their teaching practice and research engagements. Particularly, they questioned the viability of its pedagogical innovation, and cast doubt on its implications in terms of what type of knowledge and research would be valued. They also viewed the new programme as a form of institutionalisation, resulting in the reallocation of resources within the university. These perceptions demonstrate how the innovative programme, imposed as a policy initiative, could influence the ecosystem of the whole university and affect its sustainable development.

Keywords: Multilingual education; policy; professional development; university language teachers.

[ch] 高校多语项目对外语教师专业发展的影响研究

摘要. 本研究考察一所中国大学的外语教师对一个新实施的多语项目的认知。对41位外语教师的访谈发现，他们认为新项目是学校行政主导的产物，对教师个人的教学和研究都产生影响。外语教师质疑此类教学创新的可行性以及这种创新带来的专业发展导向，而这种导向涉及学校将看重何种类型的知识贡献和科学研究。外语教师还将新项目看做会导致资源重新分配的体制化活动。这些认知作为新项目实施带来的结果，也有可能进一步影响学校的生态系统和可持续发展。

关键词: 多语教育；政策；专业发展；高校外语教师。

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1. Introduction

Sustaining the learning and teaching of multiple languages in higher education is by nature a matter of ecological development (Cook, 2019). Within a university, sustainability relies upon the construction and maintenance of a healthy ecosystem that enables reciprocal interaction between all participants, as well as a rational utilisation of developmental resources (Patterson, 2004). At the centre of such an ecosystem are the roles played by faculty members, who initiate and engage in most of the disciplinary interactions, identifying, seeking and using professional resources. Their roles are supported by higher education policy and management, but, as is increasingly reported, they can also be redefined, downplayed and even constrained by the implementation of certain policies and management systems (McKnight et al., 2020; Tao et al., 2019). Faculty members from foreign language departments mostly work as language teachers with high professional autonomy (Wermke and Höstfält, 2014). They may resist the "intrusion" of university administration into their academic engagements in explicit and implicit ways. Tension arises over such "intrusion and counter-intrusion", which may be detrimental to the sustainability of a university ecosystem and even the entire higher education section. This tension is largely due to lack of mutual understanding between faculty and administration. It may be exacerbated by poor communication, and it can ultimately break the sustainable development cycle. Therefore, it is important to probe into faculty members' perceptions of how university management

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impacts on their roles, particularly when administration tries to boost development via initiatives for reform and innovation (Guo et al., 2020).

In China, universities have been keen on designing and promoting multilingual education programmes, i.e. programmes that promote the learning and teaching of multiple languages in the Chinese context, since the beginning of this century (Zheng et al., 2019). This motivation is by and large two-fold. As China goes global, the Chinese government sees the urgent need for cultivating multilingual personnel, i.e. university graduates who are fluent in two or more foreign languages and at the same time specialise in a disciplinary field such as international politics, finance and economics (Xu et al., 2020). The government encourages and supports universities to implement innovative foreign language programmes in order to upgrade existing ones that focus on only one foreign language in conjunction with one of the traditional disciplines most closely associated with language studies, such as literature, linguistics, or translation and interpreting. On the other hand, within universities, colleges and departments of foreign languages are also under pressure because of a mounting crisis in which they feel tremendously marginalised as their roles are stereotypically defined as foreign language “trainers” with little disciplinary intellectuality (Qu, 2016). The impetus from the government, coupled with the drive to obtain higher status in the university, has given rise to a great number of new multilingual programmes in the past decade, initiated and run mostly by foreign language divisions in universities or universities/colleges specialising in foreign language education. This has inevitably changed the landscape of foreign language education in universities, reshaping university language teachers’ roles in academic engagement and redirecting the distribution and utilisation of professional development resources. So far, little has been done to closely examine how language teachers have received, perceived and conceived of these changing dynamics, and little is known about how individual teachers have responded to the changes.

This article reports on an exploratory case study that investigated language teachers’ perceptions of an innovative multilingual programme recently launched and implemented in a university of foreign studies in China. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How did the language teachers receive the new multilingual programme?
- (2) What changes did they perceive that the programme would bring about in their work?
- (3) How did they conceive of the impact of the programme on their professional development?

2. Methods

2.1. Context and Participants

As part of a larger research project, this exploratory study adopted a case study design (Yin, 2009), focussing on the impact of an innovative multilingual programme designed and implemented in a foreign language studies university in China. This programme intended to cultivate talents in the field of global governance. It was designed for undergraduate students, aiming for them to learn both English and French as foreign languages and at the same time major in either international politics or international economics. This meant that educational resources needed to be synergised between colleges/departments that originally offered programmes in the English language, the French language, political sciences, and finance and economics.

All the participants in the current study were language teachers from this university. Twenty-five participants were English teachers, two were French teachers, and 14 were teachers who taught other languages such as German, Japanese, Spanish, Korean and Romanian, totalling 41 participants. Nine of the English teachers and the two French teachers were directly involved in the design, implementation and/or supervision/evaluation of the new multilingual programme, while the other 30 teachers were not. In terms of their work experience and academic seniority, 23 participants had a senior academic title (full/associate professor) with more than 15 years of teaching experience, while 18 participants worked as lecturers with less than 10 years of teaching experience. Of the 41 participants, 10 also held administrative posts either in their colleges/departments or at the university level.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected via individual interviews with the participants, ranging in length from 24 minutes to 45 minutes. The participants were asked questions centred on the new multilingual programme, with a particular focus on how the programme might affect the professional development of language teachers in the university. In particular, they were invited to talk about the ways that they had learned about the programme, their knowledge of it, their observations of its influence on the university, and their thoughts about its impact on themselves (see Appendix).

The interviews were conducted in Chinese and audio-recorded with the participants’ consent. The excerpts were translated into English as they are presented in this article.

The data analysis used the strategy used a procedure elaborated by Miles et al. (2020). The transcribed data was read through, and data excerpts closely related to the research questions were selected for further analysis. For instance, a participant compared in an interview what his colleagues thought, before and after

the implementation of the programme, about teaching French to students who were not majoring in French. We then identified this data excerpt as related to changes that have taken place or may take place due to the new programme, which was highly relevant to the second research question. The selected excerpts were then categorised based on their different manifestations of the impact of the programme on language teachers' professional development. For instance, changes brought about by the programme were categorised as impacting teaching practice, impacting research engagements, impacting resource allocation, or impacting personal goal orientation. The categorisation stage was followed by more meticulous, repeated readings of the data to produce in-depth interpretations.

3. Findings

This section discusses the language teachers' perceptions of the new multilingual programme. Their perceptions pertain to three aspects: (1) how the programme was received, i.e. how they reacted to it when they first got to know about it; (2) how it was perceived, i.e. how they understood the nature of the programme and its immediate influence; and (3) how it was conceived, i.e. what they thought of its impact upon their own professional development.

3.1. The programme's reception

Most of the participants first learned about the programme when it was publicly announced. They felt surprised because the programme involved major pedagogical innovations, but its design and implementation were mainly led by administrative leadership. Therefore, the programme was received mostly as a top-down university policy, whose planning and decision-making process did not involve the large number of language teachers in the university. As an associate professor said,

When I got to know about it, they were already recruiting students for the programme. Then in a flash the students arrived on campus ... The whole thing has already become a reality ... The speed is fast. I've never seen any other work "propelled" so effectively in this university. It must be because this is something that the president is determined to do. (associate professor of English)

This narrative indicated that, on the one hand, when driven by top-down administrative forces, the implementation of an innovative programme could be efficient, i.e. normal procedures were completed with a faster speed. On the other hand, however, the extract also revealed a sense of exclusion, referring to the fact that the participant was not involved in the decision-making process regarding the programme, and was not informed about it in good time.

After learning about the programme, some participants expressed their belief in its significance, and stated their willingness to participate if similar opportunities were provided for themselves. For instance, a professor of another language stated,

This is a "mission". We will be able to cultivate multilingual talents for our country, thereby elevating the status of our university ... I would feel honoured if a similar programme was launched focussed on English and the language I teach. (professor of other languages, and administrator in a college)

Meanwhile, others showed concern over the nature and prospect of the programme, drawing on past experience and professional insights:

There have been many initiatives like this in recent years. Most did not seem to succeed or last long, because they were mostly decided on a whim, particularly by administrators who did not know much about foreign language education, or who did not actually teach a foreign language. (professor of French)

When I first heard about it, I thought it was just a combination of three traditional programmes – English, French, and politics or economics. More precisely, it was a combination of three *select* programmes, because you couldn't expect the students to learn everything in the three complete programmes altogether ... I didn't think it was a giant step toward multilingualism; it was just some kind of "arrangement" the university would like to make use of and call innovation. (lecturer of English)

As can be seen, the new programme seemed to have left the language teachers with the impression that the university leadership had launched it as, in a sense, a gimmick. The teachers, with their substantial knowledge of day-to-day teaching practice, considered the programme from a practical perspective. They wondered how the goals claimed by the programme could be accomplished in reality, and as they were excluded from the decision-making process and could not see how the programme could be justified, their immediate impression was, inevitably, that the programme

was only an “arrangement” made by the “determined” university administration, publicised as a “mission” to serve the country and not likely to “succeed or last long”.

3.2. The perceptions of the programme

Most participants perceived that the launch of the programme had brought, or would bring, some changes to their work, including their teaching practice and research engagements. Although they tended to believe in the significance of the innovative endeavour, they found that the programme had been implemented without a systematic pedagogical design. The fact that it was the result of a top-down policy made them worried about, if not resistant to, the changes that they might one day be required to make in their teaching for administrative rather than pedagogical purposes. In addition, they were also concerned that the launch of the programme would assign more value to certain fields of knowledge and prioritise certain types of research, which would potentially affect how they were to direct their own research.

As to teaching practice, 34 participants (83% of the informants) held negative attitudes toward the new programme. Based on their own observations and second-hand information provided by other colleagues, they generally perceived the programme to be “immature” with regard to teaching issues. A professor of English said,

Although I believe [this programme] is an important endeavour, I am quite worried that the language syllabi, for English and French, have not been systematically designed or carefully thought over ... This is bound to influence students’ learning and language development. This also affects teachers’ teaching competence development. Such development, for students and teachers alike, cannot afford to go through such experiments. Once it is on the wrong path, it will be difficult to pull it back. (professor of English)

Based on observation, she was concerned that the design of the language syllabi was not systematic, meaning that she was not convinced that the content and procedure for teaching could achieve the expected learning goals. Similarly, a professor of French also questioned the aim of learning two languages at the same time:

I can hardly see how the programme, as it is designed, can enable students to master two foreign languages. The two languages [English and French] often interfere with each other when you learn them at the same time ... You can’t rely on the students’ language talent – unfortunately, most of them don’t have it. Most students need systematic training and hard work. Systematic training means that nothing in the existing teaching system is as minor as can be skipped or dropped. But teachers *have to* skip or drop a lot of things here. (professor of French)

She did not mean that pedagogical innovation should never be conducted; rather, she was suggesting that innovation should be based on well-informed decisions supported by sufficient pedagogical knowledge. In reality, the lack of systematic planning caused problems for teaching practice. For instance, an associate professor who taught a course in the programme said,

I was invited to teach a course, which I happily accepted. But I have been wondering what objectives I should try to achieve ... I was told that the entire programme was an experiment, and I was allowed generous room for innovation. But there are always some fundamental objectives that language courses should achieve. Can they also be innovated? (associate professor of English)

While she was willing to innovate in her language teaching, she was not clear whether the fundamental objectives for language courses could be innovated, and if yes, on what basis and in what ways.

It can be seen that the participants were generally willing to believe in the importance of educational innovation. They were also willing to contribute to the implementation of innovative programmes. When it came to practical teaching issues, however, the teachers who were involved discovered that the objectives of the language courses, the syllabi and the methods of teaching had not been systematically designed. This made them feel uncertain about the consequences of such an experiment. Teachers who were not directly involved showed similar resistance to the possibility of adapting their own teaching to such programmes:

If English and French can be taught this way, English and German can be taught this way, too. Then isn’t it true that all of us [foreign language teachers in the university] need to think about our own prospect of teaching a cohort of students in this *special* way? I don’t really think I could be well prepared if I were asked to teach. (associate professor of German)

As shown in these extracts, the teachers perceived that the programme might bring about changes to their teaching practice. Although they would value opportunities to “innovate” the “existing teaching system”, they believed that such innovation should only be implemented based on a careful, systematic design. Otherwise, as

they said, they might run the risk of putting their students', and even their own, development "on the wrong path". The general statements of vision, provided by the administration, contradicted the criteria for effective teaching held by the teachers. Due to the lack of opportunities for participating in administrative decisions, the teachers' concerns were not incorporated into the design of the programme, and were not adequately addressed during the implementation stage. Teachers of languages other than English and French, based on mere observation, also anticipated the challenges that they might face if they were asked to teach in such a programme if one was developed to include their languages.

In addition to teaching practice, the research engagement of language teachers was also perceived as subject to the impact of the innovative programme. In particular, all 18 lecturer participants expressed serious concerns about the research "direction" implied by the university's initiative for this programme; one of them asked:

As far as I can see, the research that underpins this programme should be focused on curriculum studies. This means that curriculum studies should be the university's priority, at least when it comes to undergraduate education. Then, will there be a wind that blows all the favour to those who specialise in curriculum studies, or those who turn to doing curriculum studies to align themselves with this priority? Will many people do this to keep up with the Joneses? (lecturer of English)

As can be seen, the new programme caused junior language teachers to interpret, correctly or incorrectly, the implicit policy shift in terms of research engagement in their university. They were thinking of their position in the university, trying to figure out how the launch of the new programme would influence their choice of research topics. Practically, if they could align their research area with the needs of the university, they would have more opportunities to make contributions, obtain resources and gain recognition. From the teachers' perspective, the launch of the new programme reflected the needs of the university, prioritising certain areas of knowledge and downplaying others. The teachers even speculated that those who contributed more directly to such new programmes would gain more "favour". In that situation, those who found their own disciplinary knowledge irrelevant to the new programme worried about whether they should or could "keep up with the Joneses". Their worries echoed the perception of a professor of English:

From what I see, the programme is only motivating research on how various courses should be spread out in a very tight span, and how a large volume of learning content could be squeezed into a smaller amount of time... This narrows the scope of research relevant and fundamental to the programme itself. It also narrows the vision of our participating and observing colleagues regarding what is worthy of research in organising and implementing a programme like this, for instance, issues on learning content, materials development, acquisition etc. (professor of English)

Overall, the participants indicated that when a policy of the university leaned heavily towards one particular programme, its impact would extend to the teaching and research of almost every teacher working in the university. University teachers are autonomous professionals who seek to maximise their personal development and to increase their contribution to the development of the university. They are constantly trying to make sense of the policy of the university, and many of them are willing to adjust their own paths of development to meet institutional demands. However, when they do not have full access to the rationale behind administrative decisions, they may not be able to understand the nature of university policy or its implications for their own development. As an associate professor said,

These days, I often feel perplexed. I understand that working in an institutionalised university, everyone needs to adapt and readapt themselves to at least some of the institutional needs. But what I can't figure out is whether these kind of needs would fade as time passes by, or they would persist as long as my whole career. If they stay for good, I am willing to change myself for good as well; if not, I am willing to hold on. But I can't figure out which. (associate professor of English)

As can be seen in the quote above, teachers may feel uncertain about their interpretations of university policies when their practical concerns for teaching and research are not adequately addressed. Such uncertainty may cause confusion regarding their own professional development, and may even reduce the chances for them to exercise professional autonomy.

3.3. The conceptions of the programme

Besides the emotions and attitudes provoked by the new programme, the teachers also expressed their thoughts about the impact of this programme. Some were making plans to change the direction of their field of research, and others were thinking about how to cope with the situation when certain groups of teachers became marginalised by the policy shift.

In order to fit into the perceived course of development of the university, some teachers were prepared to change their field of research. As a lecturer said,

I think that my field [philology] will probably become less and less needed in the university ... I've got very little to contribute with my current knowledge and research to such key projects [like the new multilingual programme] ... I'm seriously thinking about applying to study in a PhD programme in applied linguistics. (lecturer of other languages)

This is another indication of how one innovative programme might impact on the career path of every teacher, including those who do not directly participate in the programme.

Beyond personal development, the participants also talked about the influence of the new programme upon the development of the whole ecosystem of the university. One critical issue was related to the allocation and utilisation of resources when such a new programme was implemented and possibly extended in the future. Particularly, the teachers discussed the consequence of marginalising certain groups of teachers:

Running such a programme must consume lots of resources. But today we [the university] struggle in a time in which high-quality resources are not so sufficient as to be able to support every potential project. We need to balance our resource allocation between key projects and ordinary projects. When a certain key project [the researcher believed that the interviewee was referring to the new multilingual programme] occupies too much resources, people who engage in ordinary projects are sure to feel hurt. (professor of English, and administrator at the university level)

If this kind of programme finally prevails in the undergraduate education of our university, I believe I have every good reason to proclaim that if the languages taught in my college never had a chance to take the place of French, my college would be totally marginalised. So far this has always seemed a destiny, just as those languages are hardly ever to be identified as official working languages in the United Nations. (professor of other languages, and administrator in a college)

Such statements indicate that the allocation of resources was a major concern among the language teachers. Those who were not directly involved in the new programme were worried about being marginalised in the reallocation of resources. Those who also worked as administrators were worried about the development of the university when certain groups of teachers became marginalised.

A university needs to maintain a number of language departments for academic purposes and to serve for the needs of society. While it could be legitimate for the institution to choose to allocate more resources to certain departments for social, economic and political reasons, the rationale for such decisions must be justified by considering the interests of all the teachers in the university. In particular, if a university is to become a healthy community for teachers' professional development, it must ensure that marginalised teachers can enjoy equal opportunities for utilising resource and gaining recognition. Only in this way can a university achieve balanced development.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings presented above have shown how language teachers in a foreign language studies university in China reacted towards a newly launched multilingual programme in their university. They perceived the new programme as an administration-dominated initiative that would impact on their teaching practice and research engagements. Specifically, they questioned the viability of its pedagogical innovation and cast doubt on its implications in terms of the type of knowledge and research that would be valued. They also viewed the new programme as a form of institutionalisation, resulting in the reallocation of resources within the university. These cognitions demonstrate how the innovative programme, imposed as a policy initiative, could influence the ecosystem of the whole university and affect its sustainable development.

Although these perceptions and understandings, which are only personal reflections, should not be taken as solid evidence to determine the quality of the new multilingual programme, they do shed light on how the university's ecosystem can be impacted on, mediated by language teachers' cognitions. When a policy initiative is undertaken by the administration, teachers will interpret both the overt and the tacit intentions, since they receive and perceive the initiative in a specific context. Then they conceive of its likely influences, so that they can adjust their own academic roles based on their judgements and predictions. It is likely that many of these perceptions and understandings do not concur with, and may even deviate significantly from, the policy makers' real intentions, but the ways in which policy initiatives are "imposed" may cause cognitive turbulence among the teachers, followed by an imbalance in the ecosystem of the university that may be difficult to redress via administrative

efforts only. Such unintended consequences require awareness at the planning and implementation stage of an innovative programme.

The multilingual programme investigated in this paper reflects the general trend of innovating foreign language degree programmes in Chinese universities. This innovation is driven by real social and individual needs, such as the needs of the Chinese government to participate in international affairs, and the needs of individual Chinese students to compete in the global job market. It also demonstrates that state-driven language policy and planning takes an instrumental approach, regarding multilingual skills as instruments for economic and social development (Han et al., 2019). While the intention of cultivating well-qualified personnel can be justified, the question remains as to whether the goal of cultivating such personnel, possessing multilingual competence and professional skills, can be achieved by such compact programmes. Given the complex system of higher education institutions, the actual effects of such programmes can be rather unpredictable, especially when they are implemented without careful, systematic planning. It is thus advisable for administrative decisions to take into account the complications of human factors when coping with instrumental demands of the society. Special care is needed in assessing how educational policy initiatives may impact on the university ecosystem, particularly in terms of the development of human beings who are involved in the system. Language teachers, as core members of a university community, play a crucial role in the implementation of curriculum innovations. Their expertise deserves recognition, and their professional needs and challenges should be addressed if multilingual education at the tertiary level is to maintain a balanced, sustainable development trajectory.

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Appendix

Interview questions for the participants:

- How did you get to know about this new programme?
- What was your first impression?
- What specifically do you know about it?
- What change or changes have you seen happen in the university owing to the implementation of this programme?
- What change or changes may be probable in the future?
- Have you been affected in any way by this programme?
- Is it likely that you may be affected in the same way or in other ways in the future?