

## Article

# Multilingual Education Policy and LOTE Teacher Development: Focusing on China's LOTE Programs in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** This article, drawing on recent research on Language Other than English (LOTE) programs in China's universities, examines the impact of multilingual education policy on the professional development of LOTE teachers. We argue for the mediating roles of LOTE programs as they carry the influence of education policy on teacher development. In other words, LOTE programs may influence the way in which education policy impacts teacher development. Specifically, LOTE programs seem to play three mediating roles: (1) How education policy is perceived and understood by the program designer or/and coordinator impacts how LOTE teachers who engage in the program are influenced, (2) how educational resources are allocated to teachers teaching in the LOTE program impacts teachers' professional development, (3) how teachers actually position themselves in the LOTE program as opposed to their identities positioned by education policy and the university administration impacts their professional development. In a word, the influence of multilingual education policy on the professional development of LOTE teachers may be mediated by such meso- and micro-level factors as administration, resource, and identity work.

**Keywords:** LOTE teacher development; multilingual education policy; LOTE program; higher education



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## 1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of Languages Other than English (LOTEs) in China has received increasing attention over the past decade [1–3]. The number of students at universities who learn less commonly taught foreign languages, i.e., LOTEs other than Russian, Japanese, French, German, Spanish, and Arabic, is estimated to be over 10,000 [4], which means that the number will be much larger when all other LOTEs are added. Much research has been dedicated to revealing the impact of language education policy on LOTE education and the professional development of LOTE teachers [1]. However, there seems to be an over-simplified understanding of such impact that policy undeniably affects the educational practices of LOTE teaching and learning and thus LOTE teachers' professional development, and that, for the same reason, policy should be to blame if LOTE education has not been duly promoted. This generalization is particularly strong when LOTE teachers' professional development is discussed [5–8]. Such an overgeneralized understanding does not help reveal the underlying mechanism by which language education policy reaches and affects concrete practices of LOTE teaching, learning, and teacher development [9]. The lack of studies that investigate the complex interactions between policy and practice in LOTE education thus creates a research gap. In particular, it is important to further examine the specific paths along which policy interacts with LOTE teachers' professional development.

Therefore, this conceptual paper attempts to analyze and unveil the impact of multilingual education policy on LOTE teacher development, drawing on the existing literature on China's LOTE programs in higher education in the past decade. Based on our examination of the studies selected via searches on Web of Science and China Social Sciences Citation Index, a Chinese database operated by Nanjing University, we found three prominent themes

that emerge from the literature, i.e., the mediating roles of administrators, the worrying resourcing, and teachers' identity work. In what follows, we will delineate each of these three themes, which entail key information regarding how policy specifically affects LOTE teachers' professional development in China.

## 2. The Mediating Roles of Administrators

The promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative by the Chinese government leads to requirements for universities in China, which highlight the cultivation of LOTE talents and the development of LOTE programs [10]. Administrators thus play a critical mediating role as their interpretations of these requirements would directly affect the curricular arrangements and the university's expectations on teachers. In this section, we illustrate how university administrators' interpretations of the policy influence curriculum development and the university's requirements for LOTE teachers.

### 2.1. Curriculum Development

Interest in developing LOTE programs has emerged in universities of various types, including foreign studies universities and comprehensive universities. As foreign studies universities are mostly financed and supervised by the Ministry of Education and provincial educational authorities, they are expected to fulfill their responsibilities to enlarge the number of LOTE talents as well as the number of LOTEs being taught, making them the major providers of LOTE programs [11]. Therefore, the university leadership seems to have unanimously interpreted the governmental needs for LOTE education as three-fold, i.e., to increase the number of LOTEs being taught, to cultivate multilingual talents, and to promote international exchange for LOTE students [12]. As a result, the number of LOTE programs has increased rapidly in the past decade. For example, Beijing Foreign Studies University, one of the key foreign studies universities in China, has already made available programs or courses for 101 languages, whilst this number was only 84 in 2017 [12]. Besides, foreign studies universities have also encouraged students to learn a second or even a third foreign language to enhance their multilingual abilities, which would help students gain an advantage in the job market as they graduate [13]. Except for language proficiency, students' cultural awareness associated with the local cultures of corresponding languages has also been emphasized by foreign studies universities [13]. Therefore, projects, such as study-abroad, have been provided, which help students to gain more direct access to authentic cultural experiences [12]. Administrators in comprehensive universities, on the other hand, try to encourage their students whose majors are not foreign languages to learn LOTEs to enhance their multi-competence [12]. Thus, LOTE education in comprehensive universities often takes the form of (selective) courses, as part of the overall curriculum, for students who major in disciplines such as international politics and economics [14]. In order to more effectively achieve such a goal to integrate LOTE education with disciplinary education, comprehensive universities also combine their advanced disciplines with LOTEs as "LOTE+" programs. For instance, Peking University, one of the top comprehensive universities in China, once promoted collaboration between the history department and the foreign language department [13]. Specifically, a new major called "foreign language and foreign history" was developed, which set up LOTE teaching as a compulsory part of the curriculum as combined with the learning of cultures and histories of LOTE-speaking countries. This cooperation utilizes the university's best disciplinary resources to cultivate multilingual talents who specialize in a particular discipline, with an obvious intention to serve the governmental needs, as mentioned above [12]. As can be seen, different types of universities implement policies differently by utilizing their specialties to nurture LOTE talents to serve governmental needs. Despite the diversity of the specific forms of LOTE programs, the commonality between different types of universities is their administrators' similar interpretations of, and a strong desire to serve, the governmental needs.

## 2.2. Requirements for Teachers' Teaching, Research, and Service

As LOTE teachers' professional development impacts the cultivation of LOTE talents [15], university administrators hold high expectations of and have diverse requirements for teachers' teaching, research, and service. As to teaching, general teaching standards for LOTE programs have been mandated by educational authorities, pertaining to achieving high language proficiency, cultivating intercultural awareness, and enhancing traditional Chinese moralities [16]. As a result, specific guidelines for LOTE teachers' teaching activities have been prescribed in accordance with these standards. For instance, teachers are asked to highlight elements of Chinese culture and morality both in teaching and in developing teaching materials [16]. LOTE teachers should also take language proficiency as the top priority to promote students' communicative competence. Teachers are also required to design cross-cultural courses, which combine the teaching of cultures of LOTE-speaking countries with Chinese moralities, at the same time enhancing students' critical thinking skills [15]. In terms of research, affected by the governmental pursuit of research productions, university administrators implement a tenure policy for all faculty members, including LOTE teachers [17]. This policy sets a time limit for teachers' promotion, i.e., teachers must produce a certain number of high-quality publications to secure their position by the end of an "incubation" period [18]. Affected by this policy, LOTE teachers in some Double First-Class universities along the coastal areas of China (which are economically better off) may need to publish at least an average of 5.57 indexed journal articles within six to nine years to avoid losing their jobs [19]. Besides the intensity of academic publication, LOTE teachers may also need to face strict academic evaluation. In most universities, only publications in high-impact journals are recognized, which mostly publish research written in English rather than in LOTEs [19]. Unfortunately, English would be far less frequently used in LOTE teachers' academic engagements [18], thus adding more pressure on the LOTE teachers in their struggle for academic publication. With regard to service, LOTE teachers have been given various types of commitments, varying from social service to service to the university. Common social service LOTE teachers need to be committed to serving as interpreters in important political and business events that are less associated with, but occupy much time that should otherwise be devoted to, teaching and research [20]. Moreover, LOTE teachers also need to contribute to building their departments as a kind of service to the university. Because of the shortage of LOTE faculty, LOTE teachers have to take on far more administrative duties than their counterparts in the English department, including the design and maintenance of the department's website, work arrangements for their international colleagues (i.e., foreign teachers), and the provision of pastoral care for students [21].

In summary, university administrators, as they implement the governmental policies via their design and implementation of LOTE programs, seem to impose high standards and demanding requirements for LOTE teachers' teaching, research, and service. Some of these standards and requirements may pose great difficulties to LOTE teachers, as there exists a considerable gap between the current level of professionalism of LOTE teachers and the level of professionalism required by their actual engagements. Consequently, LOTE teachers may feel overwhelmed as they take on too much teaching responsibility, face the possibility of losing their job or failing to get promoted, and struggle to find the balance between service, teaching, and research. All of these situations, which seem to be in part due to the university administration that bluntly translates the governmental policy as the university policy, may hinder LOTE teachers' professional development and thus, in the long run, the sustainable development of LOTE education in China's higher education. In other words, how university administrators play their mediating roles in promoting LOTE programs not only affects the success of the programs in itself but also the sustainability of the entire LOTE education [5].

### 3. The Worrying Resourcing

Given the dominance of English in both international communication and academic publishing, resources seem to have tilted in favor of the promotion of English in both teaching and research. This may constitute a reason why LOTE programs are insufficiently resourced in spite of the advocated importance of LOTEs to, for instance, the Belt and Road Initiative. Even for LOTE programs that are adequately financed by the government, resources do not seem to be allocated to empower frontline teachers as they cultivate LOTE students and promote their own professional development. Therefore, in this section, we problematize the allocation of resources that would otherwise better promote teacher development.

#### 3.1. Shortage of Teaching Faculty and Materials

English has been the dominant foreign language in Chinese higher education for decades, which has contributed to a tendency that teaching English should be prioritized when educational resources are allocated. Despite the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative in China that calls for the teaching of more LOTEs, LOTE programs at the universities still seem to have received fewer resources compared to English programs. This lack of resources in teaching can be well seen in the shortage of teaching faculty and materials. The shortage of faculty members for LOTE programs is faced by many universities. For instance, in the School of European Languages and Culture, Beijing Foreign Studies University, which had 26 LOTE programs approved by the Ministry of Education in 2016, there was only one teacher teaching each of the eight programs that suffered most from the shortage of faculty members, while many other programs had fewer than three teachers [10]. This situation may have been owing to the high threshold standards to recruit LOTE teachers. Many universities that emphasize research production have made it a mandate that applicants for the teaching position must have published a certain number of articles in high-impact journals, which is indeed difficult for many potential applicants to meet who have just obtained a Ph.D. or even a master's degree [22]. The shortage of faculty members not only affects the quality and sustainability of LOTE programs, but also reduces LOTE teachers to a state of working in a relatively isolated community for professional development, where there is an extremely small number of colleagues. Although some universities may seek support from institutions and organizations, such as foreign embassies in China, by employing native-speaking personnel [10], these hired teaching staff, who have not been trained to teach, may not be able to improve the situation of faculty shortage, particularly as a long-term solution.

Shortage of teaching materials as an important kind of resource also poses a tremendous challenge for LOTE teachers. To solve this problem, university administrators may require that LOTE teachers should develop textbooks for classroom teaching as quickly as possible. Such a highly tight schedule of material development, in turn, further pressurizes LOTE teachers, as the lack of essential resources for compiling textbooks, such as corpora and dictionaries, is, if not more, as serious as the lack of textbooks itself. The pressures associated with this demanding requirement by administrators may also be exacerbated by administrators' negligence, and thus, failure to provide proper and professional guidance for textbook design [21]. As hired teaching staff, as mentioned above, have not been trained to teach, LOTE teachers have not been trained to develop materials either. Besides lack of resources, time, and professional guidance, scant peer collaboration, largely due to the shortage of faculty members, also brings great difficulties for materials development.

#### 3.2. Lack of Resources to Promote Professional Development

Whilst university administrators have tried to provide opportunities for professional training, many LOTE teachers consider them ineffective because some of the training lacks pertinence to LOTE teaching and some overlaps with previously provided training [22,23]. Thus, in general, resources to promote professional development are lacking for LOTE teachers.

In reality, the lack of resources does not seem to justify lowered requirements for research production. Many universities obviously favor English publications in international indexed journals, which are more widely recognized, over research presented in LOTE [18]. For instance, as LOTE teachers doing research in German and Japanese pointed out, although their LOTE-specific journals are highly recognized in their fields, such as *German Learning and Research* and *Japanese Learning and Research*, their publications in these journals are not duly recognized by the university [18]. Some LOTE teachers are willing to try publishing in English journals, but this may mean many more efforts to adjust to a different system of academic publishing. For instance, topics that are considered significant to international journals might be largely different from topics suitable for publication in LOTE journals [24]. All these efforts need to be supported by the university via proper resources for in-service training, which should not be limited only to promoting and maintaining teachers' language proficiency in LOTE [24]. Of course, resources to promote such professional development can also be obtained from LOTE teachers' interaction and collaboration with faculty members specialized in other disciplines or those working in the English department. However, many universities may fail to facilitate the building of this kind of inclusive professional development communities [25].

#### 4. Teachers' Identity Work

LOTE teachers' identity construction can be influenced by their engagement in various types of tasks commissioned by university administrators as the administrators actively respond to governmental needs. In other words, teachers' identities may be influenced by the roles they are institutionally assigned. When such roles conflict with whom they think they should be, tension may arise as teachers struggle between their self-identification and their negotiation with the university as an institutional structure. In this section, we draw on a perspective of identity positioning to outline, respectively, LOTE teachers' identities positioned by the university and their self-positioned identities.

##### 4.1. Identities Positioned by the University

LOTE teachers' identities, as positioned by the university, are primarily constructed as teachers comply with administrative mandates prescribed by university administrators. Like their counterparts in the English department, LOTE teachers in many universities, which obviously prioritize research over teaching, are positioned as researchers who must produce an adequate number of research outcomes. As a result, many LOTE teachers seem to have been forced to prioritize research over teaching for survival and professional promotion [26]. Besides, such positioned identities may also involve publishing in English journals on topics considered internationally important, which receive far more recognition in the evaluation system of the university [27,28]. LOTE teachers have also been positioned by the university as "all-round teachers". One teacher may be asked to teach all types of LOTE courses, varying from language skills to cultural knowledge, regardless of their educational background [21]. Influenced by the predominant governmental discourse about the importance of LOTE in international relationships, the university may also position LOTE teachers as "civil diplomats", promoting the friendly exchange between China and LOTE-speaking countries. In the university, they are also positioned as "managers", running all kinds of administrative errands for their department or college. In summary, the university-positioned identities, whether professionally or administratively related, all derive from the university's institutional power as it imposes mandates or requirements.

##### 4.2. Identities as Self-Positioned

Despite the strong influences from the university as an institutional structure, LOTE teachers' identity construction is also characterized by their agentic self-positioning. Based on their own values and experiences, LOTE teachers position themselves as professional language teachers who cultivate foreign language talents, patriotic cultural ambassadors who



bridge the communication with LOTE-speaking countries, and researchers who contribute to their fields of knowledge.

The identity of being a professional language teacher seems to be the most significant self-positioned identity of LOTE teachers. Driven by this identity, LOTE teachers utilize various methods to promote students' mastery of LOTEs [20]. Efforts to promote students' language proficiency and intercultural competence seem to be a concrete manifestation of the professional language teacher's identity, which is also valued by the university in its response to governmental needs [29]. LOTE teachers, therefore, primarily devote themselves to enhancing students' language proficiency despite the university's emphasis on many other aspects of students' development [29,30]. In other words, this strong identity of professional language teachers may have hindered LOTE teachers' pursuit of students' development with efforts towards a whole-person education.

LOTE teachers also position themselves as highly proficient language users who promote international communication with LOTE-speaking countries, which obviously serves the governmental needs and thus receives recognition from the university [27]. For instance, LOTE teachers have many opportunities to attend official bilateral or multilateral events as coordinators or interpreters. As mentioned earlier, many of these activities are not intimately associated with LOTE teaching and research [29], hence affecting teachers' professional development as university academics.

With regard to their identity as researchers, LOTE teachers not only see themselves as university employees who strive to get promoted with their research outcomes but also assume the responsibility of applying research to their practice in teaching and service [26]. For instance, one Sinhala teacher spent five years collaborating with two of his colleagues, compiling a dictionary containing 800,000-word entries, which he believed was an important research endeavor that benefited the teaching practice. Whilst this research outcome was awarded 2 points for academic promotion, it seemed rather discouraging that an SSCI-indexed publication would be awarded 20 points [29]. As can be seen, although LOTE teachers may have a strong researcher identity who translates research into practice, the policy, in reality, can indeed demotivate their future behaviors as driven by such an identity. As discussed above, teachers' self-positioned identities apparently differ from the university-positioned identities. The tension between the two types of identities, however, does not seem to be a matter of direct conflict. Rather, the tension arises as specific actions driven by self-positioned identities are discouraged and downplayed by the university as an institutional structure.

## 5. Implications and Conclusions

Based on the aforementioned analysis, some implications can be discerned. Policy-makers may need to further address the issues and problems that arise from the design and implementation of LOTE programs during which university administrators play a crucial mediating role. University administrators should be provided with more specific professional guidance or advice as they engage in curriculum design and implementation. Though providing good impetus for administrative actions, a general call for high-quality LOTE programs alone does not seem to enhance the inherent quality of a LOTE program, which is underpinned by a variety of key factors, such as needs analysis and resourcing. University administrators normally would not be able to accurately estimate the prospective needs in society for LOTE personnel, e.g., in four years' time when a cohort of undergraduate students graduates who major in a particular LOTE. This may easily lead to either a shortage or a surplus of LOTE personnel. Thus, acquisition planning needs to be more precisely made by policymakers as to the size of potentially needed LOTE personnel by a particular time point in the future. Policymakers also need to more accurately estimate how much educational resource is needed as compatible with the scale of potentially needed personnel—such resource also needs to be more accurately and thus economically planned.

On the other hand, university administrators, particularly those in universities specialized in foreign language education, should adopt differentiating policies when dealing with teaching and research issues for LOTE teachers. Especially, the teaching of LOTE needs to take into more serious consideration the characteristics of the language(s) in focus, e.g., how difficult the learning of the language(s) could be for students who have mostly learned English as their first foreign language, and how valuable the students' competence in the language(s) might be when placed in the job market in a few years when the students graduate. Nonetheless, the research abilities of LOTE teachers may be more effectively enhanced when research communities are constructed more on a disciplinary basis than on a language basis, i.e., research communities are organized by disciplines, such as linguistics and literature, rather than by languages, such as Polish and Vietnamese.

So far, we have examined the three themes, i.e., the mediating roles of administrators, worrying resourcing, and teachers' identity work. The analysis of these themes has helped unveil how policy specifically affects LOTE teachers' professional development in China. Specifically, LOTE programs seem to play three mediating roles: (1) How education policy is perceived and understood by the program designer or/and coordinator impacts how LOTE teachers who engage in the program are influenced, (2) how educational resources are allocated to teachers teaching in the LOTE program impacts teachers' professional development, (3) how teachers actually position themselves in the LOTE program as opposed to their identities positioned by education policy and the university administration impacts their professional development. In a word, the influence of multilingual education policy on the professional development of LOTE teachers may be mediated by such meso- and micro-level factors as administration, resource, and identity work.

As to promoting LOTE education and LOTE teachers' professional development, policymakers, particularly those at the national or provincial levels, may need to be more fully aware of the complex dynamics involved in how policy is actually implemented by university administrators and the *de facto* effects such implementation can bring about. The lack of such awareness has been documented and discussed in the existing literature [5,6], which unfortunately does not seem to have received due attention. Second, there seems to be a need to broaden the research agenda in the field of language policy and planning that more systematically and seriously addresses the issues of LOTE teacher development. For instance, more research endeavors are needed to further elucidate how a concrete policy exerts concrete effects in a specific context on LOTE teachers' development as well as how and why such effects may resemble or differ across various contexts. To date, such research efforts have still been relatively rare, particularly as compared with efforts that aim to unravel how LOTE teachers actually react to certain policies in various contexts. Third, as is equally important, more research is needed to further investigate LOTE education in schools [31,32], as the future landscape of LOTE education should obviously be shaped by how LOTEs are taught and learned with schools and universities as a coherent system.

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