

Partial Competence and a Language with Partition: the case of Chinese

Compétences partielles et langue en partition : le cas du chinois¹

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[Synopsis]

The teaching of Chinese offers a particularly useful opportunity to reflect on the notion of partial competence both theoretically and operationally, because it is at the crossroad between the value of new usage that Chinese has and the intrinsic nature of Chinese characterised by a unique relationship between the written characters and their phonetic sounds. In this context writing Chinese with the use of computer will eventually emerge, which affects a new way of writing Chinese with a real degree of transparency. Our purpose is to show how the question of partial competence can work across in a profound way the teaching, learning and assessment of the Chinese language.

MOTS CLES : Ecriture non alphabétique, langue à objectifs spécifiques, politique linguistique, Intercompréhension

1. Introduction
2. Communicative competence and partial competence
3. A partitioned language: case of Chinese
4. Implications of partial competence for learning and teaching Chinese
5. Conclusions

1. Introduction

Partial competence is a concept mentioned in the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) but does not seem to have produced as much an impact on language educational practice as the framework itself though there have been some discussions about it. It is not until recent years that there is a revival of interest in the concept through the great efforts and pain that the Council of Europe has put in in wrestling with the daunting logic problem of second or foreign language acquisition and learning while the EU membership continues to expand, and consequently the number of languages involved increases rapidly, if taken into consideration not only national and regional languages, but also community or immigrant languages. So both the political and practical reality have helped lead to this increased level of interest in partial competence as the traditional mother tongue model of modern language learning and teaching do not work in the context of a multilingual and multicultural Europe. This shift of interest also takes place against a fresh reflection on another related key concept of plurilingual and pluralcultural competence, which is said to have been misinterpreted when it was translated from French into English as two related but separated concepts of plurilingual competence and pluralcultural competence (see Coste et al, 2009).

¹ Ouvrard L.(dir.), Les compétences partielles en débat. Paris : Editions des archives contemporaines, 2016

Plurilinguism takes into consideration an individual's experience of language and acknowledges that it would extend from home, to the society, and then to the languages of other people, whether learnt at school or through direct experience in a multilingual context such as Europe. As this takes place, the individual does not keep these languages and cultures in a strictly separate mental compartments, but builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which different languages (including regional dialects) interrelated and interact.

As a community or immigrant language, the Chinese language has enjoyed a wide spread of increased level of interest in Europe in the recent years. For the Chinese language, there is an extra distance as compared with any other European national and regional languages to make it a distinctively different, thus truly second or foreign language in Europe. The special feature of Chinese that it appears to have a partition to European language speakers between its written form and phonetic presentation offers a convincing example that it is only natural that a modern language learner or user would result in an imbalanced language skill (competences) set, no matter in an educational setting or in real life. A good understanding of this feature will help not only shed light on the discussion of what partial competence is about and its impact on modern language learning and teaching on the whole, but also impact on the teaching of Chinese, its assessment and its future development in the context of a multilingual Europe, a policy that EU has been pursuing vigorously through its planned and funded actions and projects such as the on-going European Benchmarking Chinese language (EBCL) project .

2. Communicative competence and partial competence

It is clear that the underlining political purposes in the reation of the CEFR has to a large extent determined that it was meant to be a framework for European languages, the national and regional languages of the member states of the European Union and the Council of Europe (Zhang and Li, 2004). This political intention has also determined that the CEFR serves as a means to facilitate the political unity, social cohesion and integration of the European Union, thus it aims at helping improve and raise the communicative competences of the citizens of the member states through many of EU's language programmes by providing a common framework of reference for languages that describes the standards of communication competence² across all the languages concerned.

The rapid increase in both the number and scope of languages concerned were well captured by Trim back in 1997 who wrote that in the last few years. "members of the Council for Cultural Co-operation has almost doubled, and the number of national and regional languages concerned has increased proportionately, or even far more steeply if account is taken of the very large number of mother tongues brought in by immigrant populations from other continents and used on a daily basis by the communities that they have created, mainly in Europe's major urban centres.(Trim,

² As the EFR says in its opening paragraph, "The Common European Framework provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to active effectively." (Council of Europe, 2001)

1997:vii). The inclusion of many non European immigrants' language has greatly added linguistic complexity to what would appear to be a simple language matter in the original framework in terms of the communicative competences involved.

In the CEFR, three types of competences are identified for effective communication involving the use of languages - general competence, communicative language competence, and pragmatic competence. Each of these three competences further consists of a number of sub-competences. Thus the general competence is made of declarative knowledge (*savoir*) (knowledge of the world; socio-cultural knowledge; intercultural awareness), skills and know-how (*sovoir-faire*), (practical skills and know-how; intercultural skills and know-how), existential competence (*savoir-etre*), and ability to learn (language and communication awareness; general phonetic awareness and skills; study skills; heuristic skills); communicative language competence consists of linguistic competences (lexical; grammatical; semantic; phonological; orthographic and orthoepic), and sociolinguistic competences (linguistic markers of social relations; politeness conventions; expressions of folk wisdom; register differences; dialect and accent); and finally pragmatic competence refers to a range of competences such as discourse competence, functional competence (both micro and macro) in the four domains, interaction schemata, and fluency and propositional precision matter. (CEFR, 2001:11-34).

The above division and definition are comprehensive and conceptually useful, but they seem to be based upon the case of mother tongue or through formal learning rather than that of foreign languages or through informal learning. In fact, much of traditional foreign language learning and teaching have been based upon this kind of mother tongue approach, which aims to be full and comprehensive, thus contributing to a large extent the common frustration in foreign language learning, especially for adult language learners and through informal learning as such are hardly attainable objectives. It is not uncommon that very often even a native speaker may not be able to deal with all situations due to knowledge gap or lack of interest, for instance some sports or a hobby. Therefore, full language competence is very much an ideal situation and is achievable only in a first language or a bilingual environment through a formal educational system with its minimum target literacy level, often endorsed by the completion of **compulsory education**, or an authoritative language proficiency test; partial competence is an absolute and constant state for foreign language learners and users, particularly adults who often have some specific needs to function in a foreign language environment.

It is precisely with such case and needs of adult language learners and users that the CEFR proposes the concept of partial competence for the situation "when only a more *restricted knowledge* of a language is required" or "when a *limited amount of time* is available" (??), which for some reason hasn't attracted much attention until recently. If examined closely, it is clear that the word "partial" has two meanings: a) in part; not entirely, and b) preferential or biased.

The first meaning of partial competence is obviously as stated above, as it is hardly possible to attain a full competence in a foreign or second language as adults. The second meaning indicates clearly the motivation and use of a foreign language by adults as they often chose to learn certain skills over others (e.g. reading over writing) or in a certain domains (e.g. personal and professional) as these are sufficient to meet the needs and requirements, which often may change from time to

time. In Europe where multiculturalism and multilingualism are seen to be fundamental for achieving social cohesion and integration, and its citizen may need to learn and function in a number of languages, the issue of partial competence is even more acute and pressing. It is for this that Trim also talked in the same preface about the need to have a language policy that can encourage “every learner to achieve an integrating communication competence spanning a large number of languages and cultures encompassing not only general competences at different levels, but also balanced competences fostering receptive skills” (1997:vii)

It is not an exaggeration to say that all foreign or second language learning and teaching in Europe would subsequently result in partial competence no matter what they state that they aim to achieve. This is because in second or foreign language environment, the learning and teaching are actually confined to the use of the language for certain activities in certain domain/s. This is particularly true of adult language learners and how they differ from young native learners of their mother tongue in which the purpose of learning is more general than specific. Today, European multilingualism is very much a cause as well as a result of a number of factors. Firstly, the democratic progress in Europe is reflected in the transition from previous prescriptive linguistic competence to a descriptive competence; secondly, migrants’ languages become more diverse and often somewhat different from those in the country or community where they are originated; thirdly, language use is more about real communication; and fourthly, the number of foreign language users to non native speakers has increased phenomenally, communicating more inter-culturally than cross culturally. However competence is defined or described, the acquisition and manifestation of that competence by only partial, depending on conditions, experiences and opportunities available. So this is why “giving formal recognition to such abilities will help to promote plurilingualism through the learning of a wider variety of European languages.”

If the above is not enough to illustrate the point on partial competence, the case of Chinese helps to prove the point as there seems to be a “partitoin” between its phonetic and graphic constructs, which is very different from any European languages. This linguistic feature has determined to a large extent that only partial competence is attainable for learners in Europe no matter if it is through formal learning or informal learning.

3. A partitioned language: case of Chinese

« Voilà donc une langue dont on sait d'emblée qu'on ne l'apprendra pas totalement, ce qui contribue à considérablement dédramatiser l'enseignement du chinois. »³
François Monnanteuil

L’enseignement-apprentissage des langues étrangères entre dans une ère nouvelle et s’éloigne enfin de deux ornières : d’une part, celle qui faisait des langues

³ François Monnanteuil, doyen de l’inspection générale des langues vivantes en France, Séminaire national *Enseigner le chinois*, 2004, CRDP de Versailles, 2006

une simple somme de connaissances à diffuser ou à recevoir (et non de compétences à développer), et d'autre part celle où l'objectif implicite consistait à embrasser l'ensemble d'une langue donnée avec en creux le fantasme de la perfection dans la traduction, dans la correction phonologique et grammaticale, dans la quantité lexicale (sans prendre en compte d'abord l'acceptabilité). En corollaire, se diffusait la représentation d'une évaluation négative et parcellisante de la performance des apprenants. La notion de compétences partielles permet de prendre de la distance avec de tels écueils.

La didactique du chinois offre à la notion de compétences partielles un terrain de réflexion théorique et opératoire particulièrement fertile, pour des raisons qui tiennent au croisement entre la valeur d'usage nouvelle que prend désormais le chinois et le dispositif intrinsèque de la langue chinoise qui se caractérise par un lien singulier entre graphie et phonie. A ce contexte s'ajoute l'irruption de l'éventuelle production écrite par ordinateur qui affecte de façon inédite l'écriture chinoise d'un degré réel de transparence. De ce fait, la question des compétences partielles traverse désormais de façon profonde l'enseignement, l'apprentissage et l'évaluation du chinois.

L'application de la notion de compétence partielle au chinois est en effet particulièrement productive, en ce qu'elle se décline à différents niveaux :

- fixer un objectif avant tout en fonction de l'âge, du contexte d'apprentissage ou des besoins de l'apprenant ; ainsi, la charge cognitive a des spécificités telles en chinois que des options de parcellisation des compétences écrites et graphiques peuvent être envisagées. Dans le cadre de l'enseignement du chinois en école primaire par exemple, il y a lieu de procéder à une dissociation assez marquée entre la progression langagière orale et les acquisitions sinographiques, en n'enseignant pas à l'écrit ce que les élèves apprennent à l'oral (la charge cognitive consistant à apprendre à écrire 谢谢 *xièxiè*, « merci », est excessive pour un écolier, le caractère considéré étant composé de 3 composants graphiques, alors que celui-ci s'engagerait efficacement dans l'apprentissage proprement graphique de familles sinographiques telles que la suite de caractères 木, 林, 森, 本, 末, 休 (déclinaison graphique à partir du caractère 木 « arbre », qui joue le rôle de matrice graphique) ;
- privilégier ou détacher certaines compétences en fonction des objectifs fixés : la dissociation inscrite initialement dans la configuration interne du chinois, langue couvrant trois niveaux –l'oral, l'écrit et le graphique-, peut apparaître parmi les objectifs de formation, en fonction des besoins particuliers des apprenants : ceux permettant par exemple de répondre à la communication orale la plus élémentaire, sans nécessité de recourir à l'écriture ou à la lecture, comme dans le cas d'un simple accompagnement de groupes touristiques, par exemple, ou bien ceux permettant d'accéder uniquement à la compréhension écrite du chinois pour un apprenant japonisant, ayant déjà acquis deux mille sinogrammes ;
- prendre acte du clivage inhérent au chinois et jouer sur le clivage entre face orale et face graphique, ou encore entre écriture en reconnaissance et écriture en production ;

- relevons enfin que la prise en compte des besoins d'un utilisateur d'une langue seconde limite de fait le champ de communication qui est le sien (par exemple, un locuteur européen de chinois langue seconde privilégiera des champs lexicaux, toponymes ou autres, qui lui sont propres). Dans tous les cas, la notion de compétence partielle tire sa légitimité de la dimension fonctionnelle de la compétence de communication mobilisée.

Savoir peu ou incomplètement, c'est aussi savoir quelque chose... L'affirmation de l'existence de compétences partielles permet de penser enfin la progression pédagogique et la pédagogie par objectifs. Il s'agira de privilégier ou détacher certaines compétences, certains registres langagiers, certains domaines lexicaux en fonction des objectifs fixés, et dans le domaine des certifications de niveau de langue d'entrer dans une approche modulaire des compétences validées. « *Le peu que l'on sait d'une langue a déjà de la valeur ; il ne s'agit pas d'un objectif au rabais, mais d'une approche permettant de souligner les deux aspects essentiels de l'apprentissage des langues : pouvoir établir la communication avec l'autre et parvenir à un niveau minimal pour être motivé à se former tout au long de la vie.* »⁴

L'application d'une telle notion au chinois est à la fois féconde et singulière. Sont en jeu dans cette langue et cette écriture la reconnaissance et la prise en compte effective d'une face langagière et d'une face graphique du chinois : le chinois est une langue où les morphèmes sont apparents et où le sinogramme est l'unité minimale, mais le morphème peut être libre ou lié (le caractère 國 *guó* signifie « pays », mais n'en a pas l'autonomie langagière). Un autre croisement entre le chinois et la notion de compétence partielle s'inscrit dans le contexte de l'irruption de la révolution numérique : les activités de production et de réception sinographiques sont traversées par un clivage majeur, qui vient bouleverser la donne en matière d'enseignement-apprentissage du chinois. Il y a en chinois rupture entre la production écrite manuscrite et production écrite par ordinateur, par le fait que dans le premier cas l'activité est intégralement active comme il se doit pour toute activité de rédaction, alors que dans le second cas, l'usage du clavier introduit une véritable subversion : l'activité de production écrite mobilise par le truchement de la saisie *pinyin*⁵ l'aptitude passive de reconnaissance. Une « activité active-passive » est ainsi née...

En didactique du chinois, l'approche dite de « l'entrée par le caractère » (字本位 *zìběnwèi*) s'est construite à contre-courant de l'approche de « l'entrée par le mot » (词本位 *cíběnwèi*), hégémonique en Chine depuis l'émergence du chinois langue seconde au milieu du 20^e siècle. Au contraire de cette dernière, qui refuse toute singularisation par rapport aux langues occidentales et ne reconnaît que la seule unité du mot, l'approche de « l'entrée par le caractère » s'oriente généralement vers une option prenant en compte distinctement deux unités linguistiques en chinois : le caractère (et son ou ses unités de sens), unité minimale de l'écrit, et le mot, unité minimale de l'oral. De là, des seuils sinographiques ont été conçus, à l'instar, mais dans un contexte linguistique sensiblement différent, des niveaux seuil apparus au milieu des années soixante-dix pour l'anglais et le français⁶. En didactique du chinois

⁴ Rapport d'information n° 63 (2003-2004) de M. Jacques Legendre, Sénat, le 12 novembre 2003.

⁵ Le système de transcription de l'écriture chinoise ayant recours à l'alphabet latin, en vigueur en Chine depuis la fin

⁶ *Un niveau-seuil. Systèmes d'apprentissage des langues vivantes par les adultes*, Strasbourg, Conseil de la coopération culturelle du Conseil de l'Europe, 1976.

langue seconde, ces seuils sinographiques ont été développés dès 1984-1985 avec une liste dite SMIC de 400 sinogrammes⁷ ; ont suivi une nouvelle liste de 400 sinogrammes dans la *Méthode d'initiation à la langue et à l'écriture chinoises*⁸, un seuil de 900 sinogrammes en 1991⁹, puis un ensemble de seuils publiés par le ministère de l'éducation nationale pour chacun des niveaux de langue LV1 (805 sinogrammes), LV2 (505 sinogrammes) et LV3 (405 sinogrammes), ainsi que Section internationale de chinois (1555 sinogrammes)¹⁰. Les caractères des seuils sont sélectionnés sur des critères de fréquence et de capacité combinatoire. Ils sont autant d'échelles permettant de générer par composition des mots.

Le statut de ces seuils sinographiques, véritables prérequis permettant la réalisation des activités langagières écrites en réception (lecture), en production (rédaction) et en interaction (interaction écrite), est en quelque sorte celui de « marqueur » des compétences partielles du chinois écrit. C'est à ce titre que l'approche des seuils sinographiques a été retenue au sein du projet européen EBCL comme solution du « conflit » interne au chinois entre nécessité de descripteurs de niveaux de langues définis par rapport aux besoins de l'utilisateur et prérequis sinographiques permettant de réaliser des performances langagières écrites en chinois.

La reconnaissance de la possible et nécessaire dissociation sous diverses formes et à différents niveaux en chinois sont au cœur d'un débat fondateur de la didactique du chinois. Cette dissociation potentiellement à l'œuvre dans la transmission et l'apprentissage du chinois permet une typologie des options didactiques, que la notion de compétence partielle permet utilement d'éclairer. Cette typologie peut se délimiter selon quatre options principales :

- la première est l'option purement lexicale, sans reconnaissance d'une possible dissociation mot-caractère. Elle oriente naturellement vers une approche dite « dispersée » au regard de l'acquisition des caractères, ceux-ci étant au service de la communication ;
- la deuxième tente de concilier progression graphique raisonnée et dimension communicative de la langue, en mettant en place un « filtre » quant à l'apparition des caractères. Ainsi, des mots tels que « Coca Cola » (可口可
乐 *kěkǒukělè*) ou « thé vert » (绿茶 *lǜchá*) apparaîtront également sous leur face sinographique parce que composés de caractères de haute fréquence, alors que le mot « café » (*kāfēi*) n'apparaît pas sous sa forme sinographique, afin d'éviter l'effet de dispersion : approche partielle...
- une troisième approche consiste à faire le choix d'une rupture avec la sinographie, en abordant de fait que la face orale du chinois, les mots étant le cas échéant notés uniquement en transcription pinyin ;
- une quatrième approche dissocie radicalement les deux faces de cette langue en état de partition : le monde de l'oral et le monde graphique. Le chinois de communication n'est abordé que par le biais de la transcription phonétique pinyin, alors que sont programmés les caractères fondamentaux et leurs dérivés graphiques, de façon distincte : ainsi, les mots *kěkǒukělè* ou *kāfēi* d'une part, et les « matrices graphiques » 木 « arbre, 林 « petite forêt », 森 « grande forêt », ou encore 人 « homme », 从 « suivre » ou 众 « foule ».

⁷ Seuil Minimum Indispensable de Caractères, Joël Bellassen & Françoise Audry, INRP, Paris

⁸ Joël Bellassen, éd. La Compagnie, Paris, 1989

⁹ Joël Bellassen, *Perfectionnement à la langue et à l'écriture chinoises*, éd. La Compagnie, Paris, 1989

¹⁰ Cf. site Eduscol, www.eduscol.education.fr

La notion de compétence partielle se retrouve ainsi à occuper une place centrale, à la fois en tant qu'outil conceptuel mais aussi opératoire, dans la didactique du chinois.

4. Implications of partial competence for learning and teaching Chinese

The definition of partial competence has a number of implications for the learning and teaching of Chinese in multilingual Europe.

Only partial competence is a constant and attainable state when learning languages such as Chinese in Europe. In fact, it is not exaggerating to assume that all foreign language learning, almost by default, can only achieve partial competences in the absolute sense of the concept, given that for language learners, especially adults there is only limited amount of time and restricted language learning and application environment. **Full competence** is usually possible only in the first language environment (including bilingualism) in a formal educational system, often endorsed through completion of **compulsory education**, or an authoritative language proficiency test. Even in first language, there is still much talked about functional literacy problem in most developed states like the UK. According to a recent survey by Literacy Trust, UK, there is about 15% of the adult population who have completed compulsory education but have only reached the level of 11 year old in terms of their literay level. Therefore, it is not realistic to set full competence as an attainable objective in learning and teaching Chinese in European context.

It is a matter of choice in learning and teaching Chinese as a foreign language what partial competences is to achieve, depending on the purpose of learning and teaching when it comes to the *degree of general competence (coverage)*; *levels of communicative competence (linguistic)* and *extent of pragmatic competence (functional)*, but involving more intercultural communication for the European context and crosscultural communication when using it with native speakers. For the first purpose, partial competence means that at an initial level learners of Chinese may not necessarily need to learn expressions such as "Ni chi le ma? (have you eaten?)" as a way of greeting (e.g. function), which is more adequate for the second purpose of learning and teaching, for Mandarin home context. Initial foreign language learning and teaching need to reflect again on multilingualism and the issue of intercultural communication, especially when two non native speakers use a foreign language, say, Chinese by a French and German. Learning and teaching Chinese in Europe is not like 对外汉语教学, which is in fact teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages in China. Partial competence is definitely applicable but it is more cross culturally based as 吃了吗 (see above) as a greeting or 你挣多少钱 (How much do you earn?) all form part of the competences required to function effectively in the language home environment.

Partial competence also means that learning Chinese in Europe is usually for some specific purpose as well as for general communication, which forms the basis of all useful communications. Chinese for specific purposes, mostly for instrumental reasons, are related to the motivation of learning and teaching. In many ways, this is what the European Benchmarking Chinese Language project (EBCL) was created for, to provide a framework of competence descriptors for Chinese based upon the

Common European Framework of Reference as a non European language Chinese to be used as a foreign language primarily in the context of multilingual Europe, a very real partial competence, both for general and specific communication purposes.

Most modern foreign language teaching appear to still focus on teaching it as the first language aiming at achieving full competences. In the context of a multilingual Europe, Chinese language teaching programmes should aim to develop linguistic and socio-linguistic competences that are required to function in a designed range of activities at their targeted level/s in certain domain/s, and assessed accordingly in these programmes. The stress on the part of the user, particular the learners mean that a negotiated curriculum would better motivate (adult) learners as they see the relevance and worth for their efforts and investment. Therefore, general language competence should not set as its aim to cover a full range, but a "stated/required" range as necessary to function in a particular environment and situation.

With regard to Chinese, the new Chinese language proficiency test (HSK) recently promoted by Hanban (the Council for Chinese Language International) seems to have been created with partial competence in learning and teaching Chinese as a foreign language in mind, though it is problematic to term itself as a proficiency test. Unlike the previous HSK which was designed as a true proficiency test, the new one has set as its target at initial levels a very limited range of socio-cultural activities and linguistic elements. So it is not really a proficiency test but a designed promotional tool to encourage the learning and teaching of Chinese. This approach, however, can be of use to the learning and teaching of Chinese in Europe based upon the results of the EBCL project. In other words, this language proficiency must be backed up by the ability to adapt to the working and living environments characterised by different cultures.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the question of partial competence propels us to reflect yet again, but more attentively this time, on the theory and practice of our modern language learning and teaching in the context of a multilingual and multicultural Europe. Realistically, partial competence is an absolute, practical and attainable objective for majority of the language learners or population while native full competence remains to be an ideal but hardly attainable goal that has baffled both learners and teachers of modern foreign languages for decades.

This is particularly true for such languages as Chinese which is very distant culturally and linguistically from European languages. Therefore, effective and efficient learning and teaching of Chinese need take into consideration both the use and features of the language in the European context today.

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