New models, old patterns? The implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for Chinese

Abstract

The last few years have seen a change in the paradigm of language teaching and learning with the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In Spain, the CEFR has been implemented for Chinese in the same standardised way as for other languages. This over-strict implementation has not taken into account the particularities of Chinese. Consequently, Chinese has often been distorted in academic curricula to adapt it to this new approach. We question the application of European models to Chinese and the assumption that those models are universally valid, requiring no adjustments. We believe that this assumption reproduces old ways of approaching the Other, based on ethnocentrism, and perpetuates old myths and an orientalist discourse about the Chinese language, which have been criticised for decades by some linguists and should be a thing of the past. We critically analyse current adaptations of the CEFR to Chinese in Spain and suggest alternatives to the prevailing trends in scholarship on Chinese linguistics. We can thus establish models that do not reproduce old-fashioned patterns and attitudes and that enable us to describe Chinese in its own terms.

Keywords

Chinese as a foreign language; language curriculum; Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR); Chinese linguistics; linguistic ethnocentrism; Chinese pedagogy

1 Introduction

The last few years have seen a change in the paradigm of language teaching and learning with the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). Although it was initially intended to be implemented only for European languages, and was therefore developed in a certain political and educational context, the new model has not been confined merely to European languages, but has also been applied to all the non-European languages studied in Europe, including Chinese.

The implementation of the CEFR has sought to standardise language teaching without always taking into account the particularities of each language. This does not seem to have caused problems for European languages, but it has resulted in different implementation proposals for non-European languages (such as Chinese), for which the model is not adapted.

We have chosen Spain as a case study because in the Eurobarometer survey on languages published by the European Commission in 2012, 24% of respondents in Spain said they viewed Chinese as a useful language for their children to learn. This figure is higher than the European average (14%), and second only to English among respondents in Spain. As the perceived importance of Chinese has risen, the number of university degrees that include Chinese in the syllabus has risen drastically, as has the number of people studying it. This new scenario shaped by current changes therefore provides us with the perfect opportunity to reflect on past practices and establish models that do not reproduce old-fashioned patterns and

attitudes. Moreover, we can provide an interesting, extensive overview of the subject in Spain because proposals to apply the CEFR to Chinese are available for various levels of education in the country. Finally, another reason we chose Spain for our case study is because we had observed that in this country the CEFR had been applied to Chinese in the same standardised way as it had for other languages, sometimes – in our opinion – in too strict a manner. Consequently, not only have the particularities of Chinese been ignored but also the Chinese language has often been distorted in academic syllabuses to adapt it to this new approach.

Adapting an alien model to Chinese can lead to practices that contribute to perpetuating an erroneous, misinformed and to a certain extent orientalist discourse about the language. This discourse unquestioningly reproduces an attitude some experts have been denouncing for decades (see DeFrancis, 1984; Hannas, 1997; Unger, 2004; Casas-Tost & Rovira-Esteva, 2009). In this context of change within the field of language teaching and specifically of the teaching of Chinese in Spain, we question once again the applicability of European models to Chinese and the assumption that the models are universally valid, requiring no adjustments. This assumption reproduces old ways of approaching the Other, reflecting an ethnocentrism and, in this specific case, reproducing an artificial view of similarity among languages. The assumption is made as a result of disinformation and educational administrators' desire to impose a single, homogeneous model on all languages, without taking into account any differences among those languages. Consequently, old myths and mistakes about Chinese are perpetuated.

The main objective of this article is to contribute to the debate about how the CEFR should be implemented for Chinese, taking Spain as a case study. We will begin by briefly reflecting on the ideological implications behind apparently neutral academic approaches. We will then provide some general information about the educational context that has shaped language teaching in Europe over the last decade. Next, we will present the Spanish proposals

for adapting the CEFR to Chinese, while also discussing Chinese proposals. Finally, we will offer a qualitative analysis of the published curricula, and then in the conclusions we will offer some suggestions on how to improve them.

2 Old myths, old models

The implementation of the CEFR has reproduced old myths and models for Chinese in two specific ways. First, a European model is once again being applied as if it were universally valid. Since this linguistic model is not adapted to the linguistic diversity of the world but revolves around a linguistic Eurocentrism, it leads to a deformed vision of Chinese and other non-European languages. This Eurocentrism has already been denounced by Gil (2000, p. 173) as a major limitation of Western linguistic theory:

> [C]ontemporary theories and frameworks do not provide the appropriate tools for a satisfactory description of such 'exotic' languages. In general, available theories are of European origin, reflecting the peculiar properties of the particular European languages familiar to their progenitors. Often, their application to languages spoken in other parts of the world is an exercise in Eurocentricity, involving the unwarranted imposition of categories and structures that are simply irrelevant.

Shi-xu (2006, p. 385) uses similar terminology but writes about the general academic culture. He reflects that 'when solely Western frameworks, with their inherent values and interests, are applied to the Chinese context, it is not hard to imagine the sort of conclusion that the research can lead to'.

We should not be surprised to find that the application of inadequate, alien models to Chinese has given rise to paradoxes. For example, some descriptive grammars of Chinese exclude grammatical categories because they are absent from (or rare in) European languages. Thus, specific proposals for Chinese resulting from the implementation of the CEFR without the necessary adjustments completely distort certain categories or linguistic phenomena.

Second, the old myths and models are also being reproduced by the official CEFR documentation, which explicitly reflects the age-old ideographic myth, the idea that Chinese characters represent concepts without any reference to their pronunciation. While it is true that Chinese writing has a pictographic origin and the semantic component is important in the formation of characters, the phonetic component is also relevant, and Chinese writing transmits meanings through sounds, despite the imperfections of the system. A document noting the characteristics and importance of the CEFR should not, therefore, contain statements such as the following:

> The writing systems of all European languages are based on the alphabetic principle, though those of some other languages follow an ideographic (logographic) principle (e.g. Chinese). (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 117)

We should not forget the political motivations behind the CEFR, which include respect for the identity of minorities and European cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as the development of tolerant and democratic citizenship. We should expect these same values to be applied to our academic and professional activity. Upholding these values requires a more open-minded and respectful attitude towards different academic traditions that have their own ways of analysing and describing their own languages. These differences have been ignored

by some of the proposals for the implementation of the CEFR in Spain, which have described the Chinese language according to Western models rather than Chinese ones.

3 A new language-teaching framework

3.1 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Based on materials published over the previous 30 years, in the mid-1990s the Council of Europe began the difficult task of trying to unify all the different levels associated with language learning in a single framework. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* was published in its current format in 2001, to coincide with the European Year of Languages. We believe it is important to look at the spirit of the document and its main guidelines, since it defined general approaches to modern-language teaching and learning in Europe and will probably be used as a reference document for many decades.

The CEFR's good intentions include providing a common basis for the development of language programmes, general curricula, exams, and textbooks across the whole of Europe. By offering general guidelines for the specific description of its objectives, contents and methodology, the CEFR encourages transparent courses, programmes and degrees, as well as international cooperation in the field of modern languages.

In the short term, applying the CEFR to Chinese presents several benefits: a) it raises Chinese to the same level as the other languages studied across Europe; b) it establishes comparable levels between centres and countries (including in China and Taiwan); c) it makes students and professionals more mobile; and d) thanks to the adoption of the communicative approach, it leads to innovations in the traditional methodology of teaching Chinese.

The official CEFR document explicitly states that creating an exhaustive, transparent

and coherent framework for language learning and teaching should in no case imply the imposition of a unitary, standardised system. On the contrary, the CEFR claims to be: a) *multi-purpose* (usable for the full variety of purposes involved in the planning and provision of facilities for language learning); b) *flexible* (adaptable for use in different circumstances); c) *open* (capable of further extension and refinement); d) *dynamic* (in continuous evolution in response to experiences gained in its use); e) *user-friendly* (presented in a form readily understandable and usable by those to whom it is addressed); and f) *non-dogmatic* (not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any of a number of competing linguistic or educational theories or practices) (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 7−8).

As its name indicates, it is a framework of reference, so it is more of a descriptive than a prescriptive nature. In principle, the CEFR does not seek strict uniformity, but rather to offer general guidelines. However, as we shall see later, the first attempts to implement it in Spain for Chinese often contradict these guidelines. More specifically, we have identified two main problems in applying the CEFR to Chinese. First, implementing a European model as if it were universally valid and required no adjustments has been unsuccessful. Second, criticism of the rigid implementation of the model to Chinese has been silenced or marginalised because political interests have prevailed over academic interests.

3.2 The Bologna Process and European university convergence

The Bologna Declaration in 1999 represented the starting point for the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA's general objectives include comparing Europe's higher education systems and making them compatible, promoting European citizens' competiveness in the labour market, and increasing teacher and student mobility in the European Union. Achieving these objectives has required major changes to university studies,

a review of some degree programmes and, in particular, the adoption of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which is why most European universities were required to join the process.

In this context of reform, some Spanish universities have pledged to include East Asian Studies among their degrees, whether as an independent academic degree (for example at the Autonomous University of Barcelona [UAB]), a specialised component of a broader degree (for example at the Autonomous University of Madrid and the University of Granada), or in postgraduate studies (for example at the University of Salamanca, Pompeu Fabra University and the Open University of Catalonia).

The new EHEA also provided an opportunity to redefine teaching activity, methodologies, and the role of teachers and students in the learning processes, which together amounted to a change in the university culture and a more dynamic approach to language teaching. The EHEA also promotes student autonomy, which is in keeping with the CEFR philosophy for languages.

4 Applying the CEFR to Chinese

In this section on the application of the CEFR to Chinese we will consider proposals made in Spain and in the Chinese-speaking world (China and Taiwan). We have not attempted an exhaustive review of all centres where Chinese is taught because a transition is currently taking place and the first proposals are being reviewed as they are implemented. For Spain we have chosen three specific examples that we believe are representative of the current situation. For China and Taiwan we have looked at all the published proposals available to us.

4.1 The CEFR in Spain

4.1.1 Official Schools of Languages

The Official School of Languages[1] curriculum has been adopting a communicative approach for many years, an approach that is in keeping with the spirit of the CEFR. However, the CEFR's publication had an impact on basic aspects of the new curricula as set out in the regulations in Royal Decree no. 1629/2006 (BOE, 2007) and affected the structure of levels and certificates, which now match those established by the EU institutions. The curricula and certificates were adapted to the CEFR guidelines, and by 2009 the new study plan was used for all courses.

However, since each regional government is responsible for defining and setting the content and structure of the curricula in its schools, the model has been applied in a variety of different ways. For example, while in Madrid it takes seven years to reach an advanced level of Chinese (equivalent to the CEFR's level B2), in Catalonia and the Valencia region it takes only six.

In these schools, students studying different languages are all supposed to acquire the same level of competence in five academic years, except for those studying a language with a non-alphabetic writing system, such as Chinese, who must take one or two extra years, depending on the region. Although this difference is necessary and underlines the disparity among languages, the additional time does not ensure that the same level of competence is acquired for all skills in languages that are very different from Spanish, such as Chinese. One study (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982, as cited in Fisac, 2007, p. 37−8) found that the average student whose mother tongue is Spanish or English needs to invest twice as many hours studying Chinese to reach the same level they would reach studying a language that is more similar to their mother tongue.

The main reason for the difference in the number of hours is that Chinese has a morpho-syllabic writing system, with no direct correspondence between sound and script. Ramírez (2004, p. 83) estimates that the effort required to become 'literate' in Chinese is more or less the same as that required to learn a Latin alphabet 450 times bigger than the actual one. So, the parallel development of the four traditional skills (writing, reading, listening and speaking) happens more slowly with Chinese. Rohsenow (1996) has shown that when, for the purposes of experimentation, Chinese children learning to write were initially encouraged to write in a combination of pinyin[2] and characters, they were able to communicate faster and with less effort. Therefore, we believe that specific features of the Chinese writing system should be taken into account when describing the levels and progression of Chinese-language learning.

4.1.2 The UAB Faculty of Translation and Interpreting

We have chosen to study the application of the CEFR to Chinese at the UAB Faculty of Translation and Interpreting for two main reasons: because the UAB was one of the first universities in Spain to include Chinese in its degree programmes, and because the UAB is the only university in Spain that offers two different degrees in which Chinese is studied (Translation and Interpreting, and East Asian Studies), allowing us to observe their similarities and differences. Unlike at the Official Schools of Languages, the UAB has not produced a detailed syllabus for each level. Instead, the UAB merely establishes equivalences between its language courses and the CEFR levels.

The Translation and Interpreting degree focuses more on certain skills than on others, with the aim of students reaching level B2 in reading, B1 in writing and A2 in speaking and listening. The East Asian Studies degree, on the other hand, aims for students to reach the

same level in all the language skills: B1 or B2, depending on the languages taken.

Table 1 shows the target levels of each institution, together with the time needed to reach that level. The Official Schools of Languages try to maintain a balance among the four skills, thus requiring more hours than UAB degrees, where the same balance is not expected.

[Table 1 near here]

4.2 The CEFR's influence in China

Although the main focus of this paper is to analyse the implementation of the CEFR for Chinese in Spain, in this section we will look at how it has been received in China and Taiwan. Specifically we will analyse what impact it has had on the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language and the teaching of other foreign languages in those countries, including in official examinations that certify a specific language level. We believe it is important to take into account opinions in China and Taiwan and observe how the CEFR has been implemented there, both for ideological and pragmatic reasons. Let us look at some of the main initiatives.

Ouzhou Gongtong Yuyan Cankao Jiagou (歐洲共通語言參考架構) (Council of Europe, 2007) is a straight translation of the CEFR document into Chinese (traditional orthography). The translation seems to have been a private initiative with profit-driven objectives aimed at developing material for learning English.

Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages (国际汉语能力标准) (Hanban, 2007) is a project that started in 2006, with contributions from more than 80 Chinese and foreign universities. This proposal describes competences as students' ability to do 'certain things' and is similar in approach to the CEFR. According to its authors, such an approach not only faithfully reflects the real use of language but also takes into account a

major characteristic of Chinese: the marked difference between spoken and written language. To establish these scales they referred to the European CEFR and the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB). The authors stress that the scales offer a description of one's command of Chinese as a foreign language, not of the language itself. This document aims to serve as a common framework of reference for the teaching, learning and assessment of Chinese, but it does not provide or give details about the linguistic knowledge (e.g. vocabulary and grammar) required for each level.

The *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education* (国际汉语教学通用课程大纲) (Hanban, 2008) is, to our knowledge, the first concrete proposal. It is based on *Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages* (国际汉语能力标准) and like that publication it was produced by Hanban (Office of Chinese Language Council International) and the Confucius Institute, the official institutions for promoting the Chinese language and culture abroad. Although it is not an adaptation of the CEFR model, the introduction does refer to the CEFR as an international model that was consulted. This initiative is relatively innovative in the context of Chinese language teaching and is based to some extent on an intercultural approach, because it preserves particularities of its own tradition but also includes pedagogic aspects derived from current European theories. This proposal is based on the fact that language competences are sustained by four interrelated pillars: linguistic knowledge (including phonology, characters and words, grammar and functions, and topics and discourses); the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing); types of strategies (emotional, learning, communicative, resource and interdisciplinary); and cultural awareness (cultural knowledge, cultural comprehension, intercultural awareness and global awareness). To reach the proposal's fifth and highest level, which it considers equivalent to the CEFR's B1 level (i.e. "Threshold – independent user"), students are required to learn only 800 characters and 1500 words. We believe that the

number of words that students are expected to master at this level is clearly insufficient for it to be comparable with the CEFR's B1 level.

Ouzhou Yuyan Gongtong Cankao Kuangjia: Xuexi, Jiaoxue, Pinggu (欧洲语言共同参考框架：学习，教学，评估) (Council of Europe, 2008) is a complete translation of the CEFR into Chinese (simplified orthography). Like the aforementioned translations, and unlike translations into other languages, this translation too is not adapted to the unique features of Chinese either. In the foreword to the Chinese version, the editors explain that the work brings together European theories and practices and say that they hope the translation will enable colleagues to benefit from the European experience and create their own standards for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

In addition to its influence on teaching and learning Chinese, the CEFR has also had an impact on assessment standards in China, especially on the HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test). The institution in charge of this exam has been reformulating it for a long time to bring it in line with international standards for language learning, such as the CEFR. These changes have involved moving towards a more communicative approach, providing oral exams at all levels,[3] including the phonetic annotation of characters in exams (i.e. Chinese appears simultaneously in morpho-syllabic and alphabetic script), and, in general, lowering the levels of language proficiency.[4]

Although Hanban establishes equivalences between the levels of the new HSK and the CEFR levels, the descriptions of each of the five levels of the *Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages* (国际汉语能力标准) (Hanban, 2007) show that they cannot be considered equivalent to the six CEFR levels. For example, if we look at the number of characters and words necessary to achieve a certain level, then HSK level 3 (which requires knowing 600 words) is equivalent to level B1 of the CEFR and level 3 of *Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages* (which implies knowing 900

words). However, even though the CEFR does not specify the number of words one must know to reach each level, various studies in EU countries, including one by the Association of Chinese Teachers in German Speaking Countries that supports this opinion (Fachverband Chinesisch e.V., 2010), have found that to achieve level B1 in Chinese one needs to know far more than 900 words. They argue that the equivalences established by the Chinese between the new HSK and the CEFR are unrealistic, and suggest that HSK 3 is closest to CEFR level A1 and that the highest level of the new HSK (6) is equivalent to CEFR level B2.

Another initiative for comparing Chinese language levels with the CEFR comes from Taiwan and was developed by the Steering Committee for the Test of Proficiency (SC-TOP).[5] This initiative defines four levels: Beginner (800 words, equivalent to CEFR level A2), Basic (1500 words, equivalent to CEFR level B1), Intermediate (5000 words, equivalent to CEFR level B2) and Advanced (8000 words, equivalent to CEFR level C1). Based on our teaching experience, we believe these levels are more realistic than those proposed by Hanban and are closer to those required for European languages.

All these initiatives show that the CEFR has had a certain impact in the Chinese-speaking world. Nevertheless, although in China and Taiwan some aspects of the CEFR have been introduced, leading to some innovation in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, the CEFR has not been adapted to Chinese, so we cannot directly benefit from the contributions made in China and Taiwan.

5 Analysis of published curricula that apply the CEFR to Chinese in Spain

The curricula drawn up in the Madrid region (Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Madrid Official School of Languages)[6] and Catalonia (Barcelona Drassanes Official School of Languages)[7] are the main initiatives conducted in Spain to adapt the CEFR guidelines to

the teaching and learning of Chinese. There are substantial differences between each region's proposals, but both have a homogeneous structure that is similar to that of published curricula of the other languages in the institutions where Chinese is taught. The author of the curriculum implemented in Madrid, which is the most rigid of them all, emphasises that the terminology, order and structure of the content taught should be the same for all languages, which is why she admits that sometimes the result can be 'a little "artificial", trying to "force" Chinese to adapt to the "ideal"' (Marco, 2007, p. 95).

If we take a closer look at the curricula in the Madrid region and Catalonia we see that the description of Chinese does not always reflect the internal structure of the language. These curricula often assume that Chinese works like Spanish and this leads to terminological and conceptual incongruities, since traditional Chinese terminology is sometimes ignored and replaced by alien terminology, imposing on Chinese categories and characteristics it does not possess. If such an approach is applied in the classroom, it can negatively affect language learning.

The first major problem is that these published curricula describe Chinese grammar using categories and grammatical phenomena that exist in Spanish but are completely alien to Chinese. For example, one of them mentions *possessive and relative pronouns*, but Chinese only has *personal and interrogative* (sometimes used as *indefinite*) *pronouns*. They also include terms such as *adverbial subordinate sentences*, *copulative verbs*, *prepositional phrases*, *affirmative adverbs* and *verbal periphrasis*, none of which exist in Chinese. Another example is the description of 是 (*shi*) ('to be') as an *affirmative adverb*. Classifying it in this way can be counterproductive, as students might not be aware that its use is different from the Spanish word 'sí' ('yes'), and that Chinese questions are often answered in the affirmative merely by using a verb or an adjective, not necessarily using the verb '*shi*'.

The second problem with these documents is that where linguistic phenomena in

Chinese have different names from those used in Spanish grammar, Spanish terminology is preferred over Chinese terminology. For example, Spanish differentiates between the *indirect object* and the *direct object* according to semantics, whereas Chinese follows a syntactical criterion, with the term *object* referring only to the noun or noun phrase that directly follows a verb that does not have a preposition, regardless of the nature of the referent. The concept of the *complemento circunstancial* in Spanish grammar is also alien to Chinese, which classifies these kinds of linguistic units either as *complements (buyu)* or *adverbial adjuncts (zhuangyu)*, based on their function, rather than on their meaning. Using Spanish terminology to describe Chinese linguistic phenomena could therefore be misleading for students if there are no specific explanations of the differences between the two languages.

A third problem is the inclusion of categories and labels that are not important for describing Chinese. Their inclusion is yet another example of the imposition of a model that is valid for inflectional languages but not for languages such as Chinese, which is less inflected than Romance languages. This phenomenon can be observed in the categories of nouns, adjectives or adverbs. These words are labelled as *invariable*, but Chinese has no variation at all, so the distinction between *variable* and *invariable* is redundant. For Chinese, it would be much more useful to classify adjectives using other criteria, such as their reduplication patterns.

Another problem is that labels are 'invented' to avoid using Chinese terminology. This generates opaque terms without a referent either in Chinese or in Spanish. Examples include the term *grade particle* to refer to 得 (*de*) (called a *structural particle* in Chinese) and the distinction between *grammatical and lexical resultatives*, which is not made in Chinese.

A final example of the tendency to 'Hispanicise' Chinese grammar is the addition of information that uses Spanish as a reference language, such as 'serial verb sentences (to explain nominal or completive subordination in Spanish)', 'reduplication of nominal

classifiers to express "each one" (个个（每个), 件件（每件）) or "one by one" (一个一个, 一把一把)', 'usage of 不必, 不需要 to express "it is not needed, there is no need"', 'usage of passive sentences in Chinese versus usage of passive sentences in Spanish or English and differences with the structure *shi... de*', and 'ways of expressing the nuances of the impersonal and passive pronoun *se* in Spanish', to name just a few. These explanations are well-intended and aim to make grammatical phenomena easier to understand. However, they are clearly misleading and in those cases where we have nothing with which to compare a specific phenomenon, we risk presenting it as something that is 'missing' in one language and 'present' in another, which could contribute to propagate the idea that a language is impoverished. Therefore, these types of explanation should not be used, as they reflect a monolingual and ethnocentric approach.

In conclusion, expressions and terminology of this kind should be avoided because they are inappropriate for describing Chinese, and contribute to creating a distorted image of it. Expressions such as 'the lack of subject-verb agreement', 'the advantages and disadvantages of a simple phonological and syllabic system' and 'the importance of the absence of personal pronouns' are unsuitable and a consequence of the imposition of an inadequate, alien model.

Apart from these terminological problems, we believe that some of the contents included in these curricula are beyond the reach of students, at least at the level at which they are described. It is unrealistic to expect basic-level students to know proverbs, idiomatic expressions and sayings or different registers (solemn, formal, neutral, informal, colloquial and intimate), or to be able to recognise linguistic indicators of geographical origin, profession, social background or age. It is true that students at this level could acquire some knowledge of this kind, but it would be better to define the content more specifically to avoid generating unrealistic expectations. It is also unrealistic to expect students at level B1 to achieve the listening ability necessary to understand the main ideas in news programmes,

interviews, cartoons, films, debates or talk shows in standard language, unless the material is carefully selected and even edited. The two curricula studied differ regarding listening ability at level B1, since one is more general and less ambitious than the other. This illustrates the disparity of criteria in the field, including the number of classroom hours and the teaching methodology.

It is also unrealistic to expect students to know vulgar expressions or swear words and to distinguish among different professional registers, since the curricula are not intended for specific purposes but for students with a variety of backgrounds and interests. Similarly, the stylistic and figurative values of the use of measure words are unknown even to many native speakers, so they should not be included as a learning objective for level B2. Finally, only a highly specialised person could be expected to recognise variants of phonetic realisations or relaxed pronunciation occurring in informal and colloquial registers. Awareness of such linguistic phenomena is therefore completely beyond the students' capacities, even at advanced levels.

Generally, we consider that the published curricula should be revised, some of the competences readjusted, and the levels lowered in some respects. As we mentioned earlier, the students' mother tongue must be taken into account, so it is unrealistic to expect Spanish-speaking students to reach the same level in Chinese as they do, say, in Italian with the same number of classroom hours or with just one more academic year. One possibility would be to lower the requirements for all the competences, and merely require students to be able to express in Chinese everything they understand in Chinese, either orally or in writing. Another option, which is perhaps more realistic, would be to reduce the requirements for just some of the skills, especially writing. Sometimes students of Chinese are allowed more time than students of other languages to write their essay in certificate examinations, because of the specific difficulties of this language. In other words, when possible, teachers try to bridge the

gap between the expected level imposed by the homogeneous model and the actual learning context.

The inconsistencies and problems mentioned above are caused partly by the structural and terminological limitations imposed by educational administrators on the authors of the published curricula, as discussed in this article. Nevertheless, they are based on a thorough reflection and vast experience and contain many positive aspects, so they deserve praise. Despite their shortcomings, they raise many interesting points that warrant future consideration, such as the inclusion of Chinese grammatical categories that are alien to languages such as Spanish, as well as idiosyncratic phenomena in Chinese such as tones, tone change, stroke order, and the fact that Chinese can be written with two different types of orthography. They also include information about the number of characters corresponding to each level, enabling comparisons to be made with other proposals and standards; however, we believe it would be more useful to consider the number of words, since the two variables (characters and words) are interrelated, but are different nonetheless.

Despite these positive aspects, we would like to emphasise the major differences between the two published curricula. We believe some descriptions of Chinese are more appropriate than others because they are more flexible. They have only just been implemented at all levels and are still open to change, so it is very important to know the opinion of all agents involved, particularly specialists in didactics and Chinese language experts.

6 Conclusions

In this study we set out to analyse some aspects of the application of the CEFR to the teaching of Chinese in Spain. In our opinion, the way the CEFR has been applied has sometimes reproduced old patterns and ideas about Chinese that should be jettisoned. Although several authors (Marco, 2007; Li & Zhang, 2004; Beeker, Canton & Fasoglio, 2009) have questioned

the viability of applying the CEFR to Chinese without making the necessary adjustments, their opinions have been pushed into the background by government officials and educational administrators in Spain, who have implemented the CEFR too dogmatically, in contradiction with its original spirit. Critical voices have thus been silenced and marginalised. We hope to help make those voices audible by questioning the suitability of specific aspects of the application of the CEFR to Chinese. Indeed, the experts responsible for the EU-funded European Benchmarking Chinese Language (EBCL) project aimed at applying and adapting the CEFR to the Chinese language have acknowledged that some modifications need to be made to better suit Chinese-language learners (Paternicò, 2012), which is in line with our analysis.

The CEFR philosophy is positive and potentially beneficial for Chinese learners. However, instead of distorting the description of Chinese in an artificial, contrived way to make it fit a scheme based on other languages, we should make various adjustments to produce a product that will work domestically and internationally. The absence of a suitable, coherent adaptation is reflected in descriptions that are not always effective and pedagogically useful, since they do not correspond to the nature of the Chinese language. These distortions could be avoided by using the terminology of Chinese linguistics, thus providing a homogeneous product that could be compared with other Chinese language programmes around the world. Such a procedure should also take into account models being used in China, as well as the conclusions reached by the EBCL when they are made public, and should introduce aspects that could improve it by adjusting it to reality. Such an approach would be the first step towards correcting the mistakes of the past concerning a Eurocentric standpoint towards the study of foreign languages.

Another way of improving current published curricula would be to adopt a more flexible approach to the four basic skills and a more realistic approach to the levels and

objectives reached in each case, taking into consideration the students' mother tongue and not using as a benchmark the European languages for which the model was originally designed. Furthermore, we should question the need for including lists of characters and words associated with each level, as they are not directly related to communicative functions, which define the CEFR's approach.

Finally, we would like to encourage reflection on what kind of model we wish to apply to Chinese. We offer elements for analysis of which aspects of the CEFR can be adapted to the idiosyncrasies of Chinese. We thus hope to produce feasible proposals that take into account the necessary adaptation of teaching materials to the new philosophy. Now is the right time to rethink all these questions, since the initiatives presented here are currently in the process of being implemented. Therefore it is not too late to make the necessary readjustments to avoid the reproduction of old models when approaching the Chinese Other, in this case through the study of the language.

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[1] Official Schools of Languages (Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas) are government-funded language schools that award language certificates. Administratively the schools are part of secondary education, but anybody above the age of 14 can be admitted.

[2] Pinyin is a transcription system that uses the Latin alphabet to represent the pronunciation of Chinese characters, but both in China and abroad it is used as an auxiliary system, never to be combined with them.

[3] In the previous version of the HSK only the advanced level included an oral exam.

[4] Promoting the Chinese language by increasing the number of students and improving the language's international image is one of the motivations behind the reform. For more information see Hanyu Kaoshi Fuwu Wang (2009).

[5] See http://www.sc-top.org.tw/english/SP/test1overview.php (accessed 28 February, 2013).

[6] Published in *Boletín Oficial de la Comunidad de Madrid* (BOCM 2007, 2008) and (partially) in Marco (2007).

[7] See the website of Barcelona Drassanes Official School of Languages: http://www.eoibd.cat/ (accessed 4 July, 2013).