The nature and value of teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese as a school subject in South Africa: a case study of language and literacy ideologies in a public secondary school in South Africa

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Course Code: EDN5500W

October 2024

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

MEd specialising in Language & Literacy Studies

School of Education

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Abstract

In 2014 Mandarin Chinese was officially introduced as a second additional language in South Africa's school curriculum. With China's growing status and influence in the world, South Africa's current positioning within the BRICS and South Africa's strong relationship with China has raised the importance of research into the landscape of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese as a school subject in South Africa. This case study was conducted in 2021 in South Africa in a public secondary school in which Mandarin Chinese is taught as a school subject within the Confucius Institute project framework. Through linguistic ethnographic and biographical approaches, this study explores Chinese teachers' and South African students' language and literacy ideologies with respect to Mandarin Chinese and its script. With the "bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4) as the main theoretical principle informing this study, language and literacy ideologies with respect to Mandarin Chinese and its script are explored in relation to both "ontologies" and "values" with the aim of showing the deeply intertwined relationship between conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese and of its script and the value attribution to them. The data analysis shows that, despite a timid desire shown by a few students for a social approach to language, the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese is mainly informed by a conceptualisation of Mandarin Chinese as a highly standardised and abstract system which can be packaged and commodified as a well-defined and structured object. As regards the teaching and learning of the Chinese script, some tensions arise. On one hand, the teaching and learning of the Chinese written language seems to be informed by a market-driven skills-based approach, which either over-relies on pinyin (i.e., phonetic system for transcribing Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet) at the expense of the teaching and learning of Chinese characters or conceptualises Chinese characters as arbitrary symbols simply reproducing the spoken language. On the other hand, the teachers also attempt to convey an approach to Chinese literacy which emphasises the role of Chinese characters within Chinese language and culture, their grapho-semantic features and their distinctive relationship with spoken language. However, this second approach is not appropriated by the students, who mainly learn Chinese characters as phonetic/arbitrary symbols, thereby pointing to a conceptualisation of literacy as a decontextualised skill. I argue that both the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese as an abstract system of vocabulary and grammar structures and the teaching and learning of the Chinese script as a decontextualised system of phonetic/arbitrary symbols speak of a conceptualisation of language and literacy as being exclusively denotational, whereby the socio-cultural embeddedness of Mandarin Chinese and of its script are overlooked. Hence, Mandarin Chinese and its script are thought of as "an arbitrary and fungible system of representation" (Course, 2018, p. 12), which can be accessed and learnt in the same way as other (alphabetic) languages. Hence, if languages and their scripts, by virtue of their exclusively denotational nature, are conceived as fungible systems of denotative communication characterised by an ontological equivalence, it follows that they can be easily compared, hierarchised and exchanged according to their instrumental value, namely their high or low likelihood of enabling speakers (and readers/writers) to

communicate widely and access opportunities. As data shows, Mandarin Chinese is seen, similarly to English, as a highly valuable communication tool on a global level, and, thus, as a valuable commodity which can be exchanged for opportunities in terms of travelling, acquiring knowledge and accessing well-paid jobs. On the contrary, Afrikaans and African languages, due to their characterisation as languages localised into a narrow, economically stagnant and parochial reality, are seen as less valuable because they do not seem to open future opportunities for the students. I conclude that a conceptualisation of languages and of their scripts in mere denotational terms (i.e., languages and scripts as instruments to communicate denotative meanings deprived of any socio-cultural connotation and/or human value) suggests, on one hand, that languages and their scripts are ontologically equivalent (i.e., Mandarin Chinese and its script can be accessed and acquired as any other language); however, on the other hand, the exclusively denotational nature of languages and scripts easily allows an attribution of instrumental value to languages and their scripts, which, paradoxically, makes them highly non-equivalent (i.e., Mandarin Chinese and English as more valuable than Afrikaans and African languages within South Africa's linguistic market). In sum, by embracing the recent 'ontological turn' in language studies, the exploration of the intricate relationship between ontologies of language (in its spoken and written form) and value attachment to it might help uncover "highly commodified" (Badwan, 2021, p. 46) understandings of language and literacy in the field of (foreign) language education and invite to think about new and different ways forward. Particularly relevant in this project, reflections on the conceptualisations of the nature of literacy informing the teaching and learning of the Chinese script might spark novel thoughts with respect to the teaching of written language in general, especially in terms of its "material culture" (Dickinson, 2017, p. 265), its relationship with spoken language and the importance of writing in itself or, in Snoddon's (2022) words, "writing as being" (p. 722).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank first and foremost my supervisor, Prof. Catherine Kell, for her constant guidance and support over the tough but extremely rewarding years that led to the completion of this dissertation. Our thoughtful and inspiring conversations profoundly shaped my learning and writing journey. I thank you Cathy from the bottom of my heart.

I would also like to thank my husband, Sergio, for his encouragement and for reminding me every day that patience and calm are key virtues in life. Thank you also to my little daughter Martina, whose creative socialisation journey into language and literacy surprises and enchants me day after day.

Last, but certainly not least, my deepest gratitude goes to all the research participants that made this research project become reality. I will always cherish your admirable commitment to helping and supporting me. May your life be filled with joy and happiness.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"In the next five years, it is envisaged that 500 schools will offer Mandarin as a second additional language"

Ms. Motshekga, South Africa's former Minister of Basic Education, April 2016[1]

Although it appears that Ms. Motshekga's target of 500 schools offering Mandarin Chinese has not been reached yet (Chutel, 2019, as cited in Van der Walt, 2024), South Africa's engagement with Mandarin Chinese cannot be overlooked. This is especially important in a context like South Africa, whose linguistic landscape is highly contested due to the unequal prominence that the 12 official languages are given in the education system and in society in general (McKinney, 2017). By exploring the still relatively unexplored field of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese within South African schools, this study, which aims to explore the language and literacy ideologies with respect to Mandarin Chinese in a public secondary school in South Africa, positions itself within the broad fields of language anthropology, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and language education. Holding onto the theoretical tenet of "the bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4), this study aims to explore both aspects of language and literacy ideologies held by teachers and students with respect to Mandarin Chinese. Thus, although this study positions itself in critical and post-structuralist approaches to language studies, which are mainly concerned with language and literacy ideologies in terms of the relationship between language, power, and inequality, and issues of hierachisation of languages/linguistic resources, it is also very much grounded within new theoretical developments which attempt to expand and move beyond critical and post-structuralist approaches by problematising and theorising what language and literacy are in ontological terms (Badwan, 2021; Kell & Budach, 2024; McKinney, Zavala, & Makoe, 2024). This move beyond critical and post-structuralist perspectives grounded in social theory towards an "ontological turn" in language studies has been greatly influenced by research on coloniality/decoloniality, southern epistemologies, post-humanism, new materialism and materiality of language (Kell & Budach, 2024). These relatively new theoretical developments have tested the boundaries in relation to conceptualisations of multilingualism and language education (McKinney, Zavala, & Makoe, 2024). This study on Mandarin Chinese in South Africa looks at how Mandarin Chinese positions itself within this broad field by emphasising the relationship between conceptualisations of the nature of Mandarin Chinese and of its script, on one side, and the indexical/hierarchical position of Mandarin Chinese in relation to other languages composing South Africa's linguistic market, on the other side. Since literacy in Mandarin Chinese seems to be intimately connected with issues concerning the conceptualisations of the nature of Mandarin Chinese, this study draws consistently from theoretical concepts related to the materiality of language in the sense of the material quality of the

[1] Ms. Motshekga's written parliamentary reply in April 2016, retrieved on 8th May 2024 from Parliamentary Monitoring Group: https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/2721/

written sign and processes of semiosis (Dickinson, 2017; Kell & Budach, 2024; Sidnell, 2020). Another theoretical aspect of language materiality on which this study draws on concerns the links between language materiality and political economy (Heller, 2017; Kell & Budach, 2024) in terms of language commodification in the field of language teaching and international standardised language assessments. Lastly, issues concerning the attribution of an instrumental and economic value to language within a neoliberal view of language in late capitalism is also explored (Badwan, 2021; Heller, 2010; Heller & Duchêne, 2012; Heller, 2017).

Having described the broad theoretical field in which this study positions and to which this study might contribute with new insights, I will now turn to contextualise this study by providing an overview of the historical and political background to Mandarin Chinese as a school subject in South African schools.

1.1 Historical and political background to Mandarin Chinese as a school subject in South Africa

2014 was a pivotal year for South Africa-China cooperation in the field of education; indeed, in March 2014 an agreement between the two countries was signed to introduce Mandarin Chinese into the South African school curriculum, and at the end of 2014 the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Grades 4-12: Mandarin Second Additional Language* (Department of Basic Education, 2014 a-c) was officially released (De Man, 2017). Curriculum experts from East China Normal University cooperated closely with the Department of Basic Education in the development of the *CAPS: Mandarin Second Additional Language* (De Man, 2017). The Government Gazette of 20th March 2015 (Department of Basic Education, 2015) included Mandarin Chinese as non-official language, and established 2016 as the first year of implementation of the *CAPS: Mandarin Second Additional Language* (De Man, 2017).[2]

The introduction of Mandarin Chinese as a school subject in South Africa could be explained against the backdrop of the wider historical and political background of China-South Africa relations. The relations between China and South Africa, also within the framework of BRICS[3] and FOCAC,[4] go beyond issues of natural resources and include cooperation in many other sectors (Shoba, 2023), including education (King, 2022). Since 2009, with the advent of Jacob Zuma as the President of South Africa, there has been a shift in South African foreign policy, namely from an inclination towards Western countries to a progressive alignment with China, Russia as well as with other raising powers in the Global South; as a result, this foreign

[2] Please see Appendix 1 for a brief description and diagram providing some information about the South African basic education system. This information may be useful for those who are not familiar with the South African basic education system to navigate and understand the research context and the references to the *CAPS: Mandarin Second Additional Language*.

[3] BRICS was founded in 2009 as a partnership among Brazil, Russia, India and China. In 2010 South Africa joined the group, and in 2024 Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates became part of the so-called BRICS+ grouping (Cochrane & Zaidan, 2024).

[4] FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation), founded in 2010, "is a platform established by the People's Republic of China in collaboration with African countries for collective consultation and dialogue" (Taylor, 2011, p. 1).

policy shift led South Africa to join the BRICS in 2010 (Neethling, 2017; Shoba, 2018, 2023). A recent analysis shows that South Africa "is steadfast in staying at least nominally non-aligned with any great power" (Chivvis, Usman, & Geaghan Breiner, 2023). However, "[b]ecause of the wide range of opportunities that South Africa sees in BRICS, it values its partnership with China and China's role in the world order more generally" (Chivvis, Usman, & Geaghan Breiner, 2023).

Following China's economic and opening-up reforms, started in the late 1970s, China strongly welcomed foreign investments and became known as the "world's factory"; however, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, China adopted a "going out" approach, with financial investments flowing from China to overseas countries and greater participation in inter-governmental organisations (Hubbert, 2019). This new approach reflected its aspiration to be recognised as an international player (Hubbert, 2019). One key aspect of China's "going out" approach was China's establishment of a wide international network of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs) promoting Chinese language and culture (Gil, 2017; Hubbert, 2019).

CIs and CCs are managed by Hanban (i.e., the Confucius Institute Headquarters located in Beijing), which is affiliated to the Chinese Ministry of Education (Hubbert, 2019). CIs and CCs are hosted within local educational institutions (the former in higher education institutions, the latter in middle and secondary schools), although teachers and textbooks are generally provided by Hanban (Hubbert, 2019). Gil (2022) reports that, since the opening of the first CI in Seoul in 2004, more than 500 CIs and more than 1000 CCs worldwide had been established by the end of 2019. However, in recent years, an increasing anti-China sentiment and the fear for the curbing of academic freedom by Chinese institutions have led to the progressive closures of CIs in the US, in some European countries, in Australia, and in some Asian countries, such as India and Korea (Gil, 2022). Gil (2022) notes that, while further closures might happen in the above-mentioned countries, it seems that the future of CIs and CCs is in Africa, South America and the Middle East, due to positive political relations and to China's fundamental support in providing the resources, often lacking in these regions, for the teaching of the Chinese language. As King (2017) notices, in contrast to heavy criticism of CIs in the US, "there has been very little if any critical commentaries connected to the CIs in Africa" (p. 103). He attributes this not only to the fact that CIs are not linked with any former colonial power but also to the job opportunities potentially offered by Chinese companies in Africa and to study opportunities in China through Hanban scholarships (King, 2017). Lastly, by presenting the position of Hartig (2014, as cited in King, 2017) on CIs in South Africa, who argues that "normally CIs tend to stay on the safe side by not engaging too much with 'sensitive issues'" (p. 104), King (2017) mentions that African CIs "arguably engage in a certain degree of self-censorship" (p. 104).

In South Africa the implementation of the curriculum for Mandarin Chinese saw a direct involvement of the already established network of CIs and CCs by launching pilot projects through them (De Man, 2017). An internet search conducted in July 2024 showed that South Africa has established seven Confucius Institutes in seven universities and a few Confucius Classrooms in some schools so far. However, as King (2017)

also explains, CIs not only focus on the hosting university but also reach out to primary and secondary schools, thereby expanding the offering of Mandarin Chinese. In a recent study on second additional languages in South Africa, Van der Walt (2024) notes that in South Africa "there is a growing interest in Mandarin at both secondary school and university levels" (p. 336), and although Mandarin Chinese teachers have been mainly hired from China, it appears that CIs are willing to engage in the training of South African teachers to teach Mandarin Chinese (Van der Walt, 2024).

1.2 Rationale

With China's rise and influence on the world stage and with South Africa's close political ties with China, the importance of research into the landscape of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa has become paramount. In terms of research in this field in South Africa, De Man (2017) completed a comprehensive study of the *CAPS Mandarin Second Additional Language* which I will draw on in Chapter 2 in relation to language conceptualisation. Frank (2016) analysed the South African media's framing of the introduction of Mandarin Chinese into the South African curriculum, and he identified three mega-frames. The mega-frames of "imperialism" and "nationalism", supported mainly by trade unions, view Mandarin Chinese as an instrument of neo-colonialism and as an obstacle to the development of African languages. On the contrary, the mega-frame of "globalisation", sponsored mainly by the South African government, regards Mandarin Chinese in more pragmatic and instrumental terms, namely as a language that is worth learning for economic reasons and job opportunities. As Frank (2016) points out, the South African media portrayed an "elite contestation" (p. 58) between the government and the trade unions, but the voices of learners, parents and teachers as well as Chinese sources were absent.

Wang and Lemmer (2013, 2014, 2015) conducted some brief studies on the provision of Mandarin Chinese in a few higher education institutions in South Africa. They mostly focused on institutional arrangements and comparisons between the provision of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa and in China. Studies on the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South African schools have been conducted by Prof. Nel of the University of South Africa in collaboration with other scholars. These studies, which describe the teachers' and learners' experiences of teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese in the classroom, seem to be concerned mainly with the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process in terms of language acquisition; thus, they are centred on foreign language acquisition strategies in relation to Mandarin Chinese, with a focus also on Chinese characters and phonetics (Nel, 2016; Nel, Krog, & Lebeloane, 2019; Nel, Krog, Lebeloane, & Zhou 2019; Nel & Krog, 2021).

What is missing from all these studies on Mandarin Chinese in South Africa is a focus on the teachers' and students' language and literacy ideologies with respect to Mandarin Chinese, also in relation to South Africa's contested linguistic landscape. Indeed, none of these studies look in depth at who the teachers and

the students are in terms of their linguistic and social background, which I consider as being closely linked to the teachers' and the students' conceptualisation of and value attribution to Mandarin Chinese. Furthermore, these studies seem to consider Mandarin Chinese as "a language", conceived as an abstract entity, that can be simply added to the students' linguistic repertoires without problematising the nature of Mandarin Chinese and of its script.

By taking both a linguistic ethnographic approach and a biographical approach, I will explore the language and literacy ideologies with respect to Mandarin Chinese in a public secondary school in South Africa which has had a long-standing cooperation with Hanban for the provision of Mandarin Chinese. This study will give voice to teachers and students with respect to how Mandarin Chinese is conceptualised in the classroom and valued within South Africa's linguistic market. If Mandarin Chinese is going to gain more prominence in South Africa, I believe this type of knowledge cannot be ignored. Theoretically, the exploration of the nature of Mandarin Chinese in terms of an intricate relationship between spoken language, script and ideological/social value could, in the words of Kell and Budach (2024), "help us to see how people and groups dwell within different ontologies of language and negotiate them, at the same time as they construct them" (p. 92).

1.3 Research questions and aims

This study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. *What conceptualisations of the nature of language held by the textbooks, the teachers and the students inform the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in a public secondary school in South Africa?*
2. *What conceptualisations of the nature of literacy held by the textbooks, the teachers and the students inform the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in its written form in this school?*
3. *What ideological value do teachers and students attribute to Mandarin Chinese within the South African linguistic market and how does this ideological value attribution relate to the conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in this school?*

As mentioned at the beginning of this introductory chapter, by embracing the theoretical principle of "the bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4), this study aims to explore ontologies of language and literacy (i.e., conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy) with respect to Mandarin Chinese as well as value attribution to it.

Having been myself a student of Mandarin Chinese in the past in both an Italian university and a Chinese university, I have often wondered what Mandarin Chinese meant to me and what conceptualisations of language and literacy shaped my Mandarin Chinese learning trajectory. Since I am neither a native Chinese

speaker/writer nor an expert in the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese, I would like to clarify that my aim is not to evaluate and give advice on the strategies and technicalities of teaching the language and its script. What I am attempting to do in research questions n.1 and n.2 is to uncover what paradigms for conceptualising the nature of language and literacy inform the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in a specific teaching and learning context, i.e. a secondary school in South Africa.

As regards research question n.3, firstly, I aim to investigate what value teachers and students attach to Mandarin Chinese, and in the case of the students, I explore also how Mandarin Chinese is valued in relation to other languages composing the South African linguistic landscape. Secondly, I attempt to explore the relationship between the paradigms for conceptualising the nature of language and literacy with respect to Mandarin Chinese and the value attributed to it. By answering this question, this study tries to show the richness of exploring language and literacy ideologies as an interplay between language-literacy ontologies and value attachments to language and literacy, thereby embracing critical and post-structuralist approaches to language as well as combining them with the more recent ontological approach to language studies. I believe this type of exploration could also help (foreign) language teachers and students reflect on their teaching and learning approach and shed light on dominant discourses about languages. Since I am a foreign language (i.e., Italian) teacher, how language and literacy are conceptualised and valued in my teaching approach is something I have deeply at heart.

1.4 Outline of the research project

In the next chapter I present the literature review and theoretical framework of this study. First, I review literature concerning paradigms for conceptualising the nature of language and literacy as well as the value attribution to language and literacy. Second, I contextualise this study by presenting how language and literacy are conceptualised and valued in South Africa. Then I review literature concerning the conceptualisation and value of Mandarin Chinese in China, within the CI project, and within the South African curriculum. Lastly, I review literature concerning the conceptualisation of the Chinese written language.

Chapter 3 presents the research design, approaches and methodology that inform this study. It introduces the research site and participants, and it shows how the data collection and analysis were performed.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the data analysis and findings. In Chapter 4 I analyse how textbooks, teachers and students seem to conceive Mandarin Chinese in terms of language ontology. In Chapter 5, which focuses on literacy, I analyse how textbooks, teachers and students appear to conceive the Chinese written language in itself and in relation to the spoken language. Similarities and tensions regarding language and literacy conceptualisations will be pointed out. In Chapter 6, I analyse teachers' and students' narratives concerning the value attribution to Mandarin Chinese, and, in the case of the students, I also explore how

Mandarin Chinese is valued compared to other languages within South Africa's linguistic market. In the conclusion of this chapter, I explain the relationship between findings from Chapters 4-5 and Chapter 6, thus showing the interplay between, on one side, the conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese and of its written form, and, on the other side, the value attributed to Mandarin Chinese.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the main findings and the theoretical contribution of this study, as well as presenting its limitations, the potential for further research and some recommendations on foreign language teaching.

Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

This case study is theoretically positioned within the broad field of language ideologies, which "has made important contributions to understandings of the social, historical and political foundations of Language" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021, p. 2). Additionally, this case study also attempts to embrace the more recent "ontological turn" in language studies which, without rejecting the contributions of studies on language ideologies, aims to move beyond beliefs about language in order to investigate what language ultimately is (Course, 2018; Demuro & Gurney, 2021, Hall & Wicaksono, 2020; Hauck & Heurich, 2018; Kell & Budach, 2024). As Hall and Cunningham (2020) maintain, ontological beliefs of language are deeply intertwined with ideological beliefs of language; indeed, in Sharpe's (1974, as cited in Hall & Cunningham, 2020) words, "[a]ny comprehensive worldview constitutes an ideology [...]: such a worldview will contain both an ontology and a set of values" (p. 4). Elaborating on this, Hall and Cunningham (2020) maintain that "this explicit recognition of the bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values' is a useful one which has not been duly recognised in previous research" (p. 4).

Thus, with the "bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4) as the main theoretical tenet, this study aims to explore the language and literacy ideologies held by Chinese teachers and South African students within a South African public secondary school. Language and literacy ideologies with respect to Mandarin Chinese and its script are explored in relation to both "ontologies" and "values". In this study I refer to the former in terms of "conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy", and I refer to the latter in terms of, by borrowing Hall and Cunningham (2020) words, "ideological value attribution" (p. 12) to language and literacy. In order to theoretically ground the data analysis chapters (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), firstly, I review literature concerning paradigms for conceptualising the nature of language and literacy (section 2.2), and literature concerning the ideological value attribution aspect of language and literacy ideologies (section 2.3). Secondly, I contextualise this case study by reviewing literature about the conceptualisations of language and literacy within the South African education system (section 2.4). Thirdly, I review literature concerning the conceptualisation of and ideological value attribution to Mandarin Chinese in China, worldwide through the Confucius Institute project and within the South African curriculum (section 2.5). Lastly, I provide a brief introduction to the Chinese written language by presenting both Chinese characters and Hanyu pinyin (i.e., phonetic transcription system of Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet) and explaining the different socio-historical value attribution to them. I conclude by discussing competing views with respect to the conceptualisation of the nature of Chinese characters and their relationship with spoken language (section 2.6).

2.2 Paradigms for conceptualising the nature of language and literacy

This section provides a theoretical overview of different paradigms for conceptualising the nature of language and literacy in various fields, ranging from language studies (including linguistics, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics) to historical and anthropological studies. This theoretical overview not only offers important concepts and frameworks to analyse and shed light on the way Mandarin Chinese and its script are conceptualised by the textbooks and the participants of this study, but it also positions this study within the broader and ongoing ontological debates about language and literacy (as seen in Chapter 1).

From language as an autonomous and abstract system to social languaging and language materiality

As Demuro and Gurney (2021) suggest, "a dominant and rather naturalised way of ontologising Language in many contexts is as autonomous object" (p. 6). The paradigm of "language-as-object" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021) conceptualises language as an "autonomous system that can be analysed in terms of internal relationships and contrasts [and it] represents a highly abstract view [of language]" (Graddol, Cheshire, & Swann, 1987, p. 13). Moreover, this paradigm allows us to conceptualise language also in the plural (Demuro & Gurney, 2021), thereby positing that there are different bounded entities out there called "languages", each language with its own bounded system of discrete structures. The knowledge of (a) language implies the knowledge of single units (i.e., sounds and words) and of the rules for combining them into sentences (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011). This view of language, namely a "structuralist" view of language, was championed by structural linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century with Saussure as one of its main proponents (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert, & Leap, 2009). Saussure suggested the dichotomy between "langue", namely "a grammatical system that has a potential existence […] in the brains of a group of individuals" (Saussure, 1974, as cited in Graddol, Cheshire, & Swann, 1987, p. 13) and "parole", namely the actual use of "langue" by individuals (Graddol, Cheshire, & Swann, 1987). In the mid-twentieth century Chomsky, often seen as the father of modern linguistics, suggested a similar dichotomy in terms of "competence", namely the speaker's perfect knowledge of the language system, and "performance", namely the use of language in actual situations (Graddol, Cheshire, & Swann, 1987). Chomsky's cognitivist approach to language led him to theorise the existence of a Universal Grammar, which "is part of the biologically endowed human language faculty" (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011, pp. 17-18). Thus, in this view, the ultimate aim of linguistic theory is the search for the universal properties of language (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011).

While linguists focused on the scientific study of language as an abstract system and as a psycholinguistic competence, sociolinguists started to advocate interest in linguistic diversity and in the actual use of language in social contexts (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert, & Leap, 2009). Hymes was a heavy critic of Chomsky's search for universals in language, and he suggested the notion of "communicative competence", based on the social appropriateness and linguistic variation in speech, in opposition to Chomsky's notion of "linguistic competence", based on homogeneity and on language as an idealised system (Johnstone &

Marcellino, 2011). Indeed, according to Chomsky (1965, as cited in Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert, & Leap, 2009), "linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly […]" (p. 4). Thus, Chomsky's often-cited passage seems to evoke Hall's (2020) concept of the "N-Language", according to which language is "national, native, named and normed". This ontological category is championed by national ideologies, which advocate the equation one language-one nation (Badwan, 2021; Hall, 2020). The N-Language is conceived as an abstract system, which is not only pure and monolithic but is also tightly linked to a human collective and to its identity (Badwan, 2021; Hall, 2020). Following Robins (1997, as cited in Badwan, 2021), Badwan (2021) notes that "the development of linguistics as a discipline at the beginning of the nineteenth century coincided with the heyday of nationalism. It is, therefore, not surprising that the discipline is influenced by national imaginings of language" (p. 75). Badwan (2021) further observes that national imaginings of language are grounded in Holquist's (2014, as cited in Badwan, 2021) concept of "linguistic monism", which "conceives the world as consisting of geographically dispersed common languages each of which has a unique separate identity of its own that is both stable and unitary" (Holquist, 2014, as cited in Badwan, 2021, p. 57). Badwan (2021) suggests that the main implications deriving from the notion of "linguistic monism" are the valuing of standard varieties of named languages, the linking of a speech community with one shared language, and the labelling of languages as first language, second language, etc. These implications all seem to underpin a "monoglossic" understanding of language, according to which proficiency in one named language is the norm (McKinney, 2017) and bi/multilingualism is conceived as multiple monolingualisms (Grosjean, 1982, as cited in McKinney, 2017).

In the late twentieth century, with the surge of post-structuralism in language studies and the "multilingual turn" (May, 2014), the notion of language as an abstract system gave way to the notion of language as a social practice. In Demuro's and Gurney's (2021) words, "rather than language-as-object (that is as code, or as "noun"), languaging becomes a verb, a practice and a process" (p. 8). The conceptualisation of "languaging-as-practice" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021) signals the attempt to move beyond the notion of languages as discrete bounded entities in favour of "approaches that acknowledge fluidity and creativity in linguistic practices" (Busch, 2012, p. 506) and approaches that bring to the fore "the liquidity of language and its amorphous nature" (Badwan, 2021, p. 62). McKinney (2017) provides a thorough review of different terms (i.e., polylanguaging or polylingual languaging, metrolingualism and metrolingual multitasking, crossing, urban vernaculars, translingualism and translanguaging, codemeshing) that have been suggested by different authors (for a list of these authors see McKinney, 2017) to describe fluid and creative language practices. According to McKinney (2017), a "highly productive [and] descriptive umbrella term" (p. 26) that encompasses all these definitions is Bakhtin's (1981, as cited in McKinney, 2017) concept of "heteroglossia", which refers to "the complex, simultaneous use of a diverse range of registers, voices, named languages or codes, in our daily lives, but it also draws attention to the potential tension between different kinds of

registers and voices" (McKinney, 2017, p. 22; see also Bailey, 2007; Ivanov, 1999). Indeed, in line with the deconstruction of languages as discrete entities within the post-structuralist and multilingual approaches, the focus of interest and starting point of analysis shifts from languages as separate autonomous systems to the "linguistic repertoire" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021), i.e., "a heteroglossic realm of constraints and potentialities" (Busch, 2017, p. 356).

The concept of (a) language as a bounded entity through a "positivist objectification of language" (Reagan, 2004, as cited in Makoni & Pennycook, 2005, p. 138) is criticised in post-structuralist approaches to language, which seek to uncover and deconstruct discursively created categories and their normative power (Busch, 2012). Blommaert (2006, as cited in Busch, 2012) maintains that "'(a) language' is the result of ideological construction and therefore involves power, authority and control" (p. 506). In addressing this issue in colonial and postcolonial contexts, Makoni and Pennycook (2005) suggest the concept of "invention" of named languages through social, historical and political processes which serve the agenda of colonial and postcolonial elites. It is also worth noticing the fundamental role of literacy as far as the codification of national languages and indigenous languages is concerned. The compilation of grammars, dictionaries and language textbooks contributes to codifying and institutionalising a language, thereby differentiating it from other languages (Badwan, 2021; Blommaert, 2008; Joseph, 2004; Makoni & Pennycook, 2005). In Weth's and Juffermans's (2018) words, "it is writing that effectively distinguishes one language from another and distinguishes hierarchically between languages and dialects" (p. 3). The intertwining between language and textual practices is beautifully defined by Blommaert's (2008) concept of "language artefactualisation". Artefactualising a language implies two interconnected processes. First, the "variability, negotiability and context-boundedness" (Blommaert, 2008, p. 292) of speech is captured in word lists and grammar rules, and, thus, learning (a) language means learning to master lexis and grammar. Second, (a) language reduced to lexis and grammar is encapsulated into "regimented forms of textuality [intended as] specific genres of textual artefacts of limited size and specific shape" (Blommaert, 2008, p. 292), such as, for instance, language textbooks (as will be shown in Chapter 4).

Lastly, within more recent posthumanist and new materialist approaches in applied linguistics, a conceptualisation of "language-as-assemblage" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021) has been advocated. This approach sees "communication as distributed across evolving arrays of bodies, spaces and materiality" (Badwan, 2021, p. 77). Deleuze and Guattari's (1980, as cited in Kell & Budach, 2024) notion of assemblage is understood as a non-permanent arrangement of both humans and non-humans that "function collectively in a contextually unique manner to produce *something*" (Strom & Martin, 2017, as cited in Kell & Budach, 2024, p. 88, emphasis in the original). Drawing on this definition of "assemblage", it is evident how posthumanist and new materialist approaches, in line with their aim of "decentering the human" (Kell & Budach, 2024, p. 87), do not privilege language and human beings over other entities (Kell & Budach, 2024; Pennycook, 2018).

As Kell and Budach (2024) suggest, intersecting with as well as distancing from posthumanist and new materialist approaches is another body of literature, mainly within the field of linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics and semiotics, whose main aim is "centering the materiality of language" (Kell & Budach, 2024). A fundamental contribution to the emerging field of the materiality of language is Shankar and Cavanaugh's (2017) advocacy for a theory of "language materiality":

> To regard linguistic practices and the ideologies that shape them as immaterial is to miss not only how language interacts with physical objects, environments, and forces but also to elide the material nature of linguistic practice itself – its sounds, shape, and material presences. What we find so compelling about regarding language materially is precisely how doing so can bring into focus the political economic as well as the sensual characteristics of language, its use, and forms (p. 2).

Indeed, the work on the materiality of language is largely influenced by Peirce's theory of the sign, which emphasises the materiality of the sign and of semiosis, in contrast with Saussure's abstracted and symbolic notion of language (Kell & Budach, 2024; Sidnell, 2020). Another aspect through which the materiality of language manifests itself is through its deep intertwining with political economy themes, and, thus, also with processes of language commodification (Heller, 2017; Kell & Budach, 2024).

From literacy as an autonomous cognitive skill to literacy as a social practice and the materiality of literacy

Paradigms for conceptualising literacy have also changed over time, and they have followed a path similar to the one traced for language. Literacy studies became a research field in the second half of the twentieth century, when Western industrialisation and democracy were seen as an invaluable success and as a desired goal for all societies (Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013). Some scholars postulated a "great divide" between orality and literacy, and started to posit that literacy, especially alphabetic literacy, might be the technology leading to that kind of progress and success (Gee, 2008; Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013). Havelock (1963, as cited in Gee, 2008, and as cited in Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013) pointed to the uniqueness of the alphabet as an efficient writing system. Goody (1969, as cited in Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013) and Olson (1977, as cited in Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013) in the fields of anthropology and psychology, respectively, claimed that alphabetic literacy led to abstract, analytical and logical thought, which, in turn, made the development of modern science, philosophy and historical study possible. Ong (2002), who also particularly praised alphabetic literacy over other scripts, claimed that "without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials" (p. 14). This view of literacy as a set of skills leading to higher cognitive skills and to societal development irrespective of sociocultural contexts is what Street (1993) called an "autonomous" model of literacy. The research implications for this model of literacy focus not only on how literacy affects individuals' cognitive development, but also how literacy plays a fundamental role in the functioning of the institutions of the modern state (Street, 1993). As regards the Chinese script, it is worth noticing how the great divide theorists downplayed it in favour of alphabetic scripts because of its enormous number of signs compared to the

limited number of the letters of the alphabet. Indeed, Goody (1987, as cited in Li, 2018) defined it as "the most conservative of contemporary writing systems" (p. 150) and claimed that its "complexity […] clearly limits access to knowledge" (p. 150). In line with Ong (2002), who defined the Chinese script as "intrinsically élitist" (p. 90), Goody and Watt (1963) defined the Chinese civilisation as "protoliterate" or "oligoliterate" because of "the restriction of literacy to a relatively small proportion of the total population" (p. 313).

As shown for language, in the late half of the twentieth century poststructuralists rejected the great divide theories, and a conceptualisation of literacy as a social practice started to be posited (Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013). The main problem of the great divide theories is that they did not separate the effects of literacy from the effects of a particular kind of literacy, namely school-based literacy (Gee, 2008; Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013). Scribner's and Cole's (1981, as cited in Gee, 2008, and as cited in Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013) pivotal study in Liberia showed that different literacies produced different cognitive effects, thereby concluding that literacy is never independent from the social practices associated with it. Heath's (1982) study in three different communities in the US showed that children's performance in school-based literacy is heavily dependent on the language and literacy socialisation patterns young children experienced in their communities before entering the formal schooling system.

The conceptualisation of literacy as a social practice is further elaborated by Street (1993), who suggests the concept of the "ideological" model of literacy, which considers literacy practices "as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society" (p. 7). Street (1993) suggests that "the 'ideological' model subsumes rather than excludes the work undertaken within the 'autonomous' model" (p. 362) for the following two reasons. First, the great divide theorists' view of literacy as a neutral set of cognitive skills is also "ideological" in the sense that it conceals the power dimensions of literacy (Street, 1993). Second, the ideological model does not negate the technical and cognitive aspects of literacy, but it attempts to frame them within sociocultural and power structures (Street, 1993).

From the mid-1990s, ethnographic studies based on the theoretical tenet of literacy as a social practice were conducted both in Western and non-Western settings (Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013). Literacy practices and literacy events are the pivotal theoretical and methodological principles of these situated studies of literacy. Literacy events, as Barton (2006) defines them, "are activities where literacy has a role. […] Usually there is a written text, or texts, central to a literacy event and there may be talk around the text. Texts may be a focal point of the event or they may exist in the background" (p. 23). From this definition, it can be seen how the structural dichotomy orality vs literacy crumbles in favour of a blend of written and spoken language, which characterises the reality of social life (Barton, 2006; Heath, 1982). Literacy practices are

> the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape. […] Literacy practices involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships. This includes people's awareness of literacy, construction of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk and make sense of literacy (Barton, 2006, p. 22).

Although this locally situated approach to literacy through the analysis of literacy events and practices has contributed to unveiling how literacy is grasped by people in their own sociocultural context, some scholars have questioned the local perspective of literacy (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013). An expansion of the notion of "context" through a translocal perspective of literacy might be more suitable to understand literacy processes in the era of globalisation, hyper-connectivity and digital expansion (Kell, 2009; Kell, 2015; Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013; Reder & Davila, 2005).

As for the study of language in posthumanism and new materialism, recent trends in literacy studies have focused on the media and modes of literacy, thus giving attention and prominence to "the materiality or 'stuff' of literacy engagements" (Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013, p. xxxiii). Dickinson's (2017) words seem to speak to the purpose of this study, which looks at the interplay between different scripts (i.e., Chinese characters and its phonetic transcription system) and between written and spoken language (i.e., Chinese characters and spoken Chinese):

> Like spoken or signed language, writing and its decoding (i.e., reading) are embodied phenomena formed and constrained by cultural practice, social norms, and language ideologies. Indeed, ideologies of "writeability" and "readability" of languages and texts can directly influence not only the material features of writing as practiced (for example, through script choices and technologies of writing) but also perceptions of whether writing can be a suitably "complete" material representation of spoken or signed language (pp. 265-266).

This section describing a theoretical journey across paradigms for conceptualising language and literacy, namely from language and literacy as autonomous-abstract-cognitive systems and skills to language and literacy as social and material practices, will inform the following sections of the literature review and the research methodology in Chapter 3.

2.3 The ideological value of language and literacy

I argue that the different paradigms for conceptualising language and literacy described in section 2.2 pertain to "notions about the nature of language [and literacy (*my addition*)]" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 3), and thus to the ontological dimension of the "bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4). Bearing in mind the main theoretical tenet of this study, which sees conceptualisations of language and literacy and ideological value attributions to them as deeply interconnected (Hall & Cunningham, 2020), this section attempts to emphasise the value attribution aspect of language and literacy ideologies, namely how language and literacy are socially, culturally, politically and economically valued by social actors (i.e., people, countries, institutions, etc.). The theoretical concepts described in this section will provide a useful framework to explore what values the participants of this study

attribute not only to Chinese language and literacy but also to the other linguistic resources of their linguistic repertoires.

<u>Language and power</u>

In opposition to the conceptualisation of language as an abstract system in modern linguistics, Hymes's focus on how language works in concrete social situations contributed to grounding the study of language in ethnographic observation, and to showing that, "while [language] diversity can be a resource, it can also be the basis for inequality" (Johnstone & Marcellino, 2011, p. 64). As Johnstone and Marcellino (2011) suggest, Hymes was a precursor in opposing the "potential equality of languages" (p. 64) from a linguistic point of view to the actual inequality of languages from a social point of view, thus "resources suited to some purposes are unsuited to others" (Johnstone & Marcellino, 2011, p. 64).

The sociologist Bourdieu also embarked on a heavy criticism of the "'formalist' approach to language" (Grenfell, 2011, p. 46) of modern linguistics, which, as Grenfell (2011) explains, "aspires to be a 'science of language' and seeks to objectify its form as a system liable to study. However, it can only do this by […] ignoring the place of symbolic value in linguistic processes" (p. 47). Thus, Bourdieu (1977) is primarily interested in the relationship between language and power, and in how social inequalities can affect and be affected by language. The replacement of "the question of the *meaning* of speech with the question of the *value* and *power* of speech" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 646) points to the fact that language not only has a denotational function but also an indexical value, which, in the sociolinguistic sense, means that language indexes speakers' social class, place of origin, age, gender, etc. (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert, & Leap, 2009). Drawing on Silverstein's (2003, as cited in McKinney, 2017) argument, McKinney (2017) underscores that the relationship between indexicality and ideology is a very close and interactive one in the sense that "the link between particular linguistic elements […] [or named languages (*my addition*)] and what they are generally agreed to point to, or to index to, is constructed through ideology: ideology construes indexicality" (McKinney, 2017, p. 21). Thus, Makoe and McKinney (2014), drawing on Foucault's (1980, as cited in Makoe & McKinney, 2014) concept of discourse, define "language ideologies" as "the sets of beliefs, values, and cultural frames that continually circulate in society, informing the way in which language is conceptualised and represented as well as how it is used. Such ideologies are constructed through discourse, that is systems of power/knowledge" (p.659). As McKinney (2017) argues, what counts is not that language is ideological in itself, but what kinds of ideologies are built and circulate, and what consequences they might have in language education and in other aspects of social life.

As far as literacy is concerned, it is worth noting that the concepts of ideology and indexicality as applied to language can be also applied to literacy. Indeed, as Street's (1993) "ideological model" of literacy shows, "literacy practices have a role in reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination" (p. 7). Weth and Juffermans (2018) further elaborate on this and maintain that "writing is an index of power and

social hierarchies, a carrier of injustice and inequalities in society but also […] a potential vehicle for social emancipation and empowerment" (p. 11).

After having emphasised the relationship between language/literacy and power within the notion of language and literacy ideologies, I will now introduce some theoretical concepts that suggest how value attachment to language may result in language hierarchisation and commodification.

The linguistic market and the hierarchisation of language(s)

Echoing Hymes's considerations on language diversity and inequality (Johnstone & Marcellino, 2011), Bourdieu (1977) states that "linguists are right in saying that all languages are linguistically equal; they are wrong in thinking they are socially equal" (p. 652). Bourdieu's (1977) focus on the relationship between language, power and society leads him to theorise the concept of "linguistic market", which, as Badwan (2021) points out, is regulated by the following two main principles: "a language is worth what those who speak it are worth [… and] [w]hen one language dominates the market, it becomes the norm against which the prices of other modes of expression, and with them the values of the various competences, are defined" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 652; see also Badwan, 2021, pp. 30-35).

Following these two principles, Badwan (2021) observes that, on a macro-level, the status of a named language is deeply interwoven with the political and economic power of the country or countries where that named language is spoken. Badwan (2021) invokes Wallerstein's (1974, as cited in Badwan, 2021) World Systems Theory, which posits a hierarchy between the core (i.e., dominant and affluent societies) and the periphery (i.e., powerless and exploited societies), to show how languages of the core are ranked higher than languages of the periphery. For instance, statistical instruments such as Chan's (2016, as cited in Badwan, 2021) "Power Language Index", which lists the most powerful languages in the world and the opportunities brought by them,[5] clearly shows not only a hierarchisation approach to language, but also, as Janks (2004) suggests following Bourdieu's (1977) concept of "linguist capital", the conceptualisation of language as "a form of 'capital', with real socio-economic force" (Janks, 2004, p. 35).

A corollary of the hierarchisation of named languages is that powerful languages define the value of other languages, and this entails that people are led to invest in certain languages and to devalue other languages and their speakers (Badwan, 2021). As Badwan (2021) notes, the two principles of the linguistic market work also within the scope of a named language, and they usually apply to the valuing of the standard variety and the devaluing of different varieties or dialects, as will be shown in the case of Mandarin Chinese.

Overlapping with the notions of the linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1977) and the World Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 1974, as cited in Badwan, 2021) is Blommaert's (2010) concept of "sociolinguistic scale", which

[5] The opportunities granted by the most powerful languages, as identified by the "Language Power Index", are the following: "travel widely, earn a livelihood, communicate with others, acquire knowledge and consume media, and engage in diplomacy" (Chan, 2016, as cited in Badwan, 2021, p. 31).

"suggests that we have to imagine things that are of a *different order*, that are hierarchically ranked and stratified" (Blommaert, 2010, p. 33). Deeply intertwined with the concept of scale are Blommaert's (2005, 2010) notions of "orders of indexicalities" and "polycentricity", both of which point to patterns of hierarchy, normativity and evaluation in language use. The concept of "orders of indexicality" attempts to express how different linguistic resources and other forms of semiosis are not equally valued, but they are ordered "in the form of stratified complexes, in which some kinds of indexicalities are ranked higher than others" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 74). The notion of "polycentricity" attempts to capture the multiple "centres" of evaluative and normative authority (i.e., individuals, collectives, abstract entities or ideals) to which speakers refer to in daily communication practices. However, as Blommaert (2010) specifies, these multiple "centres" are not on the same level; in fact, "the impact of certain centres of authority is bigger than that of others" (Blommaert, 2010, p. 41). The different centres are hierarchised through orders of indexicality, which "impose differences in value onto the different modes of semiosis, systematically give preference to some over others, and exclude or disqualify particular modes" (Blommaert, 2010, p. 41).

Scalar approaches to language have been criticised for rigidly positioning "individuals' linguistic resources in pre-determined vertical positions in the global hierarchy" (Badwan, 2021, p. 93). Canagarajah and De Costa (2015, as cited in Badwan, 2021) advocate for a dynamic approach to scale, in which scale is conceptualised as a verb and as practice, such as in processes of "scale-jumping" and "rescaling". This dynamic view of scale acknowledges a balance between pre-defined power relationships and individuals' agency (Badwan, 2021; Kell, 2011; Kell, 2015). In other words, although the unequal social positioning of individuals' linguistic resources through pre-defined "impersonal scales" (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 158) and dominant language ideologies (Busch, 2017) should not be downplayed, Canagarajah (2013) suggests that "[r]ather than scales shaping people, we have to consider how people invoke scales for their communicative and social objectives" (p. 158). Through the analysis of the personal narratives concerning teachers' and students' linguistic repertoires, this study will attempt to unveil how dominant language ideologies operate on individuals, but also how individuals are able to "perceive, feel, experience, act, and interact, thus to position [themselves] vis-à-vis others and with regard to discourses" (Busch, 2017, p. 349).

The commodification of language

Although economic metaphors applied to language use date back to Bourdieu's (1977) notions of "linguistic capital" and "linguistic market" and even to Hymes's concept of the "speech economy" (Johnstone & Marcellino, 2011), discourses of language commodification have become more prominent nowadays because language itself has acquired a pivotal economic role in the globalised economy of late capitalism, through the global flow of resources, the digitalisation of communication, and the rise of the service industry (Heller, 2010). Neoliberal and late-capitalist discourses operating at the individual level underscore the "corporatisation of the subject" (Badwan, 2021, p. 18; see also Besley & Peters, 2007), who needs to adapt

continuously to new work conditions in order to be employable (Keeley, 2007, as cited in Badwan, 2021). Since in late capitalism communicative skills and digital literacies have largely replaced manual labour as the main skills needed in the job market (Badwan, 2021; Heller, 2010), "individuals are made to believe that widening their linguistic repertoires […] will increase their linguistic capital and cultural awareness, thereby their chances of employability and promotion" (Badwan, 2021, p. 20).

An important aspect of language commodification is its entrenchment in discourses of neo-imperialism (Heller, 2010), whereby former colonial powers attempt to recast their political influence on their ex-colonies in economic terms and reframe "the former language of empire as a neutral and equitable means for gaining access to the global economy" (Heller, 2010, p. 105). For instance, Phillipson's (1992) concept of "linguistic imperialism", as applied to the worldwide spread of English and to the role played by the British Council in this endeavour, frames language commodification in highly critical and unequal terms. Indeed, in spite of the British Council's overarching principle of reciprocity, "the flow of funds and ideas is predominantly unidirectional [from the Centre to the Periphery]. Reciprocity is in fact a myth that serves to uphold Western hegemony" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 64). A parallel of the neo-imperialist discourse, which will be explored in section 2.5, is the "soft power" discourse, which pertains to China's worldwide spread of Mandarin Chinese through the massive institutional structure of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms.

Closely related to the discourse which links language commodification to neo-imperialism, whereby "language acts as a resource to be produced, controlled, distributed, valued and constrained" (Heller, 2010, p. 108), is the debate about what counts as the legitimate commodifiable language (i.e., the legitimate English, Chinese, etc.) and who has the right and power to define it (Heller, 2010). As Heller (2010), as well as Heller and Duchêne (2012) point out, when language is commodified, issues of language standardisation, variability and authenticity become involved. Indeed, I believe that the tensions around standardisation vs variability and authenticity, language as technical skill vs language as identity (Heller, 2010; Heller & Duchêne, 2012) constitute a productive theoretical framework to analyse the teachers' and students' views on language and literacy pedagogy.

I argue that discourses of language commodification relate not only to the attribution of economic value to language, but also to the "ontological dimension" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 2) of language ideologies, i.e. what paradigm for conceptualising language mainly underpins the commodification of language. As regards the commodification of language within the specific field of language teaching, Heller (2010) notices the "tension between the ideology of language as a technical, universally available skill and the ideology of language as tied to identity" (p. 108). I argue that "the ideology of language as a technical, universally available skill" (Heller, 2010, p. 108) refers to a conceptualisation of language as an autonomous and abstract system and of "literacy [as a means] to consolidate and reify language seen in this way" (Kell & Budach, 2024, p. 79); whereas "the ideology of language as tied to identity" (Heller, 2010, p. 108) could point to a conceptualisation of language and literacy as social practices. As I discuss in section 2.5, standardised

language assessments, which, I argue, conceive languages and literacies as "technical, universally available skill[s]" (Heller, 2010, p. 108), are fundamental components of language commodification processes (Liu, 2022) and are underpinned by a conceptualisation of language as an autonomous and abstract system.

I believe it is worth noticing how, within commodification processes of language teaching and testing, the paradigm of language as an autonomous and abstract system overlaps, merges with and, perhaps, even implies a conceptualisation of language as having material and concrete consequences. For instance, if a language certificate, obtained through an international language testing system, guarantees access to a prestigious university or a well-paid job, this means that language, though it is conceived as an abstract and autonomous system by the standardised language testing system, has material consequences. By taking Bourdieu's (1977) metaphorical notions of "symbolic capital" and "linguistic market" as a starting point, Heller (2017) argues that language should be understood "literally, not metaphorically, as a form of capital that can act as a commodity" (p. 251). Similarly, Badwan (2021) notes that "this metaphorical market [i.e., the linguistic market] does not have a metaphorical influence" (p. 32), as people concretely invest or disinvest in certain languages. Therefore, Heller (2017) concludes that, "to the extent to which language is understood as having exchange value, it becomes necessary to start thinking of it either in relation to material objects (which also have value and for which language can be exchanged) or as a material object itself" (p. 251).

To conclude this section on language commodification, I would like to draw on Badwan's (2021) appeal for "humanising language" (p. 42) to present an alternative approach to language in opposition to the conceptualisation of language as a commodity. As Badwan (2021) notes, currently naturalised neoliberal ideologies that rank languages as more valuable and less valuable from an economic point of view contribute to concealing the "human value" (p. 45) of language and the fact that certain languages "are equally valuable to the being and becoming of their speakers" (p. 42). If language "is the magic through which we externalise our means of being human, and internalise new ways of understanding and growing" (Badwan, 2021, p. 49), language education should not be exclusively about selling and buying a valuable commodity in the linguistic market, but, more importantly, should be about "family, heritage, pride, bonding, exploring and sharing" (Badwan, 2021, p. 45). Both the frameworks of language commodification and "humanising language" will be considered in analysing teachers' and students' narratives of their linguistic repertoires.

This section of the literature review attempted to show the ideological value attribution to language and literacy, which connects them to issues of power, hierarchisation, and commodification. In order to contextualise this study within the South African educational context, the following section will present how language and literacy are conceptualised and valued within South African schools.

2.4 Language and literacy in the South African educational context

The introduction of Mandarin Chinese in South African schools has not happened in a vacuum. Indeed, Mandarin Chinese entered a highly linguistically diverse landscape in which the inequalities in education brought about by colonialism and apartheid are still vivid (Bua-lit Collective, 2018; McKinney, 2017). In particular, what language and literacy are, how they are taught, what languages are deemed suitable for teaching and learning and whose language resources count in schools are deeply shaped by language ideologies which circulate in society, and which have become crystallised in language policies and curricula (McKinney, 2017). In this section, I will attempt to show how language and literacy are conceptualised within the South African education system, and how these conceptualisations relate to teaching and learning practices.

Language in South African schools

Multilingualism is enshrined in the South African Constitution (Section 6, Republic of South Africa, 1996), which recognises eleven official languages (i.e., Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu) together with the South African Sign Language, which has recently been elevated to the status of South Africa's twelfth official language (South African Government News Agency, 2023). The spirit of the Constitution is captured by the Language in Education Policy (LiEP), adopted in 1997, whose main goal is "to promote multilingualism, the development of the official languages, and respect for all languages used in the country" (Preamble 1, Department of Education, 1997). The key principle through which multilingualism is supposed to be promoted is "additive bi/multilingualism", intended as to "maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s)" (Preamble 5, Department of Education, 1997).

As McKinney (2017) notes, both the Constitution and the LiEP, in spite of their effort to support multilingualism, seem to reproduce the idea of "separate named languages in silos with no recognition of variation within a language and potential gaps between named languages in the constitution and everyday language use, which involves elements of more than one […] named language" (pp. 43-44). This "compartmentalized view of language" (De Klerk, 2002, p. 43) sees languages as autonomous and separate objects (Demuro & Gurney, 2021), and it ignores more recent heteroglossic theorisations of language, which are informed by a conceptualisation of language as a social practice (Demuro & Gurney, 2021; McKinney, 2017). Thus, the policy framework conceives multilingualism as parallel monolingualism rather than heteroglossia, and it prescribes monoglossic practices in the teaching of languages, which are meant to be kept pure and learnt separately in boundaried curricula (McKinney, 2017).

Heugh (2013) points out how both a segregationist perspective and an assimilationist perspective on language teaching and learning are predominant in South Africa. The listing of the eleven official languages witnesses the perpetuation of the segregationist approach to language (Heugh, 2013) which was championed

during apartheid, when "language, culture, and ethnicity became virtually coterminous" (De Klerk, 2002, p. 31) in the "construction of ethnolinguistic identities" (De Klerk, 2002, p. 30). However, due to the challenges posed by the use of eleven languages in education, assimilation to English was seen as unavoidable (Heugh, 2013). This assimilationist approach is reflected in the widely established practice of adopting English as the language of learning and teaching from Grade 1, or of abruptly switching the language of learning and teaching from the children's home language (for those children whose first language is not English) to English from Grade 4 (Heugh, 2013; McKinney, 2017). In ontological terms, this practice of switching the language of teaching and learning from one day to the next, which is called "early exit model of bilingualism" (Walter, 2008, as cited in McKinney, 2017), reflects both a monoglossic ideology of language as well as a very decontextualised view of language (McKinney, 2017). As McKinney (2017) argues, the idea that children could acquire the English language that they would need to cope with the curriculum from Grade 4 through a few hours per week of English language instruction is based on "the cultural construction of language in general as a stable, contextless individual mental object" (Blommaert, 2006, as cited in McKinney, 2017, p. 46). This poses great challenges for all those children who do not come from English-speaking families and reproduces inequalities along the same lines of colonial power and apartheid (Bua-lit Collective, 2018; McKinney, 2017). The ideal learner is thus an English monolingual learner (McKinney, 2017).

The monoglossic ideologies of language which inform the LiEP have dire consequences on teaching and learning practices. For instance, keeping languages separate from one another does not allow teachers and learners to use the full repertoire of their linguistic resources, thereby condemning the learners who are not proficient in English to rely on "safe talk", namely rote performance through the teacher's cued elicitation and the learners' choral response (Chick, 1996, as cited in McKinney, 2017).

In the South African context, the monoglossic ideologies of language are also tightly interconnected with an imbalance in the value attribution to different named languages, where a single standard variety of English (i.e., White South African English) is generally acknowledged as the "legitimate language" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 646) in schools, while other linguistic resources (i.e., non-standard varieties of Afrikaans or African languages) are seen as inadequate (McKinney, 2017). In McKinney's (2017) words, "the discourse of heteroglossia as a problem is commonly the flip side of a powerful discourse of Anglonormativity that is linked to the global position of English, global whiteness and neoliberalism" (p. 75). According to the Anglonormativity discourse, proficiency in a prestige variety of English associated with the ethnolinguistic repertoire of Whiteness is taken for granted and it is conflated with intelligence and academic prowess, whereas speakers of other languages are seen as deficient (McKinney, 2017).

Literacy in South African schools

The autonomous and decontextualised view of language which currently prevails in the South African language polices and in the classroom practices is paralleled by an autonomous and decontextualised view

of literacy. Indeed, as underscored by some South African scholars (Bua-lit Collective, 2018), the current curriculum and early literacy interventions in South African schools favour a narrow skills-based view of literacy, according to which the teaching of literacy in formal schooling is often limited to the teaching of phonics and basic comprehension (Bua-lit Collective, 2018). Knowledge of phonics, namely of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence, is considered paramount, and it is supposed to lead to a linear process of reading words and then sentences with an increasing automaticity (Bua-lit Collective, 2018). The conceptualisation of literacy as a decontextualised set of cognitive skills that can be transferred to any type of text and to any language is common in South Africa and is responsible for setting up the more disadvantaged learners, whose main exposure to literacy happens in school, for failure in their academic career (Bua-lit Collective, 2018).

South African scholars supporting a social practice view of literacy have opposed to the narrow skills-based view of literacy a model of "rich literacies" (Bua-lit Collective, 2018), which, following Gee (2008) and Freebody and Luke (1990), acknowledges that making meaning from and through texts requires much more than the ability to decode and encode symbols, and it involves socialisation into certain practices which differ according to different domains and socio-cultural settings. Therefore, children should not only be exposed to different types of texts but, more importantly, be engaged in meaning-making activities helping them link texts with substantive content and the outer world (Bua-lit Collective, 2018).

As regards the relationship between literacy and language, Heugh (2013) points out how literacy in South Africa has been often conceptualised independently from language. While the current curriculum, namely *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* (*CAPS*) *2010*, makes reference to the use of the learners' home language for the teaching of literacy in the early years of schooling, before 2010 the curriculum did not make clear the connection between the teaching of literacy in the early grades of schooling and the language through which literacy should be taught (Heugh, 2013). Indeed, "[a]s long as literacy were taught well, it could be taught in any language, such as English [...]" (Heugh, 2013, p. 222) also to those learners for whom English did not have any functional use in their daily social practices (Heugh, 2013). Although the current curriculum explicitly links the teaching of literacy with the learners' home languages in the early grades, the skills-based approach to literacy is still largely based on the "Big 5" approach (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension), which is based on the basic components of the English language, and which is transferred uncritically to the teaching of literacy in African languages (Bua-lit Collective, 2018). This decontextualised and skills-based approach to literacy has a profound influence on the very abstract ways in which literacy and languages are conceptualised by learners as they move through the education system.

This section presented how, in the South African educational context, language and literacy are conceptualised in a highly autonomous and decontextualised way, thereby embracing the paradigms of "language-as-object" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021) and literacy as an autonomous universal skill (Street, 1993).

Furthermore, it showed that despite the principle of the equality of languages advocated by the South African Constitution, language ideologies circulating in society and embedded in language policies perpetuate a profound power imbalance among different named languages within the education system. While this section was aimed at contextualising this case study by providing an overview of the main issues concerning the teaching and learning of language and literacy in South Africa, the next section will focus on Mandarin Chinese.

2.5 Mandarin Chinese in China, on the world stage and within South Africa's education system

This section of the literature review starts with an overview of how Mandarin Chinese is conceptualised and valued within China's language policies. Second, it analyses the spread of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese globally through the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs), and its implications in terms of language commodification. Lastly, it shows how Mandarin Chinese has been inserted into the South African curriculum and how it is conceptualised within it.

Mandarin Chinese in China

China[6] officially recognises 56 ethnic groups, which include the Han majority group, accounting for around 91 per cent of China's population and speaking "Chinese", and 55 minority groups, speaking around 130 languages (Sun, Hu, & Huang, 2007, as cited in Feng & Adamson, 2019). The "Chinese language" spoken by the Han people is composed of several varieties, which can be grouped into seven main dialect groups (i.e., Mandarin, Wu, Min, Yue, Xiang, Gan, Kejia), each with its own subdialects (Li, 2006). As Feng and Adamson (2019) argue, the perception of China as a linguistically homogenous country is due to the government's constant and vigorous promotion of the standardised version of Mandarin Chinese, namely Putonghua (literally meaning "common speech"), as a lingua franca all over China. In this study, by using the term "Mandarin Chinese", I refer not to the vernacular versions of Mandarin Chinese but to Putonghua (i.e., Standard Spoken Chinese) and to Standard Written Chinese (Li, 2006).

After the establishment of Communist China with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a strong need for a standardised common language was deeply felt by the government, whose main goal was to rebuild and unify a nation from ruins after many years of war (Feng & Adamson, 2019; Li, 2006) along the ideology of "one language for one nation" (Zhou, 2012, p. 22). In order to construct the standard national language, a prestigious version of Mandarin Chinese was chosen as the phonological, lexical and grammatical basis (Feng & Adamson, 2019; Li, 2006); however, as Li (2006) underscores, "Putonghua does not correspond entirely with any geographically based Chinese dialect, for it was developed from select linguistic features of various Mandarin subdialects, and as such is probably best regarded as a product of

[6] In this study the term "China" refers to the "People's Republic of China".

careful national language planning" (p. 154). In 1956 Putonghua was adopted as the official language of the People's Republic of China (Feng & Adamson, 2019). The careful construction and promotion of a standard national language has been a constant government endeavour. Government bodies, such as the National Technical Committee of Language Standardisation and the Committee for the Reform of the Chinese Written Language, were set up to standardise both the spoken and the written language (Feng & Adamson, 2019). As regards the written language, in order to overcome an enormously high illiteracy rate, Hanyu pinyin (i.e., "Chinese spelling"), namely a phonetic system used to transcribe Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet, was officially adopted in 1958. This phonetic system was conceived as an instrument to access the Chinese characters, whose pronunciation cannot be inferred directly from their written form (Feng & Adamson, 2019). Hanyu pinyin (hereafter called "pinyin") never replaced the Chinese characters, which, in order to be made more accessible to the wide population, underwent a process of standardisation and simplification (Rohsenow, 2004, as cited in Feng & Adamson, 2019).

In 1986 Putonghua was appointed as the main language to be used in schools and in all other public domains (Rohsenhow, 2004, as cited in Feng and Adamson, 2019). In the 21st century, since the promulgation in 2000 of the Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language, the promotion of Putonghua and of Standard Written Chinese has become even more forceful (Feng & Adamson, 2019). It is also worth noticing the launch of several campaigns which have aimed to safeguard the purity of the standard Chinese language in media, adverts and public signs (Riva, 2017).

Although the legal framework acknowledges the right to use and develop minority languages and cultures, the massive promotion of Putonghua has had a profound impact not only on minority languages but also on non-standard Chinese dialects (Feng & Adamson, 2019). As Zhou (2012) stresses, China "endorses an unbalanced bilingual ideology and a structured language order" (p. 27) which "treats Putonghua as the superlanguage and reserves for it most public functions while politically and functionally marginalizing minority languages" (p. 26). Similarly, with respect to Chinese dialects, Li (2006) notes that the language policy assigns high functions to Putonghua and low functions to dialects, thereby expanding the use of the former in formal and public domains and limiting the use of the latter in local and informal contexts. As far as the written language is concerned, Wang (2018) points out how the official codification and promotion of Standard Written Chinese has contributed to the underdevelopment of the scripts of Chinese dialects and minority languages. In spite of some contestations of China's assimilationist language policies from minority language speakers and dialect speakers (Riva, 2017; Wang, 2018), Xu's (2019) case study on language and identity among monolingual and bilingual participants in China's minority regions showed the high value attached to Putonghua, considered as "the admission ticket to the linguistic market, without which other types of linguistic capital [i.e., minority languages and/or English] cannot be allowed in and exchanged" (p. 34). Hence, as Zhou (2012) argues, Putonghua is seen as an absolute requisite to be a citizen of the People's

Republic of China, and, in the words of one participant of Xu's (2019) study, to be "a member of the greater group" (p. 28).

In the Chinese context, the relationship between the promotion of a standard official language and the building of the Chinese nation has been framed by the Chinese authorities in terms of "cultural soft power" (Cao, 2011; Riva, 2017). The soft power theory, as conceived by Nye (2004), refers to "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (p. x). Attraction is meant as "attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies" (Nye, 2004, p. x). While the Western concept of soft power mainly refers to a "non-coercive foreign policy tool" (Riva, 2017, p. 98), the Chinese concept of "cultural soft power" refers to both internal nation-building purposes and the construction of China as a benevolent nation on the world stage (Cao, 2011; Riva, 2017). While this sub-section focused on the advancement of Putonghua within China as a nation-building endeavour, the next sub-sections will discuss the state-led worldwide exportation of Putonghua and its reception into the South African education system.

Mandarin Chinese within the Confucius Institute project

As mentioned in Chapter 1, since the 2000s China launched an outward-looking soft power campaign with the worldwide establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs), whose goal is to promote Chinese language and culture (Gil, 2017; Hubbert, 2019). The Confucius Institute project has been extensively examined through the lens of international relations and political studies (for a complete list of these studies see Hubbert, 2019, p. 165), which mainly focus on policy goals at state-to-state level rather than on the actual "appropriation" of policies by the people involved in the Confucius Institute project (Hubbert, 2019; Stambach, 2014; Stambach & Kwayu, 2017). In more recent years, these political studies have been complemented by an ethnographic literature on CIs and CCs focusing on the following themes: language and culture (Hua & Wei, 2014; Hubbert, 2019; Stambach, 2014; Stambach & Wamalwa, 2018), race (Schmidt, 2013), affect (Schmidt, 2014), representations of China and the Chinese State (Hubbert, 2019), relationship between CIs and local educational institutions (Stambach, 2014), students' perceptions in terms of curriculum and instruction (Hubbert, 2019; Wheeler, 2014). This case study, which focuses on the ideologies of Mandarin Chinese in terms of its conceptualisation and value attribution in a South African school partnering with Hanban, could be seen as an additional contribution to this ethnographic literature on CIs and CCs.

As regards the type of language taught, CIs and CCs promote Putonghua and Standard Written Chinese (Feng & Adamson, 2019; Hua & Wei, 2014; Stambach, 2014). However, it is interesting to note that, in Hanban's programming and in the language textbooks, the language is called "Hanyu", which literally means "the language of the Han people" (Stambach, 2014). The textbooks generally adopted in CIs and CCs language courses are published by Hanban through the Beijing Language and Culture University Press, and they usually conflate the standard language with all Chinese nationals, thereby minimising cultural differences or subordinating them to an implicit national norm (Stambach, 2014).

Closely related to the global spread of CIs and CCs are also discourses of language commodification and marketisation (Gao, 2017; Heller, 2010). As Gao (2017) points out, the Confucius Institute project, "though driven by political interest, is in reality also a market-based economic practice" (p. 28). The naming of this soft power campaign after the well-known Chinese philosopher Confucius has also been defined as a branding operation by Chinese authorities (Starr, 2009). In terms of the teaching and learning of the language, Gao (2017) underscores how the former Director General of Hanban, Xu Lin, in the effort of creating a mass market for Mandarin Chinese, advocated for a loose readjustment of the correctness and authenticity of Mandarin Chinese to a language ideology based on mass consumption. However, as Gao (2017) notes, some standards must be set, and this has led to the establishment of the Chinese Proficiency Test (i.e., Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, hereafter called "HSK"), an international standardised test for Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language. The HSK is administered by Hanban and is modelled on the six language levels (i.e., A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)[7] (Xie, 2011, as cited in Feng & Adamson, 2019). Each level of the HSK Syllabus is based on a definite number of vocabulary items and grammar structures (Jiang et al., 2019). The HSK is often seen as a prerequisite to access both a competitive job market and higher education in China (Hubbert, 2019; Liu, 2022). By exporting a clearly defined standardised language variety and a pre-packaged syllabus, standardised language tests not only "regulate what kinds of language, and which kinds of speakers, are legitimated or granted authority" (Liu, 2022, p. 331), but they also contribute to "narrow[ing] the curriculum" (Cushing, 2019 & Shohamy, 2006, as cited in Liu, 2022, p. 335). This has contributed to "othering" speakers of non-standard varieties of Chinese in CIs and CCs (Hua & Wei, 2014), and to shifting the focus of some Chinese complementary schools from language as heritage to language as an instrument within an ideology of mass consumption (Liu, 2022).

Mandarin Chinese within the South African curriculum

South Africa's Language in Education Policy, in addition to "promot[ing] and develop[ing] all the official languages" within the overarching goal of "promot[ing] multilingualism", aims to "support the teaching and learning of all other languages […], including […] languages which are important for international trade and communication […]" (Department of Education, 1997). As De Man (2017) notes, this is the "open door" for the teaching of Mandarin Chinese in South African schools. It should be noted how the phrasing "important for international trade and communication" seems to suggest an instrumental and economic value attributed to Mandarin Chinese. All the language *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements* (*CAPS*), including the *CAPS: Mandarin Second Additional Language*, describe three separate language levels, namely "home

[7] The HSK is currently under revision with the introduction of additional levels and a rearrangement of the content of the current six levels. However, for the purpose of this study, I refer to the six-level HSK, which was administered when data for this project were collected (i.e., in 2021) and which is still in place according to the websites of several CIs and HSK test centres.

language", "first additional language" and "second additional language" (Department of Basic Education, 2014 a-c, p. 10). The "home language" and the "first additional language" are compulsorily taught from grade 1 onwards. The "second additional language" is offered from grade 4 onwards or later, and it is not a compulsory subject (De Man, 2017). According to the *CAPS*, Mandarin Chinese is currently offered in South Africa as a second additional language theoretically from grade 4, although in practice it is usually taught in secondary schools from grade 8 onwards (De Man, 2017).

As regards the conceptualisation of Mandarin Chinese within the *CAPS*, De Man (2017) highlights that the South African Mandarin curriculum overlooks what she defines as the "unique nature of Mandarin Chinese" (p. 31).[8] Indeed, the *CAPS: English Generic Second Additional Language* was used "as template for the versioning of the Mandarin curriculum" (De Man, 2017, p. 145), and this engenders several issues as far as the pedagogy and the expected proficiency of the students are concerned. Thus, De Man (2017) criticises the curriculum as it disregards the "linguistic distance between [Mandarin] Chinese and English" (p. 4), especially with respect to the so-called "unique characteristics" (p. 31) of Mandarin Chinese, namely Chinese characters and tones (De Man, 2017). No reference to the teaching of Chinese culture, which is also considered by De Man (2017) a unique feature of Mandarin Chinese, is made within the Mandarin curriculum (De Man, 2017), which is focused on language skills or, in De Man's (2017) words, "technical language teaching" (p. 45).

This section showed the artificial construction and standardisation of Mandarin Chinese within China's language policies and its forceful promotion in China and worldwide. The worldwide spread of Mandarin Chinese through CIs and CCs is deeply intertwined with discourses of language commodification, of which the HSK is a key component. In terms of language conceptualisation, the HSK, with its pre-packaged syllabus of vocabulary and grammar structures, conceives Mandarin Chinese in a highly decontextualised and structuralist way. Moreover, the modelling of the HSK on the CEFR seems to imply that Mandarin Chinese approximates European (alphabetical) languages. Similarly, the "versioning" of the Mandarin curriculum from the English curriculum (De Man, 2017) seems to suggest that Mandarin Chinese can be taught and learnt in the same way as English. I argue that both the HSK Syllabus and the Mandarin Chinese curriculum in South Africa treat Mandarin Chinese as "an arbitrary and fungible system of representation" (Course, 2018, p. 12) which can be acquired in the same way that alphabetical languages are acquired. The next section will delve into this debate by focusing on the Chinese written language and on its relationship with spoken Mandarin Chinese.

[8] De Man's (2017) study mainly focuses on the curriculum devised for the initial teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese, i.e. *CAPS: Mandarin Second Additional Language (Grades 4-6)*. Although, as will be specified in Chapter 3, the participants in this study are in grades 8 and 11, I argue that the Mandarin curriculum devised for the initial teaching of the language is relevant to be mentioned. This is because students in this case study are approaching Mandarin Chinese for the first time in grade 8 and they progress very slowly due to a very limited teaching time.

2.6 The Chinese script

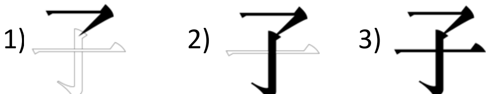
In order to make the most language-specific and literacy-specific sections of the data analysis accessible to those who do not have any prior knowledge of Mandarin Chinese, the first sub-section aims to provide some basic information concerning the fundamental features of the Chinese script and the role of pinyin. The second sub-section will problematise different conceptualisations of the Chinese characters and of the relationship between spoken and written language. This last section of Chapter 2 reviews some theoretical concepts which can help shed light on the contradictions felt by the teachers and the students when negotiating competing conceptualisations of the Chinese script.

The explanations and discussions suggested in this section originate from academic sources that I could access from a language point of view (because they are written in English) and that I believed were relevant for the interpretation of the data of this project. I am aware that there is a wider literature on the interpretation of the Chinese script that I am not considering due to time constraints and to my inability to read academic sources written in Chinese on this topic. As mentioned earlier, I am neither a native Chinese speaker nor an expert of its script; therefore, any inaccuracy or oversimplification in the interpretation of the literature remains open to criticism and suggestions.

An introduction to the Chinese script and the role of pinyin

Mandarin Chinese (and more generally the Chinese language) is based on a logographic script composed of characters. Unlike phonographic (alphabetic or syllabic) scripts, in which one grapheme represents a phoneme or a syllable (i.e., a sound), a logographic script, such as the Chinese writing, is composed of graphemes (i.e., characters) representing a word or a morpheme (Li, 2018; Liu, 2005). As Sun (2006) points out, Chinese characters are not exclusively visual signs representing concepts, but they can be phoneticised and read aloud. In Wang's and Yang's (2008, as cited in Li, 2018) words, "[e]ach character maps onto a syllable that is a morpheme or word" (p. 150). However, since there is no direct relationship between the character and the pronunciation, "a literary speaker of any Chinese dialect can immediately pronounce a Chinese character in her/his own dialect" (Sun, 2006, p. 206). As an example, Sun (2006) shows how the character 水 (meaning 'water') can be read in different ways according to different dialects, but all the dialect speakers would be able to recognise its meaning because "the character 水, as a logographic form with a single-graph structure, does not represent any given phone within a word, but a syllable associated with a morpheme standing for 'water'" (Sun, 2006, p. 102).

In terms of scriptal features, characters are composed of strokes, namely line patterns which constitute the "smallest building materials for characters" (Wang & Yang, 2008, as cited in Li, 2018, p. 151). For instance, the character 子 (meaning 'child') is composed of three strokes: horizontal hook stroke (1), curved hook stroke (2), and horizontal stroke (3).



Certain sets of strokes constitute character components, which are the basic units which can be combined to form characters (Li, 2018). For instance, the character 明 (meaning 'bright') is composed of two components 日 (meaning 'sun') and 月 (meaning 'moon'). As identified by the scholar Xu Shen in 100 CE, there are six main principles forming the graphic structure of the Chinese characters: 象形 xiàngxíng (literally 'imitate-shape', or pictographic), 指事 zhǐshì (literally 'indicate-condition', or ideographic), 会意 huìyì (literally 'grasp-meaning', or semantic-semantic compounds), 形声 xíngshēng (literally 'shape-and-sound', or semantic-phonetic compounds), 假借 jiǎjiè (literally 'loan-borrowing', or borrowing), and 转注 zhuǎnzhù (literally 'interchangeable notation', or explanatory) (Xu Shen's classification as cited in Gu, 2000, and in Sun, 2006).[9] Nowadays, around 90 per cent of the Chinese characters belong to the category of semantic-phonetic compounds (Lee, 1989, as cited in Li, 2018), which contain both a grapho-semantic component (also called 'semantic component', 'semantic radical' or simply 'radical') giving some clues about the meaning and a phonetic component giving some clues about the sound (Li, 2018). For instance, the character 妈 (read as 'mā' and meaning 'mother') is composed of the semantic component 女(meaning 'woman' and representing, though stylised, a kneeling person) and the phonetic component 马 (read as 'ma', without indications about the tone). Semantic components, though stylised, are pictorial elements, or "iconic images" in Gu's (2000, p. 116) words, through which a general meaning of the character could be inferred (Wenzel, 2010a). For instance, characters containing the component 女 generally refer to the 'female/woman' semantic field (i.e., 姐 meaning 'elder sister', 妹 meaning 'younger sister', 媳 meaning 'daughter-in-law', 婚 meaning 'marriage', etc.). Radicals have been traditionally used as indexing devices to locate characters in Chinese dictionaries (Sun, 2006; Wenzel, 2010a).

Mandarin Chinese (and more generally the Chinese language) is a language characterised by a high degree of homophony, namely words of different meanings share the same pronunciation (Sun, 2006; Wenzel, 2007, 2009, 2010a). As Wenzel (2007) argues, although over the years compound (disyllabic or polysyllabic) words have increased, "the Chinese language is at its heart *monosyllabic*" (Wenzel, 2007, p. 300), i.e., one

[9] For further explanations and examples of characters belonging to each category, see Gu (2000) and Sun (2006, pp. 103-107.)

syllable corresponds to one word.[10] In the spoken language there are around 1000 possible tonal syllables,[11] but there are more than 1000 words. This implies that many words are pronounced in the same way (Wenzel, 2007, 2010a). For instance, the syllable *tā* (pronounced in first tone) corresponds to more than one character (i.e., one word): 他 ('he'), 她 ('she'), 它 ('it'), 塌 ('collapse'), 溻 ('become soaked with sweat'), etc. From this example, it is possible to see how the Chinese script helps disambiguate different words that are pronounced in the same way.

As regards the history of how most of the Chinese characters, namely the semantic-phonetic components, came into being, Wenzel (2007, 2010a) provides a brief but incisive summary. He notes that the first characters, which were found three or four thousand years ago on oracle bones, were pictorial signs representing ideas/objects that became associated with spoken words. Hence, these signs were used semantically, or I would say "grapho-semantically". Then, some of these signs were borrowed to represent words which had the same or a similar pronunciation. For instance, the character 其, originally pronounced as *jī* and representing a 'basket', became also used for the pronoun *qí* 'his/her/its/their'.[12] In these cases, the signs were used phonetically, but this created some confusion as one sign could suggest several meanings. While in the spoken language context can help disambiguate, in the written language a different device had to be found. Grapho-semantic elements were added to the characters. For example, the bamboo pictograph 竹 was added on the top of the character 其, thus forming the semantic-phonetic component 箕 meaning 'basket', while the character 其 continued to be used to indicate the pronoun 'his/her/its/their'.[13] Through the addition of semantic components many more combinations became possible, and this, in turn, contributed to creating more characters to disambiguate meanings in writing (Wenzel, 2007, 2010a).

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[10] The increase of polysyllabic words in Chinese might collide with Wenzel's (2007) definition of Chinese as "monosyllabic"; however, drawing from Humboldt's ideas, Kwan (2001) argues that "[i]n Chinese, the so-called compound words (hence by definition polysyllabic) are in fact compounds of multiple morphemes, in which each morpheme taken by itself is still always monosyllabic. So monosyllabicity in Chinese is not a matter of spoken words, but refers to the very morphemic unit as such" (p. 185). In the words of Huang Kan (1983, as cited in Kwan, 2001), "the Chinese language is monosyllabic down to its roots. With the uttering of one sound in Chinese, a certain meaning should have been expressed in its entirety, this being so different from polysyllabic Western languages" (p. 185).

[11] Tonality at the level of the syllable in Chinese has a meaning-discriminative function, and it helps increase the sound complexity of the language (Kwan, 2001). As previously mentioned, each Chinese character corresponds to a syllable. Hanyu pinyin is a phonetic transcription system used to annotate Chinese sounds in the Roman alphabet. In general, each syllable is composed of initials (i.e., consonants) and finals (i.e., vowels). Tone marks are placed on finals. Mandarin Chinese has four tones and a neutral tone (Sun, 2006):

- First tone: mā (high and flat) = 妈 mother
- Second tone: má (rising) = 蔴 hemp or flax fibre
- Third tone: mǎ (first falling and then rising) = 马 horse
- Fourth tone: mà (falling) = 骂 swear
- Neutral tone: ma (pronounced slightly) = 吗 interrogative particle

As this example shows, tones are essential because the same syllable pronounced in different tones has different meanings and corresponds to different characters.

[12] Example taken from McDonald (2011), p. 93.

[13] Example taken from McDonald (2011), p. 94.

It is worth noticing that, although there have been some attempts in the Chinese history to replace characters with a phonographic system, they have all been unsuccessful (Sun, 2006). In addition to historical and cultural reasons, another reason for the failed efforts to alphabetise the Chinese script could be the richness of homophony in the Chinese language (McDonald, 2011; Sun, 2006). The coexistence of Chinese characters and pinyin is named by DeFrancis (1984, as cited in Liu, 2005) as "digraphia", a term that underscores "the coexistence of two different writing systems for the same language" (Liu, 2005, p. 401). As Liu (2005) notes, it does not seem that one system is prevailing on the other, as Chinese characters and pinyin are used in different domains and for different functions. Indeed, the Chinese characters are used in all kinds of written communication, while pinyin is used in education to facilitate the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese (Liu, 2005). Instead of replacing the Chinese characters with a phonographic script, the Chinese government (as pointed out in section 2.5) embarked on a simplification of the Chinese characters, which mainly consisted in the reduction of the number of strokes in certain characters (Chen, 1999, as cited in Sun, 2006). Simplified characters are used in mainland China and Singapore, while traditional (i.e., non-simplified) characters are still used in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau (Sun, 2006). Confucius Institutes and Classrooms usually promote the teaching of simplified characters (Stambach, 2014), and this applies also to this case study.

The nature of Chinese characters and their relationship with spoken language: competing views

This sub-section will explore competing conceptualisations of the nature of the Chinese characters by drawing on a long-standing debate: whether Chinese characters simply represent spoken words as in other alphabetic languages or have a grapho-semantic nature (Gu, 2000; McDonald, 2011; Wenzel, 2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). I argue that different conceptualisations of the nature of the Chinese characters not only influence the way Chinese characters are taught and learnt in the classroom, but, ultimately, could shed new light on the conceptualisation of the relationship between spoken and written language.

McDonald (2011) argues that "the Chinese written system, like all writing systems, is based on a spoken language, not vice versa" (p. 88). While it is possible to argue that the Chinese characters cannot be totally divorced from the spoken language because they are "readable" (Sun, 2006, p. 102) and because phonetic devices played an important role in the constitution of most of the Chinese characters (i.e., semantic-phonetic compounds) (McDonald, 2011), McDonald's (2011) argument reaches the conclusion that "once Chinese characters become used as elements of a writing system in order to represent a particular language, their interpretation is determined by their connection to specific units of that language, not by any 'inherent' meaning they may seem to possess in themselves" (McDonald, 2011, p. 90). In line with Boodberg's (1937, as cited in McDonald, 2011) emphasis on the role of "convention" in linking together graph-semanteme-phoneme, McDonald (2011) maintains that "the principles of a character's composition are irrelevant to its interpretation" (McDonald, 2011, p. 90), thus, I argue, pointing to an arbitrary and

unmotivated relationship between the graphic features of a character and its meaning. McDonald (2011) corroborates his point by showing how the linguist John Kennedy (as cited in McDonald, 2011, p. 89) emphasises the connections between characters and their corresponding sounds while totally ignoring the graphic features of the characters in relation to their meaning. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, I argue that this view of the Chinese characters seems to point to a conceptualisation of the Chinese characters which approximate Chinese characters to "symbols" in Peirce's sense, whereby a "symbol" is "a sign whose interpretation is a matter of social convention" (Merrell, 2001, p. 31), and whose relationship with its semiotic object is arbitrary and unmotivated in sense that "there is no necessary natural link (as with the index) or a link due to some resemblance or similarity (as with the icon)" (Merrell, 2001, p. 31). This view of the Chinese characters seems to echo not only Peirce's characterisation of the "symbol" but also Saussure's conception of the arbitrary relationship between "signifier" and "signified" within the "linguistic sign" (Gu, 2000).

McDonald (2011) argues explicitly against the interpretation of Chinese characters as "icons" or "indexes" in Peirce's sense, whereby an "icon" is "a sign that interrelates with its semiotic object by virtue of some resemblance or similarity with it" (Merrell, 2001, p. 31) while an "index" is "a sign that interrelates with its semiotic object through some actual or physical or imagined causal connection" (Merrell, 2001, p. 31).[14] On the contrary, Gu's (2000) analysis of the six main principles forming the graphic structure of the Chinese characters (see previous sub-section) according to Peirce's categories of "icon", "index" and "symbol" shows that only the "loan-borrowing" and "interchangeable notation" principles could be seen as falling under the category of "symbolic signs". As regards the other character formation principles, Gu (2000) argues that the "imitate-shape" principle corresponds to "iconic signs" and the "indicate-condition" principle corresponds to "indexical signs". As regards the "grasp meaning" principle and the "shape-and-sound" principle, Gu (2000) argues that they do not seem to fall precisely into any of Peirce's categories. Thus, he coins for them the neologism "juxtaposigns" (Gu, 2000, p. 117), and argues that their interpretation "depends on a synthetic understanding of the two combined parts" (p. 117). According to Gu (2000), this is "the most interesting and the most artistic of all the six graphic principles" (p. 117). He concludes that "of the six principles for graph-making, only two of them [i.e., "loan-borrowing" and "interchangeable notation"] can be said to show no motivated, natural connection between the signifier and the signified. The largely motivated nature of Chinese writing sign is the most significant feature of Chinese written language and has affected Chinese conceptions of signification, representation, and aesthetics" (Gu, 2000, p. 119). In the same vein, Ting (2020) suggests that "[c]ompared with alphabetic writing, the relationship [between signifier and signified] is not

[14] I would like to clarify that, although McDonald (2011) argues against the interpretation of characters as icons or indexes, he does not explicitly classify characters as symbols in the Peircean sense. He argues that a character is simply a graph for a word which has a certain reading (or sound-shape) and functions as a unit of the language. I argue that this view underscores the importance of the graph-sound relationship as in other alphabetical languages and dismisses the graphic shape of characters as useless in interpreting the meaning of characters (McDonald, 2011).

arbitrary. Many characters were coined using the 'motivated method', considered a trait of the Chinese characters" (p. 115).

In opposition to McDonald's (2011) interpretation of the Chinese characters as arbitrary signs, (i.e., whose graphic features are irrelevant in relation to the meaning) merely representing the spoken language, Wenzel (2010a), despite acknowledging that the Chinese script can represent spoken words, seems to argue in favour of the "semantic structures" (p. 317) within the Chinese characters.[15] In Wenzel's (2010a) opinion, arguing that Chinese characters are not pictographic or ideographic ignores essential socio-cultural aspects of the Chinese script, such as the disambiguating function of the Chinese script (given the rich homophony in spoken Chinese) and the high importance attributed to graphic etymology and calligraphy in Chinese culture. Furthermore, Wenzel (2010a) maintains that arguing against the pictographic or ideographic nature of the Chinese script ignores the grapho-semantic components (also called 'semantic components' or 'radicals') of the Chinese characters (see previous sub-section). These semantic components are pictorial elements which enable classifying characters into semantic fields, and, thus, are important in the process of learning how to read and write (Wenzel 2010a). Indeed, in terms of character learning, once the relevance of the graphic features of the characters in relation to their meaning has been acknowledged, it is possible to suggest that "there is no need to learn [… the] characters 'one by one' in total separation" (Kwan, 2001, p. 217) because the principles of character composition and the semantic components should help learners, with the help of the teacher, "reason" (Kwan, 2001, p. 217) most of the Chinese characters (Kwan, 2001). Although it might be argued that, due to stylisation, standardisation and simplification over the millennia, the pictorial elements of the semantic components no longer resemble the original objects, "the pictographic feature […] has left traces" (Wenzel, 2010a, p. 318), and "it is an 'image' in the mind, not a passive one on a piece of paper, but an active image that strikes you" (Wenzel, 2010a, p. 319). On the contrary, McDonald (2011), in his journey towards learning the Chinese characters, recalls how "[he] spent hours writing characters over and over again in order to memorise them, something that, as an amateur calligrapher, [he] quite enjoyed, and further hours copying out characters, their associated pronunciations, and what seemed like their almost endless series of meaning" (p. 200). I argue that, although he hints at the aesthetic quality of the Chinese characters, his learning method seems to suggest that character-pronunciation-meaning are linked only by virtue of a convention, and, thus, characters and their meanings can be only learnt through rote memorisation and repetition rather than "reasoned" (Kwan, 2001, p. 217) from the principles of character composition and the semantic components of the Chinese characters.

After having pointed out different conceptualisations of the Chinese characters, namely as arbitrary signs or as having a grapho-semantic (i.e., pictographic/ideographic) nature, I would like to suggest a few considerations about Chinese language in its spoken and written form. I argue that the debate concerning

[15] For an extensive critique of McDonald's (2011) views and, in general, of Western phonocentric perspectives on Chinese writing, see also Gu (2014).

the Chinese script as either merely representing the spoken language or as having also grapho-semantic (i.e., pictographic/ideographic) features in itself could offer meaningful insights into what written language ultimately is.

In terms of the distinctiveness of the Chinese script compared to other alphabetic scripts as regards the relationship between script, sound and meaning, Wenzel (2007, 2010b) borrows and refines Kwan's (2001) distinction between a linear relationship, which pertains to alphabetic scripts, and a triangular relationship, which pertains to the Chinese script.

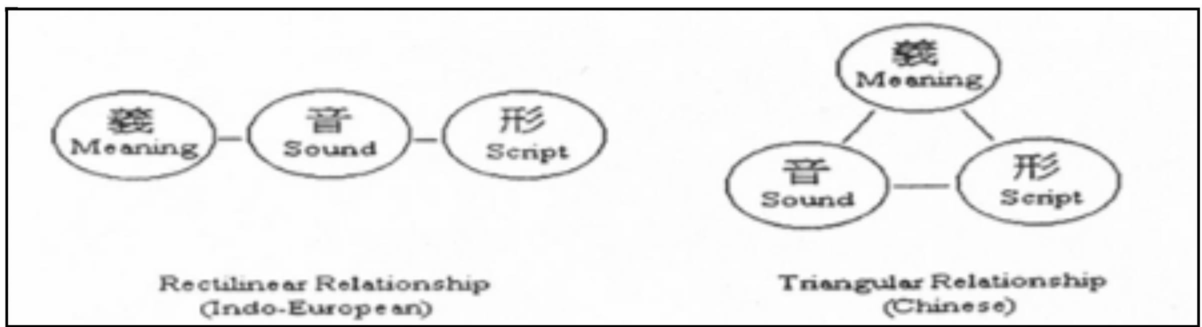


Figure 1-Kwan's (2001) model representing the relationship between meaning, sound and script in alphabetic scripts and in the Chinese script

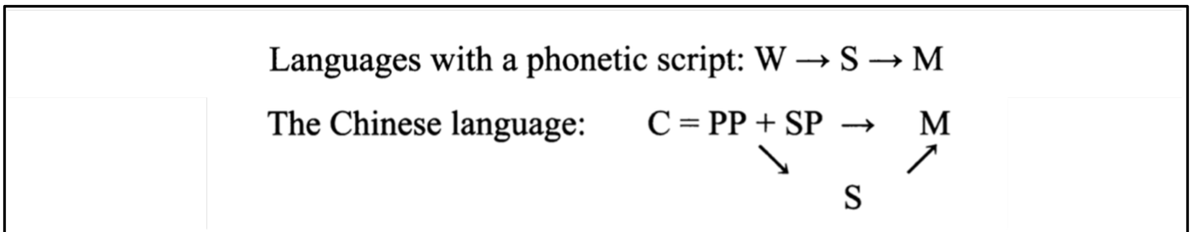


Figure 2-Wenzel's (2010b) model representing the relationship between meaning, spoken language and written language in alphabetic scripts and in the Chinese script

With respect to languages with phonetic scripts, the written (W) represents the spoken (S), which, in turn, represents the meaning (M) (Wenzel, 2010b). Thus, in Kwan's (2001) words, "the script is understood merely as a mechanical reproduction of the verbal language, and [the] sound is the direct representation of meaning, and the script only an indirect one" (p. 204). As regards the Chinese script, Wenzel's (2010b) triangular model, based on Kwan's (2001), represents how most of the Chinese characters, which fall under the category of semantic-phonetic compounds, relate to sound and meaning. In Wenzel's (2010b) words, "a character (C) usually has a phonetic part (PP) and a semantic part (SP), where the phonetic part refers to the spoken (S), which then refers to the meaning (M), and where the semantic part refers more directly to the meaning (M)" (p. 461). Because of this triangular relationship, Wenzel (2007) maintains that the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese script contribute to involving "the reader and writer of Chinese more directly [than readers and writers of alphabetic languages] in the world of meaning and objects" (p. 308).

McDonald's (2011) view of the Chinese script as "like all writing systems, [being] based on a spoken language" (p. 88), together with the total irrelevance attributed to the graphic features of characters in the

interpretation of their meaning, is heavily influenced by Saussure's (1916/1957, as cited in McDonald, 2011) claim, paraphrased by McDonald (2011), that "meaning is constituted by language as an interface between thought and sound" (p. 117), which, according to McDonald (2011), implies that "there are in fact no pre-existing ideas to which words, or graphs, may attach themselves; there are only sounds and concepts mutually delimited into meanings" (p. 117). This view clearly gives prominence to the spoken language as the carrier of meaning, thereby downplaying the written language, thus also the Chinese script, as its mere representation, as the linear model shows (Kwan, 2001; Wenzel, 2010b).

On the contrary, Wenzel (2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b), by drawing on the ideas suggested by the philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt and taken up also by the Chinese scholar Kwan (2001), argues in favour of a different relationship between the Chinese spoken language and its script, in which the Chinese script plays a much more fundamental role. Wenzel (2007, 2009, 2010a) explains that the Chinese characters, unlike alphabetic scripts of European languages, do not allow for what he defines as "arbitrary", "formal" and "abstract" grammatical morphemes (i.e., affixes) indicating linguistic inflections (for case, gender, number, tense, etc.). In Wenzel's (2007) words, "[t]he Chinese script has no inflections, […] but it has meaningful semantic parts and not meaningless alphabetic letters, as in the major languages of the West" (p. 303); thus, according to Wenzel (2010a), this fundamental feature of the Chinese script has "cemented" (Wenzel, 2010a, p. 317) the monosyllabic structure of the Chinese language (one word-one syllable-one character), which, in turn, has led to its poverty of grammar (i.e., absence of inflectional morphology). Following Wenzel's (2007, 2010a) argument, it could be maintained that the Chinese script, in which each character "stands for a whole [monosyllabic] word" (Wenzel, 2009, p. 121) and is materially "quadratic in shape and more compact and complete by itself [compared to words composed of alphabetic letters]" (Wenzel, 2009, p. 121), has contributed to the "isolating" (Humboldt, 1826, as cited in Wenzel, 2010a, p. 317) nature of the Chinese language. According to Humboldt (1826, as cited in Wenzel, 2010a), the Chinese language creates a "three-fold isolation" (p. 317) in terms of words, concepts/ideas and characters, in which "[t]he characters form an additional image with which the ideas clothe themselves, such that the image blends with the idea for those who frequently use those characters" (Humboldt, 1826, as translated and cited in Wenzel, 2010a, p. 317). Hence, Wenzel (2010a) argues that "[i]f the ideas 'clothe' themselves in their written images, the latter […] are more than mere representations, i.e. more than attachments to the spoken words. They are an essential and integral part of the language itself. Alphabetic letters add less" (Wenzel, 2010a). Wenzel (2010a) continues his argument by mainly pointing out the relevance of the grapho-semantic (i.e., pictorial) features of the Chinese characters. Indeed, Wenzel (2009) argues that "the pictorial elements and the grammatical isolation we find in Chinese give force to each individual character" (p. 123). Thus, it seems that a conceptualisation of the Chinese script which, without rejecting its capacity of representing the spoken language, points also to its "semantically oriented" (Gu, 2000, p. 102) (i.e., grapho-semantically oriented) nature, as also shown above in Figures 1 and 2 by the triangular model (Kwan, 2001; Wenzel, 2010b), seems

to suggest that the Chinese script is “an inherent component of the Chinese language itself” (Humboldt as paraphrased in Kwan, 2001, p. 217). This view does not see writing as mere representation of the spoken language, but as holding some meaning in itself and/or adding something more to the spoken language. In conclusion, it could be argued that an appreciation of what I call the “the fabrics” of the Chinese script, namely the graphic features of the Chinese characters and, especially, their grapho-semantic components, could not only expose the limits of a phonocentric and representational approach to language (Kwan, 2001) but also ultimately suggest an appreciation of writing as, in the words of a deaf scholar, “a world-making project” (Snoddon, 2022, p. 724).

After having introduced the main features of the Chinese script, I pointed out the fundamental socio-political-historical role that characters have played in China compared to pinyin, which, on the contrary, is mainly used to facilitate access to the Chinese characters. Then, I presented different views concerning the arbitrary vs motivated relationship between the graphic features of characters and their meaning. I argue that these views lead not only to different conceptualisations of the Chinese characters (i.e., arbitrary signs merely representing spoken language vs signs also having a grapho-semantic nature) but also to different ways of teaching and learning the Chinese characters (i.e., rote memorisation of characters and associated meanings vs reasoning of character meaning from the principles of character composition and grapho-semantic components). Lastly, I attempted to show the “more substantial” (Wenzel, 2007, p. 303) role that the Chinese script, due its “semantic structures” (Wenzel, 2010a, p. 317), plays within the Chinese language compared to other alphabetic scripts. All these reflections drawn from the literature will help analyse how the textbooks, the teachers and the students conceptualise and value the teaching of the Chinese script.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the main theoretical concepts and literature which will inform my data analysis in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Chapters 4 and 5, which will focus on the language and literacy conceptualisations informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese and of its script in this specific school context, will draw mainly on paradigms for conceptualising language and literacy presented in section 2.2. More specifically, Chapter 4, which focuses on language, will also draw on conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese in China, within the Confucius Institute project and within the South African curriculum discussed in section 2.5. Chapter 5, which focuses on literacy, will draw on the discussion concerning Chinese characters vs pinyin and on the competing views concerning the conceptualisation of the Chinese characters presented in section 2.6. Both Chapter 4 and 5 will also relate the conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese and of its script surfacing from the data

analysis with conceptualisations of language and literacy within the South African educational context presented in section 2.4.

Chapter 6 will focus on the ideological value attribution to Mandarin Chinese within South Africa's linguistic market and on how this relates to the conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese and of its script discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. By focusing on the ideological value attribution to Mandarin Chinese in relation to other languages in South Africa, this chapter will mostly draw on theoretical concepts presented in section 2.3, namely the relationship between language and power, the linguistic market, the hierarchisation of language(s) and the commodification of language.

The theoretical framework that I have just outlined will inform not only my data analysis in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, but also my research design and methodology, which I will present in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research design and methodology

After having presented the background context and aims (in Chapter 1) and the theoretical framework (in Chapter 2) of this study, in this chapter I will attempt to provide a fine-grained description of the research design and methodology through which the research questions were investigated. Firstly, I will provide an overview of the research approaches and paradigms this study draws on, which, in turn, contributed to shaping the research design and methodology. Secondly, I will describe the research site and introduce the research participants. Thirdly, I will describe the data collection methods and the reasons why I relied on these methods. I will also take the chance to briefly tell the "history" of this study, whose research design and data collection methods had to be readjusted due to unforeseen circumstances. Fourthly, I will present how the data were collated and analysed in order to answer the research questions. The last section will present some ethical considerations concerning this study.

3.1 Research approach, design and methodology

This study mainly draws on both a linguistic ethnographic approach and a biographical approach. As I will attempt to explain, both approaches are deeply linked to language and literacy ideologies, within which this study is theoretically positioned. Copland and Creese (2015) define linguistic ethnography as "an interpretive approach which studies the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures" (Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 13). More specifically, "linguistic ethnography looks at how language is used [conceptualised and valued (*my addition*)] by people and what this can tell us about **wider social constraints, structures and ideologies** (*my emphasis*)" (Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 14). Similarly, "biographical approaches give researchers access to individuals' lived experience of language, to their learning trajectories, to **societal influences and language ideologies and to the discursive construction of language use in social spaces** (*my emphasis*)" (Flubacher & Purkarthofer, 2022, p. 4). The above-mentioned definitions of the linguistic ethnographic approach and of the biographical approach seem to suggest a close relationship between both research approaches and the aim of exploring language and literacy ideologies; namely, for the purpose of this study, language and literacy ideologies concerning the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa. As far as the exploration of literacy ideologies in relation to the Chinese script itself (i.e. characters) and also in relation to its interplay with pinyin are concerned, a semiotic approach that attends to what Dickinson (2017) calls "the physical materiality of writing" (p. 267) is adopted. According to this approach, "we see written artifacts not merely as vehicles for the *transmission* of linguistic meaning or symbolic physical representations of speech but […] we also analyze them as the 'material culture' of language" (Dickinson, 2017, p. 265).

In terms of wider research paradigms (i.e., positivist, interpretive, constructionist), I argue that the linguistic ethnographic approach and the biographical approach adopted in this study contribute to positioning it within both interpretive and constructionist research paradigms (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). Indeed, as Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006) argue, “paradigms in the social sciences often coexist” (p. 9). The interpretive approach “aims to explain the subjective reasons and meanings that lie behind social action” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p. 7); namely, in this study, it aims to explain the reasons and the meanings that teachers and students attach to Mandarin Chinese. The constructionist approach “aims to show how versions of the social world are produced in discourse” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p. 7); namely, in this study, it aims to show how Mandarin Chinese and its script are conceptualised and, thus, constructed in the textbooks, in classroom discourse and in teachers’ and students’ discourses about teaching and learning practices, as well as how hierarchies among different named languages are constructed within students’ narratives of their linguistic repertoires. The semiotic approach adopted for the exploration of literacy ideologies contributes to showing not only how the Chinese written language (pinyin and characters) is constructed in discourse (i.e., students’ and teachers’ narratives), but also how it is physically constructed within material artifacts (i.e., the Mandarin Chinese textbooks).

In terms of how research should be designed and conducted, interpretive and constructionist research generally relies on an inductive approach (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006), whereby “the researcher starts with a set of vague speculations about a research question and tries to make sense of the phenomenon by observing a set of particular instances” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p. 7). Within the specific fields of linguistic ethnography and biographical approaches, “researchers look for the typical in the specific, relying on individual stories and case studies to explain larger issues” (Flubacher, 2022, p. 53). Indeed, the present study attempts to shed light on the macro issue of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South African schools by focusing on Mandarin Chinese teachers’ and South African students’ conceptualisation and valuing of Mandarin Chinese in a specific school context. Considering this, a case study research design seems to suit this study well. Drawing on the definition given by Merriam-Webster’s dictionary (2009, as cited in Flyvbjerg, 2011), a case study consists of an in-depth analysis of a bounded “individual unit” (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 301), which is represented in this study by one specific Mandarin Chinese teaching and learning project in one public secondary school in South Africa.

Within the framework of a case study research design, the research questions are explored through qualitative research methods (i.e., mainly interviews, the use of language portraits, a small number of classroom observations as well as qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis of the Mandarin Chinese textbooks) as they may enable making sense of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa “from the perspective of the ‘insiders’” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38), i.e. students and teachers. A common critique of qualitative research, and especially of case studies, is that the findings are not generalisable due to the bounded unit of study and the small sample size of participants (Dörnyei, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2011). Flyvbjerg

(2011) defines this critique as a "misunderstanding" about case studies and suggests that "formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas 'the force of example' and transferability are underestimated" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 305). Although there is no claim to generalise the findings of this study to all the South African students learning Mandarin Chinese and to all the Chinese teachers teaching Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, this study may provide interesting insights into this relatively under-researched phenomenon and a way of thinking through it theoretically. Furthermore, it may plant the seeds for further research in this field.

3.2 Research site and participants

As an introductory note, I would like to specify that, in order to maintain confidentiality for the school and the research participants, the school where this study was conducted as well as all the research participants are identified by pseudonyms in the writing up of the research.

The Mandarin Chinese Department at Blue River School

This study was conducted in 2021 (with one additional interview in 2023) in one public secondary school in South Africa which has been collaborating with Hanban for the teaching of Mandarin Chinese for some years. This school, which is identified by the pseudonym 'Blue River School', is located in a suburban area of a large city. It advertises itself as a school which services diverse communities, but it places a special emphasis on previously disadvantaged communities.

The language of learning and teaching in the school is English. Afrikaans and one African language (among the official languages in South Africa)[16] are offered as first additional languages, with Afrikaans being more widespread than the African language in terms of number of teachers and students within the school. The school has a Mandarin Chinese Department, which, in addition to providing Mandarin Chinese language teaching, also organises cultural events for the school and for other audiences in collaboration with relevant institutional bodies.

The interview with Jing, the director of the Mandarin Chinese Department, provided valuable information concerning the setting up and the daily management of the Mandarin Chinese Department. The Mandarin Chinese Department at Blue River School was set up some years ago in cooperation with Hanban because of Mr. Labuschagne's (i.e., the school's Principal who was in charge at that time) interest in China. Since then, as Jing underscores, the cooperation with Hanban has always been a positive and transparent one. In particular, the role of Hanban is praised for its ability to provide constant funding for the operation of the Mandarin Chinese Department. Indeed, at Blue River School, the offering of Mandarin Chinese as a

[16] The name of the language is not stated to conceal the identity of the school.

subject comes without additional fees for the students. Hanban, in addition to the provision of teachers and textbooks, also offers the students opportunities to visit and study in China through scholarships. The Mandarin Chinese textbooks used at Blue River School are chosen among the titles suggested by Hanban. As will be shown and thoroughly discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, in addition to one textbook which is used since grade 8, the textbook preparing students for the HSK 1 test is considered a "must-have" textbook within the school.

Mandarin Chinese was introduced at Blue River School as a compulsory subject for all the students at the school. This was firmly requested and supported by Mr. Labuschagne. When I first approached Blue River School, in February 2020, Mandarin Chinese was taught as a compulsory subject from grade 8 to grade 11. However, when I collected data in 2021, the school partly changed the compulsory vs optional policy for Mandarin Chinese; namely, Mandarin Chinese was still compulsory for grade 8 and 9 students, but it was optional for grade 10 and 11 students, who could choose Mandarin as an eighth subject, in addition to the seven subjects that have to be studied in the FET Stage (four mandatory subjects and three electives) and that are assessed in the National Senior Certificate examination (NSC). This change was because students from grade 10 started to feel the pressure of concentrating on the seven subjects for the NSC. At the time of data collection, Mandarin Chinese was not considered a subject that could be included in the seven subjects for the NSC. As Jing reported, Mandarin Chinese was seen as a risky subject to take for the NSC because the teachers were unsure whether the students were adequately prepared. This inadequate preparation for the NSC was mainly due to two reasons. First, the teaching time for Mandarin Chinese was very limited at Blue River School. In the *CAPS* for the subject of Mandarin, the suggested time allocation for grades 7-9 is 2 hours per week, and for grades 10-12 it is 4 hours per week (Department of Basic Education, 2014 b-c). At Blue River School, grade 8 and 9 students only had one-hour class every two weeks, and grade 10 and 11 students had two one-hour classes per week on alternate weeks. Since the Mandarin classes took place in the afternoon, some students had transportation issues in the afternoon, and it sometimes happened that they missed their Mandarin classes. One day I remember arriving in the grade 8 classroom just before the lesson began, while all the students were rushing out to catch the last available transportation. Second, while the *CAPS* for Mandarin presumes that all students start learning Mandarin in grade 4 (with no other versions of the curriculum allowing entry in other grades), in practice second additional languages are usually taught from grade 8 onwards, namely when students enter secondary school (De Man, 2017). This means that students "miss" four years of curricular instruction (from grade 4 to grade 7), and this was the situation of all the students interviewed at Blue River School, who had no previous instruction of Mandarin. These policy vs practice gaps (i.e., scarce time allocation and no allowance for an entry level different from grade 4) also explain why, although the teachers mentioned the *CAPS* for Mandarin as a general guide, they were not following the content and teaching plans prescribed in the *CAPS* for Mandarin. The teachers were relying almost exclusively on the Mandarin Chinese textbooks chosen from the ones suggested by Hanban. The

teachers also put great emphasis on the students' preparation for the HSK 1 test, namely the first level of the international standardised language assessment for Mandarin Chinese, which is promoted by Hanban and which all the students were supposed to take in grade 11. In sum, it could be inferred that, although the Mandarin Chinese Department at Blue River School promoted Mandarin Chinese as a second additional language, its actual implementation seemed to suggest that Mandarin Chinese was offered as an 'extra' subject, and this is how it was often defined by some students.

The members of the Mandarin Chinese Department at Blue River School

At the time of data collection, the Mandarin Chinese Department was composed of Jing, i.e. the director of the department, and three teachers, i.e. Bowen, Meilian and Fang. In the next paragraphs, I will briefly introduce them by providing some background information which might be helpful to contextualise the data analysis in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Jing – director of the Mandarin Chinese Department

Jing is a Chinese national who has been living in South Africa for many years. She played a key role in setting up the Mandarin Chinese Department at Blue River School by linking the school with relevant Chinese institutional bodies. She is very supportive of the Hanban projects (including the promotion of HSK at both basic education and higher education levels) and puts a lot of effort into organising institutional events in cooperation with Hanban. She is a very hard-working and dedicated person, and she firmly believes that the South African students could afford better opportunities in their future lives and careers by studying Mandarin and, thus, benefitting from the Hanban scholarships.

Meilian – grade 8 and 9 teacher

Meilian, who was teaching some of the grade 8 and the grade 9 classes at the time of data collection, is a young teacher who has taught Mandarin Chinese in South Africa for a few years under the aegis of Hanban. Before coming to South Africa, she taught Mandarin Chinese in another African country. As far as her academic background is concerned, she majored in Chinese language and literature in China, and chose English as a second major. While in South Africa, she is currently doing research in Mandarin linguistics. She says she has a special talent for languages. By choosing to be a Mandarin Chinese teacher outside of China, she wants to give other people more opportunities and to enable them to get know China better. She believes that the economic ties between China and South Africa provide a good rationale for students to study Mandarin.

Bowen – grade 8 and 9 teacher

Bowen, who was also teaching some of the grade 8 and the grade 9 classes at the time of data collection, is a young teacher who has lived and taught in South Africa for many years under the aegis of Hanban. Before teaching at Blue River School, he taught Mandarin Chinese at a higher education institution in South Africa. As regards his academic background, after he majored in Chinese language and literature in China, with a second major in English, he specialised in teaching Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language, and he is currently specialising in curriculum studies. Bowen believes that South African students choose to study Mandarin Chinese not because they are fascinated by the Chinese culture, but because they are fascinated by the Chinese economy. He compares English and Mandarin as languages "opening doors" for the students. As shown in Chapter 5, Bowen has a special interest in the teaching of Chinese characters. His reflections on the conceptualisation and teaching of the Chinese script are a core component of the interviews with him (Appendix 7).

Fang – grade 10 and 11 teacher

Fang, who was teaching the grade 10 and 11 classes at the time of data collection, is a middle-aged Chinese teacher who has moved to South Africa to teach Mandarin Chinese under the aegis of Hanban. In China she was an English teacher. When I expressed to her my concerns about being in the classroom with the students, she reassured me by saying that the students would be fine during my classroom observations as they already knew that in the classroom "we are all friends, and we are like a family". Fang is a very gentle teacher always speaking in hushed tones with me and the students. Although she strived to involve the students during the lessons, her teaching approach was very teacher-centred and textbook-based. Perhaps her lack of fluency in English was also a factor that hindered her in engaging in open conversations with the students (Appendix 8).

The students

In this study I focused on students in grade 8, i.e. students who have just started learning Mandarin Chinese as a compulsory subject, and students in grade 11, i.e. students who have chosen to continue Mandarin Chinese as an optional subject and who are in their last year of Mandarin Chinese learning at Blue River School. Data collection in grade 8 and grade 11 was meant to provide some information concerning the students' conceptualisation and valuing of Mandarin Chinese and of its script at different learning stages. As will be shown in Chapter 5, most students in grade 8 found characters too difficult or confusing, thereby tending to resort to pinyin as the only writing system, while all students in grade 11 felt the need to learn Chinese characters. In terms of value attribution to Mandarin Chinese, data excerpts in Chapter 6 will show that the discourse of Mandarin Chinese as having an instrumental and economic value, though present in a few grade 8 students, was more prominent among grade 11 students.

Grade 8 students

In grade 8 five students participated in the study, i.e. Kylie, Sandra, Kim, Zintle and Zaira. All these students, except for Zintle, are English and Afrikaans speakers, although they maintain that their most used language both at school and within the family is English. Zintle, who speaks both some African languages and English at home, is the only African language speaker who participated in the study. Before attending the Mandarin Chinese classes at Blue River School, none of these students had previously had any formal instruction in Mandarin. Kylie, Sandra and Kim share some interest in Asian entertainment, but they find Mandarin Chinese a challenging subject and are not sure whether they will continue after grade 9. Zaira spent some time in China as some of her family members live and run a business in China; so, she is keen on learning the language for her future career "hopefully in China". Zintle also seems to be very committed to learning Mandarin Chinese because of its status as a global language (in her words, "it is globally available").

Grade 11 students

In Grade 11 eight students participated in the study, i.e. Brenda, Daniel, Nina, Sarah, Thomas, Vicky, John and Liyana. All the students in grade 11, except for Daniel, are English and Afrikaans speakers, although English is again reported to be the most used language both at school and within the family. Daniel is a student coming from Congo, whose home and family languages are Swahili and French, although he sees English as the language of his present and future. Among these students, all of them showed a specific interest in travelling outside of South Africa, especially in Asia, and the majority of them see their future lives and careers abroad. While all the students stressed that learning Mandarin Chinese is an "opportunity" unlocking other "opportunities" in terms of travelling and communication, Brenda, Daniel, Thomas and Vicky, especially, also showed a career-focused mindset in relation to Mandarin Chinese.

3.3 Data collection

Before providing a detailed description of how and which data for this study were collected, I would like to share Blommaert and Jie's (2010) conception of "fieldwork", which "should not just be reduced to data collection, because essentially it is a ***learning process*** *(authors' emphasis)*" (p. 26). Thus, different data collection methods and data sources were important to gain a deeper knowledge of the "kaleidoscopic, complex and complicated [reality]" (Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 11) of the school context, of the practices and processes, and of the research participants' experiences.

The school was first approached in February 2020, just a few weeks before the Covid pandemic broke out. Therefore, in accordance with the school's protocols around Covid, access to the school was postponed to 2021, when, however, for personal reasons and for travel restrictions, it was difficult to travel from Italy

(where I was residing in 2021) to South Africa. Therefore, despite the fact that I had planned to explore the conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese (research questions n.1 and n.2) mainly through observation in grade 8 and grade 11 classrooms, I was able to observe only three lessons in the grade 11 class, namely in Fang's class. Two of these lessons were audio-recorded and constituted the interactional data of my study. Although observation (and consequent collection of interactional data through audio-recording) of teachers' and students' teaching and learning discourses and practices as naturally occurring in the classroom was very limited, it gave me a sense of what was happening in the classroom (i.e., how the lessons were conducted, what and how the teaching material was used during the lesson, how the teacher and the students interacted, etc.). All these impressions and my first reflections on what I observed were recorded in my fieldnotes. Some of this interactional data provided a few salient examples to support my argument in the data analysis.

Since observation and interactional data was quite limited, I mainly resorted to interview data from Jing, the teachers and the students, as well as to the Mandarin Chinese textbooks adopted by the Mandarin Chinese Department, to explore the conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School. This is why the linguistic ethnographic approach adopted in this study should not be understood as a "traditional ethnographic approach [… because…] limited time [was] spent in the field" (Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 30), but rather as "an ethnographic perspective" (Green & Bloome, 1997, as cited in Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 30). Indeed, as Copland and Creese (2015) suggest, "[a]nswers to research questions [such as research questions n.1 and n.2 pertaining to the conceptualisations of language and literacy which inform the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese] that might have traditionally emerged through observation may not do so in this kind of research, making formal interviews valuable data sources" (p. 30).

Interviews were conducted online (unfortunately without video, except for Jing's interview) by using WhatsApp.[17] I interviewed Jing, Meilian and Bowen via one-to-one semi-structured interviews (Appendix 5). Bowen made himself available for a second interview in 2023 (after I started my data analysis) for some clarifications. Unfortunately, Fang gave her consent for the classroom observation but not for the interview. Students in grades 8 and 11 were interviewed in groups of two or three students per group (Appendix 5). Group interviews, in which the students could choose their partners, were preferred to individual interviews, as group interviews made the students feel more at ease during the interview.

As seen in section 3.2, the interview with Jing was mainly aimed at contextualising the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School. Interviews with teachers and students focused on different "macro topics". One macro topic, which pertained to interviews with both teachers and students, included questions attempting to elicit teachers' and students' descriptions and narrative accounts of their actual teaching and learning approaches and practices. These questions were aimed at exploring the

[17] I made sure to provide teachers and students with sufficient data on their phones.

conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School (research questions n.1 and n.2).

In the teachers' interviews, another macro topic consisted of questions concerning the teachers' background and their linguistic repertoire. By assuming that the way teachers conceptualise language also influences the way they teach language (McKinney, 2017), these questions were also aimed at eliciting data which could provide valuable insights to explore the conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy informing the teaching of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School. One last macro topic in the teachers' interviews concerned their views on the introduction of Mandarin Chinese as a subject in the South African school curriculum. The questions pertaining to this macro topic attempted to elicit teachers' views on the value of Mandarin as a school subject for South African students, and, thus, to ultimately explore the ideological value that teachers attribute to Mandarin Chinese within South Africa's linguistic market (part of research question n.3).

In the students' interviews, in addition to the macro topic including questions on learning approaches and practices, the other macro topic comprised questions trying to elicit students' perspectives on the role and value of Mandarin Chinese as a language within their linguistic repertoire and as a subject within South African schools. These interview questions were aimed at ultimately exploring the ideological value that students attribute to Mandarin Chinese within South Africa's linguistic market (part of research question n.3).

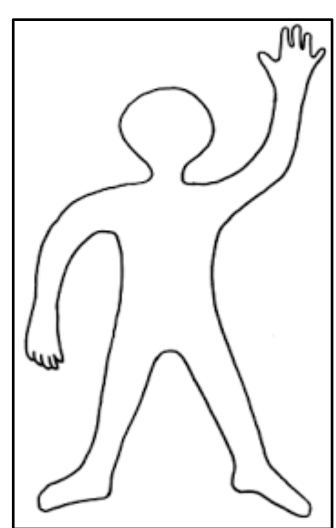


Figure 3-Template for language portraits retrieved from heteroglossia.net (https://www.heteroglossia.net/Sprachportraet.123.0.html)

Interviews with the students were preceded by the completion of a short questionnaire aimed at collecting some general information on the socio-cultural and linguistic background of the students (Appendix 3). Interviews with both teachers and students were preceded by the colouring of their language portrait. Teachers and students were invited to use different colours to represent their linguistic resources[18] and to map them out onto a body silhouette representing these (Appendix 4). The language portrait is a multimodal method of inquiry that was adopted in this study to invite teachers and students to reflect on their linguistic repertoire (Busch, 2012). The theoretical concept of the linguistic repertoire (mentioned in Chapter 2) positions itself within a post-structuralist view of language. According to Busch (2012), languages are not conceived as entities in themselves but "in relation to one another" (p. 18), thereby constituting a "heteroglossic whole" in the Bakhtinian sense (p. 18) (see Chapter 2, section 2.2). Busch's (2012) notions of

[18] During the data analysis, I realised that the choice of the word "languages" instead of "linguistic resources" in the language portrait instructions given to the teachers and the students (Appendix 4) may have influenced the choice of the linguistic resources represented on the body silhouette by limiting them to standard/national languages. However, whenever possible, this issue was addressed during the interviews, especially in relation to Mandarin Chinese and other Chinese language varieties/dialects.

the linguistic repertoire as "interactional" and as "point[ing] both backwards and forwards" (p. 18) seem to provide an interesting theoretical framework to explore teachers' and students' conceptualisations and valuing of Mandarin Chinese in relation to other linguistic resources acquired within their life trajectory as well as other linguistic resources they would like to acquire in their future. In this study the language portraits were very "telling" not only for what was present in them but also for what was absent from them, and they were mainly used to prompt some interview questions. For instance, the absence of Chinese language varieties/dialects other than standard Mandarin Chinese in teachers' portraits led me to ask whether they could understand or speak other Chinese language varieties/dialects; the presence of European/Asian languages together with Mandarin and the absence of African languages as desired future languages in students' portraits led me to ask whether they were interested in learning an African language as a subject in school.

As far as the Mandarin Chinese textbooks (i.e, *HSK Standard Course 1* and *Easy Steps to Chinese 1*)[19] are concerned, I first chose them as data sources because teachers relied very much on them in their teaching practice, and, thus, I believed that textbooks as data sources could supplement my brief observation period in the classroom. However, once I started looking at the textbooks, I realised that they could offer valuable insights into how language and literacy were conceptualised, taught, learnt and valued in this particular context. The prefaces, the overall structure and topics of the textbooks, as well as the vocabulary, the texts, and the explanatory sections (on grammar, characters and pinyin) presented in the various chapters, were quite revealing in terms of the general aims and the underlying teaching approach of the textbook authors. This approach mainly aligns with a structured and decontextualised approach to language teaching mostly aimed at preparing students for international standardised language assessments (beginner level) modelled on European languages. In terms of the Chinese written language, how different scripts (i.e., pinyin and Chinese characters) were used throughout the textbooks and how Chinese characters were presented were fundamental sources of data to shed light on the conceptualisation of the nature of Chinese literacy according to the textbook authors (i.e., characters as arbitrary signs simply representing sounds as in alphabetic scripts vs characters as grapho-semantic signs whose material graphic shape is worth exploring).

[19] Please find here full reference of the textbooks under consideration:
Jiang, L., Wang, F. (Fang), Wang, F. (Feng), & Liu, L. (2019). *HSK Standard Course 1 textbook*. Beijing, PRC: Beijing Language and Culture University Press.
Ma, Y., & Li, X. (2020). *Easy Steps to Chinese 1 textbook* (2nd edition). Beijing, PRC: Beijing Language and Culture University Press.
Each of the two textbooks is coupled with a workbook, which reflects the same structure of the corresponding textbook. As regards the *HSK Standard Course 1 workbook*, it also presents mock tests of the HSK 1 test. For the purpose of this study, only the textbooks are considered as they were the main teaching and learning point of reference.

3.4 Data analysis

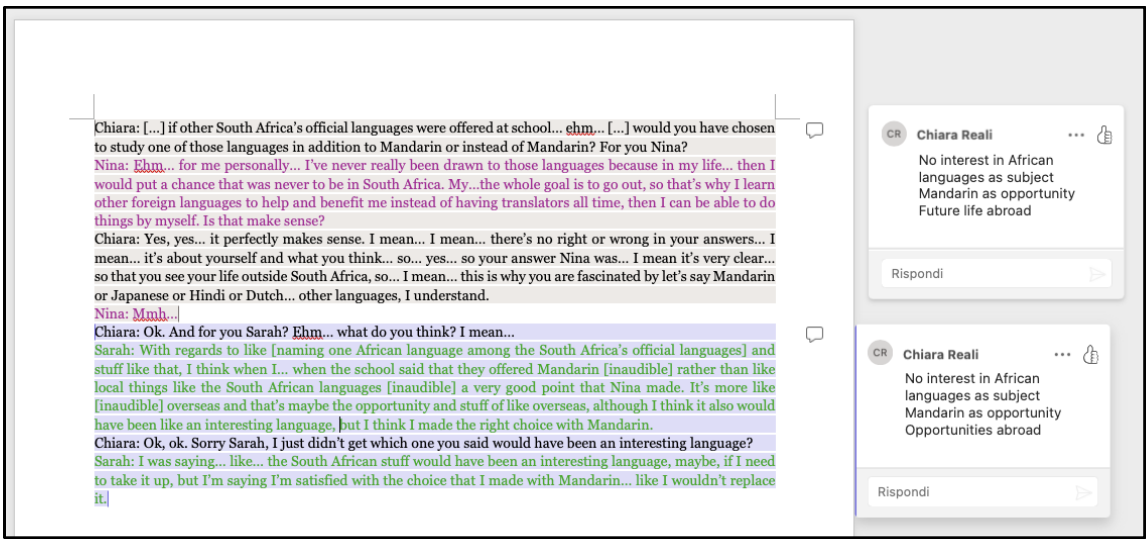
I started my data analysis process by listening many times to the audio-recordings of the interviews and of the lessons observed. While listening to the audio-recordings, I transcribed all of them into Microsoft Word documents. The reason for transcribing is that "transcripts provide a permanent and readily-accessible record of spoken language and they can allow […] to look at this in considerable detail" (Swann, 1994, p. 39). The transcriptions enabled me to immerse myself into the data and familiarise with it. Once the interviews and the interactional data had been given a textual form, I adopted a thematic analysis approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017) to analyse all data sources. Clarke and Braun (2017) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (p. 297). Within this study, thematic analysis suited data analysis well, as it could "be used to identify patterns within and *across* data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297), namely within and across different data sources (i.e., fieldnotes, interviews, interactional data, and textbooks). Thematic analysis was constantly coupled with discourse analysis. As Gee and Handford (2012) maintain:

> Some forms [of discourse analysis] are closely tied to linguistics and tie their claims to facts about grammar and about the way different grammatical structures function in different contexts of use. Other forms are less closely tied to linguistics or grammar and focus on the development of themes or images across sentences or utterances in an oral or written text (p. 5).

In this study, discourse analysis was generally more aligned to the second type of discourse analysis described by Gee and Handford (2012) (i.e., discourse analysis focused on the "development of themes or images"), as the aim was to identify themes within and across different sources of textual data in order to interpret it in relation to the research questions. However, the focus on themes did not overlook the theoretical and methodological principle that "linguistic and pragmatic *shape* is the main entrance to [a] wider package of social and cultural meaning" (Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 72). Indeed, while performing thematic analysis and discourse analysis, special emphasis was given to lexical choices made by research participants and by the textbook authors within the textbook prefaces. Examples of these lexical choices will be provided in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

<u>Stage 1 – Coding of data from interviews and interactional data</u>

The thematic analysis process started with the coding of interactional data (into which fieldnotes were incorporated) and interviews. During the coding process I was sensitive to Clarke and Braun's (2013) suggestion that codes need to "capture both a semantic and conceptual reading of the data" (p. 121) rather than simply summarising and reducing data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). By using Microsoft Word, chunks of text were selected, and relevant codes were written as a comment on the right.



Chiara: [...] if other South Africa's official languages were offered at school... ehm... [...] would you have chosen to study one of those languages in addition to Mandarin or instead of Mandarin? For you Nina?
Nina: Ehm... for me personally... I've never really been drawn to those languages because in my life... then I would put a chance that was never to be in South Africa. My...the whole goal is to go out, so that's why I learn other foreign languages to help and benefit me instead of having translators all time, then I can be able to do things by myself. Is that make sense?
Chiara: Yes, yes... it perfectly makes sense. I mean... I mean... there's no right or wrong in your answers... I mean... it's about yourself and what you think... so... yes... so your answer Nina was... I mean it's very clear... so that you see your life outside South Africa, so... I mean... this is why you are fascinated by let's say Mandarin or Japanese or Hindi or Dutch... other languages, I understand.
Nina: Mmh...
Chiara: Ok. And for you Sarah? Ehm... what do you think? I mean...
Sarah: With regards to like [naming one African language among the South Africa's official languages] and stuff like that, I think when I... when the school said that they offered Mandarin [inaudible] rather than like local things like the South African languages [inaudible] a very good point that Nina made. It's more like [inaudible] overseas and that's maybe the opportunity and stuff of like overseas, although I think it also would have been like an interesting language, but I think I made the right choice with Mandarin.
Chiara: Ok, ok. Sorry Sarah, I just didn't get which one you said would have been an interesting language?
Sarah: I was saying... like... the South African stuff would have been an interesting language, maybe, if I need to take it up, but I'm saying I'm satisfied with the choice that I made with Mandarin... like I wouldn't replace it.

Chiara Reali
No interest in African languages as subject
Mandarin as opportunity
Future life abroad
Rispondi

Chiara Reali
No interest in African languages as subject
Mandarin as opportunity
Opportunities abroad
Rispondi

Figure 4-Example of coding from an interview extract with Nina and Sarah (two grade 11 students)

<u>Stage 2 – Collating codes and data extracts within tables</u>

Once I coded all the interview and interactional data, I created four tables in four Excel sheets in order to have a more aerial and comprehensive view of the data. Two tables (one for the teachers and one for the students) were more related to the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese. The other two tables (one for the teachers and for the students) were more related to the role of Mandarin Chinese within the linguistic repertoire of students and teachers and to Mandarin Chinese as a school subject within South African schools. In the tables, variables were constituted by the research participants (left column) and the codes identified in the data (top rows). In the tables I grouped data extracts from different research participants according to the codes that had been identified in Stage 1. Because of the biographical approach of this study, I thought it was important to see how data extracts and codes related to each individual research participant. Although the language portraits (as well as the questionnaires) were mainly intended to provide me with an initial background knowledge of the teachers' and the students' socio-linguistic backgrounds that could prompt some interview questions, I went back to the portraits at this stage of data analysis to triangulate data from the interviews with relevant data from them. For instance, it was quite revealing that some students mentioned in their narratives that they had African languages as subjects in primary school, but they did not include them in their language portraits. In another example, one student clearly represented Mandarin on her linguistic repertoire but omitted Afrikaans, although she was learning Afrikaans as first additional language and Mandarin as second additional language in school. By triangulating data from the interviews with the portraits I attempted to give prominence to these mismatches, which would ultimately inform my interpretation of the data. Since the focus of the study was mainly on Mandarin Chinese within the language repertoires of teachers and students, a detailed multimodal analysis of the portraits was beyond the scope of this study. However, a general look at the visual representations of the participants' choices in terms of

languages and associated colours (i.e., standard language varieties often associated with the colour of the country's flag vs non-standard language varieties, languages as clearly demarcated from one another by different colours vs nuanced relationship between languages) were very precious in giving some clues about students' and teachers' conceptualisations of and value attribution to language/s.

	Teaching approach						
	Vocabulary and characters grouping characters sentence structures	Comprehensive approach oral & written language	oral vs written characters as foundation/authentic language tracing characters/graphic design over-reliance on pinyin	Radicals and phonic components	characters-pinyin-meaning as unit	Textbook essential/important guide Teacher decoding textbook	Translation vs repetition Closed and structured answers
Bowen	For all the students I've been teaching, I always trying to them working out two things, let's put it in that way. One thing it's building their vocabularies and one thing building a [...] like to learn more characters, to group their characters, to have them to memorise that, and the fact the other thing is to creating more useful sentence	"So the new... for Blue River School we have this... let's call it revolution. I want to call it that. Ahahah... But it is more like that we are just trying to be more professional about the students because not everyone... not every single student can make it in 11 Grade. So we were thinking to expose them to the different part of the Mandarin, the	"But, however, if you ask me in South Africa right now, which one is more important... I can... I have to say it's more important for them to learn the most important knowledge about how to writing the characters to get the solid foundation, because oral is easy to accomplish. So, for example, they are doing it right now for five hours, obviously [...] but I can use another five hours to recover the knowledge, but the writing, that's the foundation of the characters, is always taking more	"so Chinese writing they have like a certain order to writing the strokes. So you see, that actually become the problem because I'm writing characters, I see characters as a combination of radicals and strokes. So if you give me a new character I never saw, I never know, I can first decoding that which radical is in this	"If the students are relying more on the pinyin then I rely on the pinyin myself. So when I write on the board, or if I'm showing them my powerpoint, my slides, it's always I show both characters and pinyin. But what I did, if this character keeps repeating and it's also sounding exactly the same. You know... sometimes characters can	I think... so in my situation... I think the textbook is quite essential to the students because we only saw them like... ehm... let's say one hour every two weeks. But the textbook is with them all the time. So as the role of the textbook it's... it's... let's put it in this way... because I feel I'm going to offend a lot of people by saying that, but the	I prefer to do the translations, like, the students actually translate from their language to Mandarin. It's more useful because when you choosing a method you have to think about the situation. I only saw them, like, as I emphasised so many times, you gonna recall this... ahahah... so I don't have that much time with
Meilian		At the beginning we... ehm... we... actually we... ehm... we choose Easy Step to Chinese, this... this book, textbook this year. So and also HSK to help them writing and do the oral.	"Well... This are my experience... I think... ehm... at the beginning they... you don't need to push the learners to write a lot, because for the high school learners, they actually... they have to know the strokes, the radicals and the characters shape and know this character, because compared with English, or the [African] language or the Afrikaans, they don't write exactly the characters, but for Mandarin we... we... we know the	Well... This are my experience... I think... ehm... at the beginning they... you don't need to push the learners to write a lot, because for the high school learners, they actually... they have to know the strokes, the radicals and the characters shape and know this character, because compared with	"I don't think they can separate [reading, writing, pronunciation]. The pronunciation and... especially this language, the characters and its writing, you can't distinguish this part, and even the pinyin, the pronunciation, the phonetic, they are very important because, like... ehm it's	"Mmhh... I think the textbook... I don't think the textbook is the rules, so we have to follow each question, but is very important because... actually learners like it because they can have their own book, ahahah... the Mandarin book in here. But I think when I teaching, I... the textbook is a	
Fang	Teacher: I have already heard a specialist cite when someone learn some new things, if they read the sentence or the words five times, he or she can remember the whole words or sentences. So that's the...that's about to say ...ehm ... ehm... failure is the mother of success, and who is the mother, who is the father of success? In my opinion is repeat. Repeat	Fang's classes are mostly focused on reading from the textbook (both characters and pinyin) and repeating. Sometimes she suggests some role-play exercises in which students need to replace a word or give an open-ended answer. However, she promptly suggests the answers. She makes the students listen to textbook recordings, and makes them do listening exercises	In another lesson I observed, namely the lesson ending unit 4, Fang invites the students to revise all the strokes they have learnt so far, namely thirteen strokes. Fang writes the word 笔画 (meaning 'strokes') and the corresponding pinyin on the whiteboard. Then, under the word 笔画 (strokes), she draws the thirteen strokes to revise. These thirteen strokes correspond to the strokes presented in the textbook from unit 1 to unit 4, except for an additional stroke added by the teacher. Each stroke on the whiteboard is identified by a number	Fang focuses students' attention on the components of the characters only in the case of 他 (meaning 'he') and 她 (meaning 'she'). These two characters share the same pinyin (tā), so they are pronounced in the same way. Since the character 她 (she) is in the title of the textbook unit 她是我的汉语老师 (She is my Chinese language teacher), Fang explains the difference between 他	Since the teacher mainly follows the activities in the textbook, the students are constantly exposed to characters and pinyin. In some instances, the teacher explicitly attracts the students' attention towards certain characters that she writes on the whiteboard. When she writes characters on the whiteboard, she always makes sure to write the pinyin above each character.	Fang relies a lot on the textbooks, namely the HSK1 Standard Course Textbook and the HSK1 Standard Course Workbook. When teaching, she follows the activities suggested in the textbook and in the workbook without any improvisation or digression. She introduces each activity by reading the title both in Mandarin and in English. Teacher: Ok, let's do the first part	A distinctive feature of Fang's lessons is choral repetition, which constitutes most of teacher-student interactions. Choral repetition applies to sentences, words, and sounds. In the two lessons observed, there are two conversation activities that could be seen as slightly distancing themselves from the textbook. The

Figure 5-Example of one table with codes and data extracts (teachers' pedagogy)

The table was a valid instrument to become more acquainted with the data, and to start thinking about some proto themes. The coding of data and its incorporation within the tables was mostly data driven, and it allowed me to get a general feeling of what "story" was emerging from the data.

<u>Stage 3 – Discourse and semiotic analysis of the Mandarin Chinese textbooks</u>

Once I coded teachers' and students' narratives concerning their teaching and learning approaches, respectively, and interactional data from the few lessons I managed to observe, I realised that an analysis of the Mandarin Chinese textbooks adopted in grades 8 and 11 would be necessary to gain a clearer picture of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese at the school. Indeed, both Bowen and Meilian reported that the textbooks were a fundamental resource for the teaching of Mandarin Chinese, and I observed that Fang relied mostly on the textbook during her lessons. The analysis of the textbooks included the following steps. First, I performed a discourse analysis of their prefaces. Discourse analysis of prefaces was focused on "developing themes or images" (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 5), and particular attention was paid to the lexical choices of the textbook authors in describing the main aims and teaching approach of the textbooks. Second, I looked at the overall structure and topics of the textbooks by analysing the tables of contents and the structure of each chapter. Third, I performed a "more linguistic" discourse analysis, namely what Gee and Handford (2012) call a form of discourse analysis "closely tied to linguistics" (p. 5), of the vocabulary and the texts presented in each chapter. I explored how the vocabulary was presented, as well as the content, genre and linguistic form of the texts, their purpose and contextualisation, and their authentic/inauthentic nature.

I also looked at other explanatory sections on grammar, characters, and pinyin, and at how these related to the vocabulary and the texts in each chapter. In terms of literacy, I performed a detailed semiotic analysis of the scripts used throughout the textbooks. First, I looked at the interplay between Chinese characters and pinyin, namely whether there was an over-reliance on pinyin or on the characters. Second, I analysed how Chinese characters were presented, namely if there was a focus on the teaching of the graphic features and the semantic components of characters in order to interpret their meaning, or if the graphic features and semantic components of characters were largely neglected and the focus was merely on associating characters with their pinyin pronunciation and English translation.[20]

I would like to specify that, while the data analysis in Stages 1 and 2 was mostly data-driven, the analysis of the textbooks was guided by what Shaw (in Copland & Creese, 2015) calls "sensitising concepts" (p. 159). Indeed, in order to avoid a decontextualised analysis of the textbooks, which would ignore how the research participants of this study engage with the textbooks, sensitising concepts (i.e., linguistic structures vs communication, characters vs spoken language and pinyin) that I drew from the analysis of interviews and interactional data in Stages 1 and 2 were used to "guide [me] in looking in particular directions" (Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 49) when analysing the Mandarin Chinese textbooks used in grades 8 and 11. The analysis of the textbooks also produced some additional proto themes.

Stage 4 – Elaborating themes and representing them in thematic networks

Throughout the data analysis process from Stage 1 to Stage 3, I started to develop some proto themes, but my feeling was that they were still very anchored to the data, thus preventing me to see "the whole picture" and think about it theoretically. The tables, in particular, proved to be too rigid and too detailed for the purpose of elaborating themes. Therefore, I went back to my literature review and theoretical framework and refined them by keeping in mind the proto themes I had elaborated. I also started to define more specifically the research questions, which had been constantly evolving throughout Stages 1 to 3. Indeed, the main research question initially focused on language ideologies mainly in terms of issues of power, inequality and hierarchisation of languages (which is still a core component of research question n.3). This research question was coupled with a more vague and seemingly unrelated question about the pedagogy of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School. During the process of data analysis, I became more interested in deeper issues around conceptualisations of the nature of language, which, I realised, were inextricably connected with the written language, namely with the Chinese script (research questions n.1 and n.2). As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, by embracing recent theoretical developments in the field of applied linguistics and language anthropology, which, without dismissing issues of power and inequality in language studies, look deeper at language

[20] I also looked at the types of activities and exercises which were suggested in the textbooks, and some reflections on these contributed to informing my final argument. However, since a detailed analysis of the textbooks goes beyond the scope of this study and for reasons of space, I will not include activities and exercises in the presentation of the data analysis.

ontologies, I attempted to explore the relationship between, on one side, conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy and, on the other side, inequality issues connected to higher/lower value attribution to language/s (second part of research question n.3). This was done by integrating and interpreting data from all the three research questions.

After having refined the literature review and theoretical framework, as well as the research questions, I created some visual representations of the data similar to what Attride-Stirling (2001) calls "thematic networks", which "are presented graphically as web-like nets to remove any notion of hierarchy, giving fluidity to the themes and emphasizing the interconnectivity throughout the network" (p. 389). More specifically, for each research question, I designed two thematic networks with "basic themes" and "organising themes", whereas the "global theme" was explicitly stated as the title of the thematic network (Attride-Stirling, 2001). These thematic networks incorporated themes from all the data sources, and some short data extracts were also included to evoke basic themes.

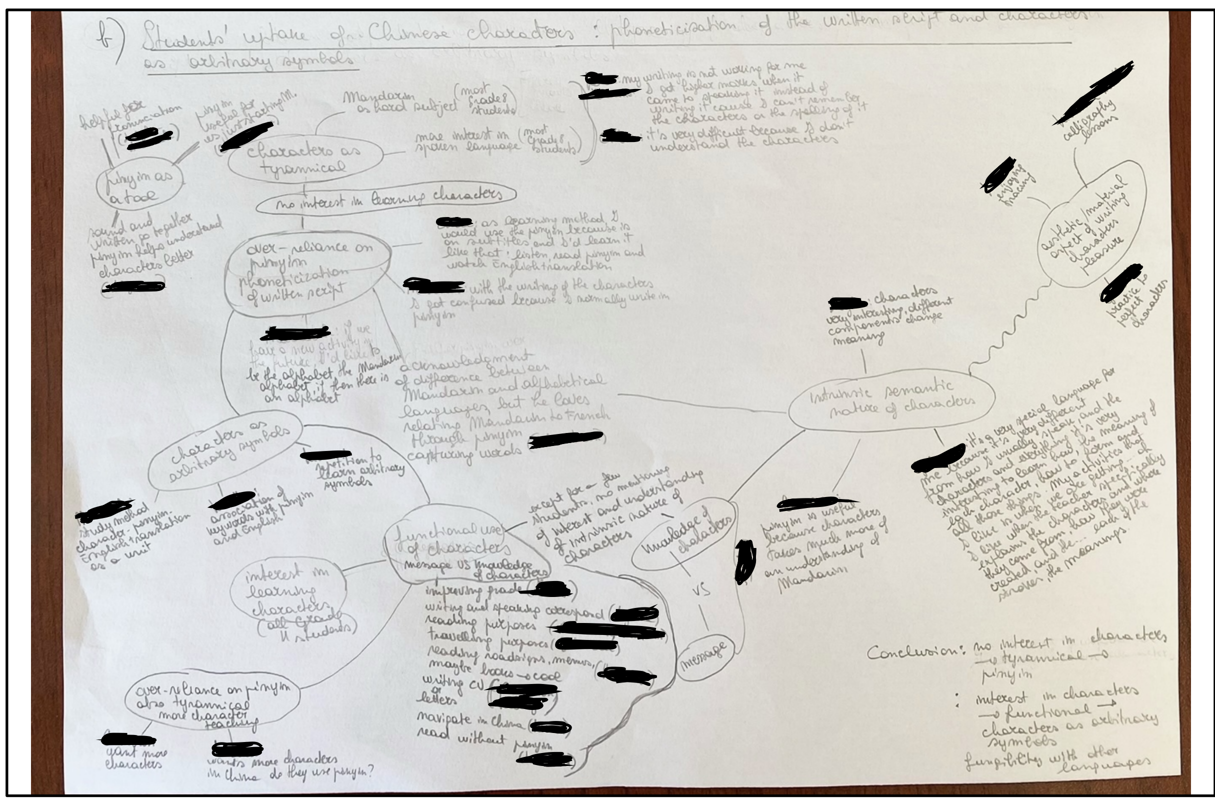


Figure 6-Example of one thematic network referring to research question n.2

The thematic networks enabled me to interpret my data by exploring the links between data and theory, and ultimately to answer the research questions. The thematic networks also proved to be very precious to guide me in the final writing-up of the data analysis chapters, namely Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3.5 Ethical considerations

In considering ethical issues related to this research project, I would like to point out as an overarching premise that ethics does not simply refer to "the procedures of ethical review that are in place in the institution in or under the auspices of which the research is to be conducted" (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p. 36), but it refers to fundamental ethical principles, such as "minimising harm, respecting autonomy, protecting privacy, offering reciprocity and treating people equitably" (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012), that researchers should carefully consider when conducting research with human participants. When conducting this study, both on the school premises and remotely (i.e., online), I always kept these principles in mind, and they influenced both my conduct and some of my data collection choices. For instance, the choice of inviting the research participants to colour their language portraits before the interviews took place was dictated not only by my research purposes. Indeed, the language portrait activity was meant to recognise and valorise teachers' and students' (current and desired) linguistic resources within their own past and future life trajectories. When handing over the language portrait activity to the participants, I also provided them with my language portrait, coupled with a short, written narrative. In this way, the participants also had the chance to get to know something about me before the interviews. Considering the potential ethical issues deriving from the power relationships between myself as a researcher and the students/teachers (Blommaert & Jie, 2010), in order to find "common ground", I stressed my roles as a life-long Mandarin Chinese learner to the students and as a language teacher to the teachers, thereby sharing joys and frustrations experienced within these roles. As Blommaert and Jie (2010) suggest, interviews were, as far as possible, "dialogical" and aimed at building "rapport" and "cooperativity" (p. 44). I often offered some personal stories during the interviews not only to elicit further data from the participants but also to offer a mutual and equitable exchange, from which both researcher and participants might benefit in some way.

A reflection on my positionality and voice as a researcher is needed to acknowledge the subjectivity in the interpretation of my data. Positionality and voice refer to what Coffey (1999, as cited in Copland & Creese, 2015) defines as the "ethnographic self" (p. 95), namely, the researcher as a real person who brings with her/him into the ethnographic fieldwork and account a whole bunch of ideas, biases, needs, expectations, feelings, emotions and desires (Copland & Creese, 2015). All these personal components are inextricably linked to the researcher's background, which might "shape relationships and representations" (Creese's case study, in Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 69) and engender issues of "reflexivity" in ethnographic research (Copland & Creese, 2015). Having said that, I believe it is important to acknowledge my background as it might reflect on the interpretation of my data. As briefly mentioned before, I am neither a native Chinese speaker/writer nor a Mandarin Chinese teacher. I am an Italian living in South Africa and teaching Italian as a foreign language to South African students. While my profession as a foreign language teacher at La Dante Society (which is an official language teaching institution comparable to the Confucius Institute network) might help me understand some issues concerning the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese as a

foreign language, it is also true that Mandarin and Italian are two very different languages. Indeed, my knowledge of Mandarin Chinese is mainly based on my studies of Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language in a university in Italy and a university in China, and is therefore limited. Although the ideas and theories I suggest in answering research questions n.1 and n.2 are based on an honest and rigorous analysis of my data, they may be influenced by my own understanding of Mandarin Chinese, which might be limited or faulty and subject to criticism. I have aimed therefore not to give the impression of arrogance towards Chinese teachers and Chinese people, in general. Furthermore, not being a South African citizen who has grown up in South Africa and experienced it firsthand, my knowledge of the South African sociolinguistic context is also limited to academic courses and to conversations with students and people in my academic, job and daily experiences. Thus, my interpretation of the data concerning the students' linguistic repertoires in research question n.3 may be felt as incomplete and inappropriate by them or by other South African researchers in this field. In spite of all these shortfalls, I believe it was worth conducting this novel study, even if performed from the point of view of an "outsider".

As far as the procedural aspects of ethics are concerned, since I have chosen to do research in a public school, after having obtained the ethical clearance from the University of Cape Town, I obtained permission from the Education Department of the Province in South Africa where the school is located. In addition to that, I obtained permission from the school principal to access the school after having informed her about the purpose of my research project and about how it would be conducted (Appendix 2). All participants involved in the research, and the parents/legal guardians of the students, were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 2), in which I provided all the necessary information about the purpose of my research and about how it would be conducted. Furthermore, in the consent form, I stated clearly that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time. In terms of anonymity and confidentiality, I protected the identity of the school and the participants through pseudonyms, and I made sure, as far as possible, to remove any identifying feature.

After having explained the research approach and design of this study, as well as the methodology that guided data collection and data analysis, the next three chapters (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) will delve into the analysis and interpretation of data according to the three research questions of this study.

Chapter 4: Mandarin Chinese as a standard commodifiable object

4.1 Introduction

This data analysis chapter answers the first research question:

1. *What conceptualisations of the nature of language held by the textbooks, the teachers and the students inform the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in a public secondary school in South Africa?*

Holding onto the "bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4), as explained in Chapter 2, this chapter explores the ontological dimension of language ideologies by attempting to uncover the conceptualisations of the nature of Mandarin Chinese held by the Mandarin Chinese textbooks, the teachers and the students.

Before delving into the conceptualisations of language underpinning the pedagogy of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School, I believe it is worth reporting some data showing how two of the Chinese teachers (Meilian and Bowen) conceive Mandarin Chinese as a language in their linguistic repertoires.[21] As McKinney (2017) maintains, teachers' conceptualisations of language deeply influence how language is taught in schooling. After having grasped how the Chinese teachers think of Mandarin Chinese in their linguistic repertoire, I then move onto the teachers' pedagogy. Since the teaching of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School is very textbook-based, I first present the principles and goals underpinning the structure as well as the language variety, the texts and the activities of the textbooks used in grades 8 and 11. Then, I present the teachers' pedagogical approach by analysing data from the teachers' (Meilian and Bowen) interviews, as well as from the lessons observed in grade 11 (Fang's class). In the last section I consider the students' uptake of Mandarin Chinese and their views concerning the pedagogy by analysing data from the students' interviews.

4.2 Mandarin Chinese as a standard object within the teachers' linguistic repertoires

This section describes and analyses some salient points concerning the conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese in Meilian's and Bowen's linguistic repertoires. It will be shown that their conceptualisations of the nature of Mandarin Chinese, and of language in general, mostly embrace national ideologies of language, equating "one nation-one language" (Badwan, 2021; Hall, 2020), in accordance with China's massive effort in creating and promoting Mandarin Chinese as the standard national language (as discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.5). The analysis of the following data will attempt to show what this entails in terms of the

[21] As specified in Chapter 3, Fang did not agree to the language portrait activity and the interview, so it was not possible to retrieve data concerning her linguistic repertoire.

conceptualisation of the nature of Mandarin Chinese, which, in turn, influences its pedagogy (as will be shown in the next sections).

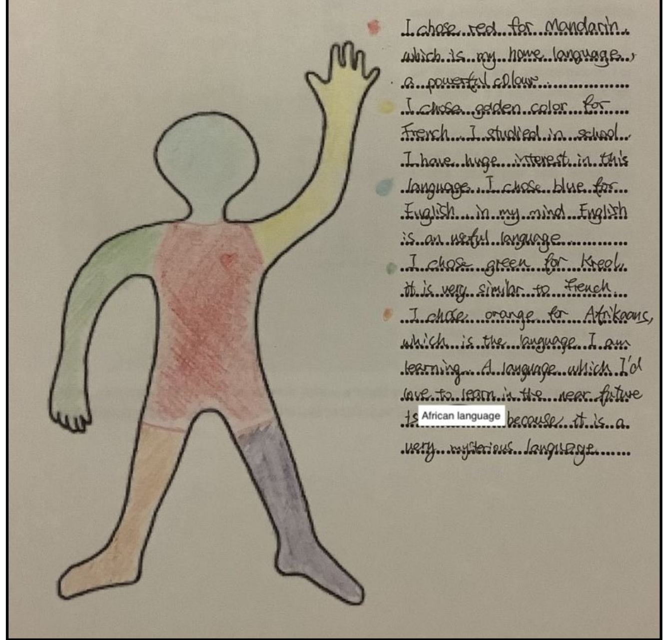


Figure 7-Meilian's language portrait

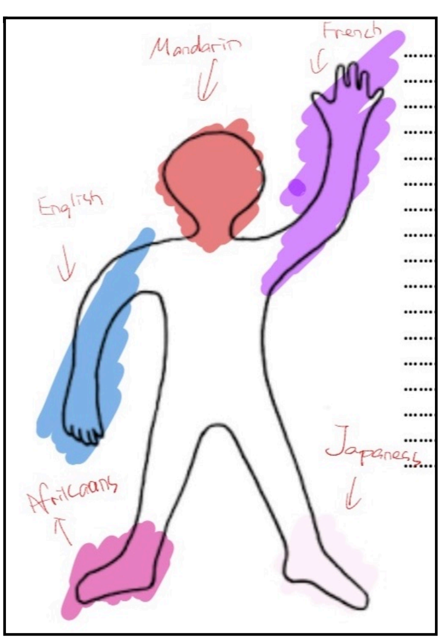


Figure 8-Bowen's language portrait

Meilian

Meilian describes Mandarin Chinese as her "home language" and her "mother tongue". In her language portrait, Mandarin Chinese occupies the core of her body and is represented in red, defined as a "powerful colour". When explaining why she chose red, she says that red is the main colour in the Chinese flag and it represents Chinese people's "blood". The position of Mandarin Chinese in the core of her body symbolises that it is deeply rooted within her.

> […] the red and the golden colour in Chinese people, in our mind, that means… ehm… represent… you know the Chinese flag, [and] why they choose the red colour [because] it's like… blood […].

Meilian comes from an area in the northern part of China where many minorities live. Spending her childhood in an ethnically and linguistically diverse area is described as "interesting". However, she makes clear that she belongs to the Han ethnic group, the largest, and I would say unmarked, ethnic group in China, against which other ethnic groups are defined as "minorities". Meilian was born and raised as a Mandarin Chinese monolingual child, and she never felt the need to learn local people's languages. She defines local people as "weaker" because, although they have their own language, they have to learn Mandarin Chinese in school. Therefore, the fact of having been raised with Mandarin Chinese as her home language is considered a great advantage.

> [...] It's difficult because all the people, they are speaking, they speak, actually they are weaker... ehm so they have their own language. It's like... ehm... the Muslim... they have their language and they have to learn Mandarin at the primary school. So I'm the Han people, I don't need to learn their language, actually a language... so I can't speak dialect. When I was young, I just speak Mandarin... I was learn in Mandarin... ahaha...[...].

At a certain point of the interview, Meilian confesses that she can understand her grandfather's dialect, but this dialect is not included in the language portrait.

<u>*Bowen*</u>

In Bowen's language portrait, Mandarin Chinese, represented in red, is located in the head and is defined by Bowen as his "mother tongue." Although in his narrative he does not explicitly justify the choice of red for Mandarin Chinese, it is interesting to see how his choice reflects Meilian's choice of red for Mandarin Chinese. Hence, it could be inferred that Bowen's choice of red also refers to the colour of the Chinese flag. Bowen is originally from a city in northern China not far from Beijing. He was born in a neighbourhood belonging to the railway management department and, thus, welcoming people from different parts of China. He notices that, in that neighbourhood, Mandarin Chinese was the main language of communication unifying people who probably spoke other languages and/or language varieties. So, in his narrative, linguistic diversity fades out in favour of linguistic standardness[22] and homogeneity. Perhaps, similarly to other children of his age, Bowen grew up as a Mandarin Chinese monolingual child. He admits he may have had some influence from the Beijing dialect, the prestigious one on which standard Mandarin Chinese is based (as explained in Chapter 2, section 2.5). Therefore, he sees the positive influence of the Beijing dialect in relation to his knowledge of Mandarin Chinese. It is interesting to note that, when asked about other languages or language varieties spoken in China, Bowen corrects me and underscores that they are "dialects", thereby implying that they are not "languages".

> Chiara: Because I remember when I was in China, many people said that Mandarin Chinese was the language that they studied in school, but with their families maybe they talked other languages... I mean...
>
> Bowen: Oh, it's not other languages, it's other dialects, I know what you are saying.

[22] In describing the conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese, and of language in general, within the teachers' linguistic repertoires, the term "standardness" is preferred to the more common term "standardisation" because the former emphasises an ontological status rather than a process, which seems to be implied by the latter. Indeed, both teachers appear to believe that only standard national languages are deemed to exist as "languages". Moreover, both teachers seem to give this ontological status for granted as they do not acknowledge any standardisation process.

The negative connotation of languages or language varieties other than Mandarin Chinese is also evident in his narrative about his learning experience of Mandarin Chinese in school.

> The pinyin I think they [the teachers] only taught in the first year and then after that, as I mentioned, my neighbourhood don't have the accent problem, don't have the dialect intrusion, so I never think the teacher had the trouble to teach us how to pronounce them [sounds] properly.

It is interesting to see how his words "accent problem", "dialect intrusion", and "trouble to teach" derogatively connotate different pronunciations deriving from other languages or language varieties.

In both Meilian's and Bowen's portraits, it is possible to see how the choice of the red colour for Mandarin Chinese refers, explicitly in Meilian's case and implicitly in Bowen's case, to the Chinese national flag, thereby suggesting a close identification of one language with one nation, which is championed by national ideologies of language. The definition of Mandarin Chinese as "mother tongue" in both Meilian's and Bowen's narratives also suggests Meilian's and Bowen's view of Mandarin Chinese as the language of their, I would say, "mother nation" to which they belong. In ontological terms, this national view of language espouses the paradigm of "language-as-object" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021), which is deeply intertwined with the ontological category of the "N (i.e. national, native, named and normed)-Language" (Hall, 2020) and the concept of "monoglossia" (McKinney, 2017) (as explained in Chapter 2, section 2.2). Both Meilian and Bowen grew up as monolingual children in Mandarin Chinese, namely a highly standard language, represented in the portraits as an abstract system standing on its own and clearly demarcated from other languages and/or language varieties spoken in China. Meilian's and Bowen's current interests in Mandarin linguistics and Mandarin curriculum studies, respectively, could also be interpreted as further indications of their conceptualisation of language as an abstract system. Furthermore, both narratives convey a conceptualisation of language in terms of standardness, homogeneity and purity, as shown by the conceptualisation of Mandarin Chinese as "language" in opposition to the conceptualisation of other languages and language varieties spoken in China as "dialects"/"weaker languages". Other "languages" (i.e., English, French, Japanese, Afrikaans, African language[23]) represented in their linguistic repertoires, clearly separated by different colours from one another in the portraits, mostly refer to standard national languages (except for Creole in Meilian's portrait). Bowen's justification of the choice of blue for English as referring to the British flag also speaks of a conceptualisation of English as a standard language. Meilian's contact with Creole when teaching in another African country sparked her interest not in deepening her knowledge of Creole but in studying standard French at Alliance Française, the official French language and culture promotion organisation headquartered in France.

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[23] The name of this African language (i.e. one of South Africa's official languages) is not stated to protect the identity of the school and of the participants.

In conclusion, Meilian's and Bowen's conceptualisations of language with reference not only to Mandarin Chinese but also to other languages in their linguistic repertoires are deeply influenced by national ideologies of language, which imply a view of language as a standard object. In the next sections, I will show how these conceptualisations of language deeply influence and are reflected in the choice of the textbooks and in the language pedagogy.

4.3 Mandarin Chinese as an abstract system in textbooks and teachers' pedagogies

This section attempts to uncover the conceptualisations of language which underlie the teaching of Mandarin Chinese as it is portrayed by the textbooks and by the teachers' pedagogies. The textbooks and the teachers' pedagogies are analysed in close connection to each other because the teaching of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School is very textbook-based, as observed in Fang's lessons and reported in Bowen's and Meilian's interviews. Indeed, I noticed that Fang's lessons rely heavily on the textbook, as she follows sequentially the activities suggested in the textbook without any improvisation or digression. In the same vein, while Meilian describes the textbook as "a good tour [guide] to help me teach this language", Bowen metaphorically thinks that "the textbook is like the Bible and I'm like the priest, and I'm decoding the sentence, I'm decoding to say it".

Mandarin Chinese textbooks

The textbook used in grade 8 is *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* (2nd edition), while the textbook used in grade 11 is *HSK Standard Course 1.* Both the textbooks have been chosen by the teaching staff at Blue River School from a selection of textbooks suggested by Hanban and are published by the Beijing Language and Culture University Press, which closely cooperates with the Chinese Ministry of Education and Hanban.[24] The Mandarin Chinese teaching staff at Blue River School uses *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* from grade 8, and introduces *HSK Standard Course 1* in grade 11, when students are supposed to take the HSK 1 test. At the time of data collection, the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook was the only textbook used in grade 11. The choice of this textbook is justified by Jing, the director of the Mandarin Chinese Department, in these terms:

> […] because, you know, by end of the day, the students gonna go to the HSK test, if they go to China, if they want to learn, or study for the education in China, they have to pass the HSK test. Then we also started use the HSK as our textbook… … they have a guideline from level 1 to level 6 […].

As stated in its Foreword and Preface, the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook is based on the HSK Syllabus, and its main aims are "combin[ing] testing and teaching, and promot[ing] teaching and learning by testing" (p. 3

[24] The section 'related links' on the website of the Beijing Language and Culture University Press shows its cooperation with the Chinese Ministry of Education and Hanban (https://www.blcup.com/en, accessed on 14th August 2024).

& p. 7). The Foreword presents the *HSK Standard Course* textbook series as "matching the HSK test in all aspects from the content, form to the levels" (p. 3). Hence, as also shown in the Preface's excerpt below (Figure 9), the main aim is to equip students of Mandarin Chinese with the necessary knowledge and skills to pass the progressive levels of the HSK test.

1. Written Level by Level with the Syllabus as Its Basis

The HSK test is made up of six levels. The authors of the Course have done a thorough study of the Syllabus and the question designing guidebook and made a statistical analysis of plenty of past tests as well. Based on the result of our study and analysis, we've summed up the focuses, difficulties, language points, topics, functions and situations etc. for each book, while sticking to the vocabulary required in the Syllabus, systematically defined the scope and class hours for each level. The specifics are as follows:

Volume	Objective	Vocabulary	Class Hours
Book 1	HSK (Level 1)	150	30-34
Book 2	HSK (Level 2)	300	30-36
Book 3	HSK (Level 3)	600	35-40
Book 4 (Volumes 1 & 2)	HSK (Level 4)	1,200	75-80
Book 5 (Volumes 1 & 2)	HSK (Level 5)	2,500	170-180
Book 6 (Volumes 1 & 2)	HSK (Level 6)	5,000 and above	170-180
Total: 9 volumes		Above 5,000	510-550

Figure 9-HSK Syllabus as basis for *HSK Standard Course* textbook series (*HSK Standard Course 1* textbook, p. 8)

Similarly, *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* Preface states that "[i]n order to meet the students' needs to prepare for various exams and to achieve good grades, the core vocabulary, grammar and requirements of various exams are taken as reference" (p. III). On the back cover of the textbook, it is specified that "[t]he series is designed especially for non-Chinese background students, who are learning Chinese as a second/foreign language, and who are taking Chinese exams, such as IGCSE (UK), SAT II/AP (USA), HSK (China), IB Chinese B Standard Level […]", thereby making reference to the HSK test as well as to other well-known standardised language assessments. Similarly to the *HSK Standard Course* textbook series, the *Easy Steps to Chinese* textbook series also provides progressive and sequential stages of language learning as shown in the excerpt below (Figure 10).

The series consists of seven books in three stages:

- Stage 1 (Books 1, 2, 3): the focus of this stage is to establish a solid foundation through the learning of pinyin, characters, vocabulary and grammar. The aim is to help students foster an interest in learning Chinese and develop skills in using simple Chinese for communication.
- Stage 2 (Books 4 and 5): the focus of this stage is to learn more vocabulary and grammar so that students are able to use the language functionally when communicating with people in real-life situations.
- Stage 3 (Books 6 and 7): the focus of this stage is to provide students with authentic materials, and help them develop communication skills. It is believed that when the time comes, the students will be confident in expressing their viewpoints precisely, appropriately, logically and coherently in both oral and written forms.

Figure 10-Stages of language learning in *Easy Steps to Chinese* textbook series (*Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook, p. II)

A specific reference to the scientificity of the course design is made in both textbooks. Indeed, the *HSK Standard Course* series is characterised by "a scientific course design" (p. 3). Likewise, the Preface of *Easy Steps to Chinese* series specifies that "[t]he course incorporates theories and findings from brain science, educational psychology, and second/foreign language teaching and learning. The course […] is designed logically and scientifically so that students are able to learn and acquire Chinese systematically" (p. II).

Although the stated principles and goals of both textbooks refer to a communicative approach to language teaching with the aim to enable the students to communicate in real-life situations (*HSK Standard Course 1*, pp. 7-8; *Easy Steps to Chinese 1*, p. II), I argue that, in both cases, the authors of the textbooks seem to be more concerned about sticking to prescribed vocabulary and grammar structures rather than exposing learners to rich and authentic language. For instance, the authors of the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook state that, when building dialogues and situations in the textbook chapters, they always "ensur[e] the words and grammar points used are within the HSK Syllabus" (p. 8).

Each of the two textbooks is divided into 15 chapters (called "lessons" in *HSK Standard Course 1*, and "units" in *Easy Steps to Chinese 1*), each presenting a list of words and grammar structures within a few texts. These texts gravitate around a general theme or topic (family, hobbies, etc.) in the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook, and around a language function (expressing desire, expressing ability to do something, locating people and objects in the space, etc.) in the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook.

In the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook, in line with the stated communicative approach, texts are presented in the form of dialogues; nevertheless, they are very short, and the contextual situations are quite unreal. This gives an impression of isolated sentences rather than an oral text resembling a real-life conversation.

课文 Text

1 在办公室 In the office 10-1

Zhuōzi shang yǒu shénme?
A: 桌子 上 有 什么？

Zhuōzi shang yǒu yí ge diànnǎo hé yì běn shū.
B: 桌子 上 有一个 电脑 和一本 书。

Bēizi zài nǎr?
A: 杯子在哪儿？

Bēizi zài zhuōzi li.
B: 杯子在桌子里。

English Version
A: What are there on the desk?
B: There is a computer and a book.
A: Where is the cup?
B: It's in the desk.

New Words
1. 桌子 zhuōzi n. desk, table
2. 上 shang n. up, above
3. 电脑 diànnǎo n. computer
4. 和 hé conj. and
5. 本 běn m. *a measure word for books*
6. 里 li n. inner, inside, interior

Figure 11-Vocabulary and text in *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook (p. 72)

This dialogue (Figure 11) is the first text of "Chapter 10 - 我能坐这儿吗 (Can I sit here)". In this dialogue, set in an office, two people are identifying some objects in the space. Without giving additional contextual information, the dialogue seems to be far from an authentic conversation. It appears that the main aim of

this dialogue is only to present the new words listed below the dialogue, as well as the existential sentence structure composed of the verb 有 (yǒu) and the "words of locality" explained in the grammar notes of chapter 10.

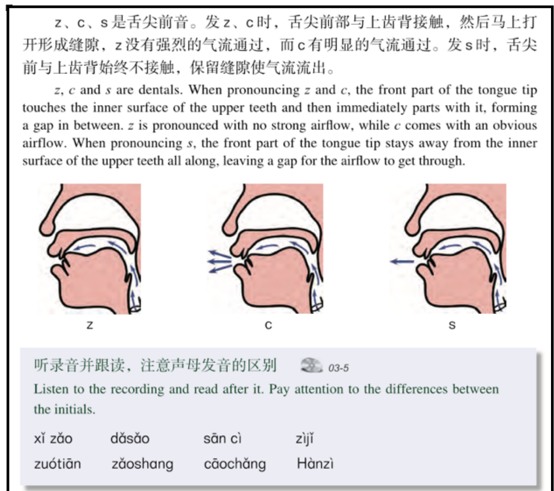
Similarly, the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook also has very unrealistic texts. It is interesting to note that the textbook presents both dialogues and monologues in its chapters. While the dialogues are also very short and unrealistic as in the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook, the monologues are even more stilted in attempting to convey a sense of the language used in real-life situations.

Figure 12-Vocabulary and text in *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook (pp. 14-15)

The example above (Figure 12) is taken from pages 14 and 15 in "Chapter 2 -日期 (dates)". On page 14 (left side of Figure 12) the new words and sentence structures are presented. On page 15 (right side of Figure 12) a short monologue with no English translation is presented. The text means: "One week has seven days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Today it's Sunday the twenty-second of September and it's my birthday". It seems evident that the purpose of the text is not to provide students with an example of a realistic conversation concerning days and dates, but, simply, to present the days of the week and the sentence structures emphasised in the boxes on page 14 (i.e., the order of a date, pronoun/adjective + 的 + noun, and subject + 是 + object). As noted by McDonald (2011) in his analysis of some Mandarin Chinese textbooks, although the communicative paradigm remains the flaunted underlying paradigm inspiring the compilation of the textbooks, an "'accumulative' model of language learning" (p. 53) is implied, according to which "successful language learning is understood as 'acquiring' a sufficient stock of words and structures" (p. 53).

In terms of which variety of language is presented in the textbooks, both textbooks make a taken-for-granted equation between Mandarin Chinese or Putonghua, namely the official highly standardised form of language, and "the Chinese language", thereby reproducing teachers' conceptualisations of language as a standard object (as seen in this Chapter in section 4.2) and concealing from the students the remarkably multilingual and heteroglossic reality of China's linguistic landscape (as discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.5).

Both textbooks also have dedicated sections and exercises on pinyin which aim to teach the students the standard pronunciation of discrete sounds and syllables, as shown in Figures 13 and 14.


z、c、s是舌尖前音。发z、c时，舌尖前部与上齿背接触，然后马上打开形成缝隙，z没有强烈的气流通过，而c有明显的气流通过。发s时，舌尖前与上齿背始终不接触，保留缝隙使气流流出。

z, *c* and *s* are dentals. When pronouncing *z* and *c*, the front part of the tongue tip touches the inner surface of the upper teeth and then immediately parts with it, forming a gap in between. *z* is pronounced with no strong airflow, while *c* comes with an obvious airflow. When pronouncing *s*, the front part of the tongue tip stays away from the inner surface of the upper teeth all along, leaving a gap for the airflow to get through.

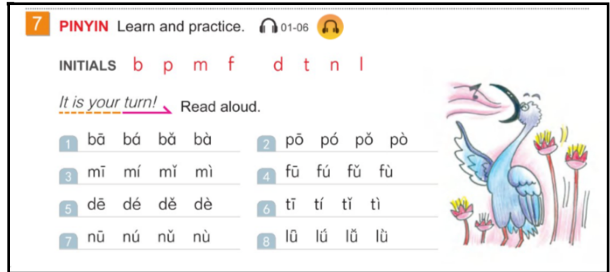
听录音并跟读，注意声母发音的区别 03-5

Listen to the recording and read after it. Pay attention to the differences between the initials.

xǐ zǎo dǎsǎo sān cì zìjǐ

zuótiān zǎoshang cāochǎng Hànzì

Figure 13-Pinyin section in *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook (p. 18)


7 PINYIN Learn and practice. 01-06

INITIALS b p m f d t n l

It is your turn! Read aloud.

1 bā bá bǎ bà

2 pō pó pǒ pò

3 mī mí mǐ mì

4 fū fú fǔ fù

5 dē dé dě dè

6 tī tí tǐ tì

7 nū nú nǔ nù

8 lū lú lǔ lù

Figure 14-Pinyin section in *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook (p. 6)

These sections on pinyin, together with the sections on vocabulary and texts, show not only a "structuralist" view of language, whereby language is primarily conceived as a system of sounds which are then combined into words and sentence structures to convey denotative meaning (see Chapter 2, section 2.2), but also a conceptualisation of language in highly standard terms. Learning Mandarin Chinese means, first and foremost, learning the standard pronunciation of its discrete sounds, then combined into standard vocabulary and standard grammar structures.

Teachers' pedagogies

This section highlights some key points concerning the teachers' pedagogies. Although, in general, I noticed an attempt from all the three teachers (Bowen, Meilian and Fang) to adopt a communicative approach in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese by engaging the students in oral communication, at a closer analysis, I noticed that the teaching approach described or observed in the lessons remained more faithful to a structuralist view of language. When asked about the principles underlying his teaching approach, Bowen replies:

> For all the students I've been teaching, I always trying to them working out two things, let's put it in that way. One thing it's building their vocabularies and one thing building a … like to learn more characters, […] and the fact the other thing is to creating more useful sentence structures for them to use […] So basically the idea here is, I always tell my students, like, learning Chinese and using Chinese is like playing legos. […] So you have to building a lot of the blocks, and the different way you put the blocks together it's gonna show different things. So that's how… my teaching philosophy.

As it is evident from Bowen's words, Mandarin Chinese is thought as an ensemble of "blocks", namely words and sentence structures, that can be combined in different ways to express different denotative meanings. This view of language seems to echo not only a structuralist conception of language in the Saussurean sense, but also a very cognitive conception of language in the Chomskyan sense (see Chapter 2, section 2.2). Bowen puts the accent not on the social appropriateness of language, as Hymes would suggest (see Chapter 2, section 2.2), but on the supposed humans' innate ability, as Chomsky maintains, of creating an infinite number of grammatically possible sentences which convey different denotative meanings (Johnstone & Marcellino, 2011). The focus on the acquisition of sentence structures is also exemplified by Bowen's main teaching method, which consists of translating from the students' language (i.e., English in the classroom) to Mandarin Chinese.

> I prefer to do the translations, like, the students actually translate from their language to Mandarin. […] So just like physically repeating the sentence can help but it's not going to stay there forever, it's not going to bring them further.

As McDonald (2011) explains, translation of (often decontextualised) sentences is especially used within the grammar-translation paradigm, which posits more emphasis on the language structures rather than on its social appropriateness. The grammar-translation paradigm, on which Bowen seems to rely as his main teaching method, also seems to presume a sort of equivalence between English and Mandarin Chinese because it focuses exclusively on the denotative meaning conveyed by language, thus ignoring the indexicality of language and its socio-cultural embeddedness (see Chapter 2, sections 2.2 and 2.3).

In a similar vein, Meilian seems to suggest a sort of equivalence between Mandarin Chinese and Afrikaans in her teaching of phonetics. She is currently learning Afrikaans because she maintains that Afrikaans is a language that could help her teach Mandarin in this school, since a lot of students are Afrikaans-speakers.

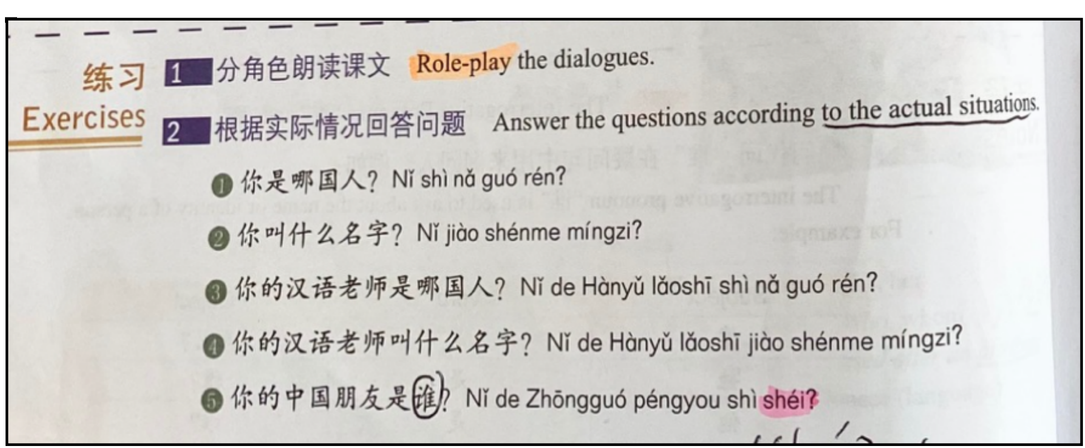
> I have to know [Afrikaans] because I'm teaching Mandarin, and I think the phonetics is… If I know the language they speak, I can easy find some words to compare the words and the way I learn Afrikaans, it's like the […] in the way how do they learn the Mandarin. […] So in my experience, I can speak Afrikaans, but I'm not using that language to teach. […] Is only, like, sometimes some learners struggle with the pronunciation, so I will compare that, like they can't find the tone, ahahah… like the fourth tone, ahahah, especially the fourth tone, it's like… so maybe I will compare with Afrikaans to try to find some pronunciation, but I won't speak that language even I know some words, but I won't speak it. I won't to… because they only have this environment, they only have an hour at school, so I would like, I ask them try to use Mandarin.

Although her interest in Afrikaans is laudable, it seems that, in her view, Afrikaans could be useful in the classroom only for teaching phonetics and comparing pronunciations, not, for instance, as a "bridge" to allow the students to express authentic meaning in Mandarin Chinese within the classroom. This contributes to

showing not only Meilian's abstract conception of language but also her conviction that languages such as Afrikaans and Mandarin Chinese can be somehow equivalent as far as the smallest bits of language, i.e. sounds, are concerned.

Fang's teaching approach also seems to put enormous emphasis on language structures and accuracy in terms of pronunciation. In her lessons, Fang is the "conductor" and students talk only when they are invited to do so, except for a few questions raised by the students. Although there is interaction between the teacher and the students, it is always prompted by the teacher and related to some textbook activities. For each activity suggested in the textbook, the teacher attempts to involve the students by asking them to answer either collectively or individually. Although Fang tries to create a safe space where students feel at ease when answering, it seems that the students are quite shy when talking Mandarin individually, and the atmosphere is very hushed. The tone of the students' voice is usually very low, and sometimes they laugh nervously when they are not sure about the correct word order or when they are asked to pronounce a word with the correct tones (Appendix 8).

In Fang's class I had the chance to observe a few conversation exercises in which the students are invited to work in pairs and then report in front of the whole class. In the example below (Figure 15), the conversation activity is presented in the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook as a series of questions[25] which the students should answer according to their actual situations.


练习 Exercises

1 分角色朗读课文 Role-play the dialogues.

2 根据实际情况回答问题 Answer the questions according to the actual situations.

1. 你是哪国人？ Nǐ shì nǎ guó rén?
2. 你叫什么名字？ Nǐ jiào shénme míngzi?
3. 你的汉语老师是哪国人？ Nǐ de Hànyǔ lǎoshī shì nǎ guó rén?
4. 你的汉语老师叫什么名字？ Nǐ de Hànyǔ lǎoshī jiào shénme míngzi?
5. 你的中国朋友是谁？ Nǐ de Zhōngguó péngyou shì shéi?

Figure 15-Conversation activity in *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook (p. 24)

The teacher invites the students to work in pairs. However, while the students are working in pairs, she gradually suggests one answer, in the form of a structured sentence, for each question. For reasons of space, I will focus only on question 5 (meaning 'Who is your Chinese friend?').

[25] The English translation of the questions is the following: 1. What nationality are you?, 2. What is your name?, 3. What nationality is your Mandarin teacher?, 4. What is the name of your Mandarin teacher?, 5. Who is your Chinese friend?

Fang: Ok, let's prepare for question number five, 你的中国朋友是谁 (your Chinese friend is who)? This it means who is your Chinese friend, who is your Chinese friend. 你的中国朋友是谁 (your Chinese friend is who)? We can also say 谁是你的中国朋友 (who is your Chinese friend)? Both ok. 你的中国朋友是谁 (your Chinese friend is who)? 谁是你的中国朋友 (who is your Chinese friend)? We can read this sentence in the opposite direction 你的中国朋友是谁 (your Chinese friend is who)? it also means 谁是你的中国朋友 (who is your Chinese friend)? The same answer. So your answer is… 你的中国朋友是谁 (your Chinese friend is who)? If I ask 丽亚娜 (Lìyànà, i.e. Liyana)你的中国朋友是谁 (your Chinese friend is who)? 丽亚娜(Lìyànà, i.e. Liyana) will answer 我的中国朋友是(my Chinese friend is) bla bla bla. For example, you can say 我的中国朋友是我的汉语老师 (my Chinese friend is my Chinese language teacher). Understand me? So you two [addressing Nina and Thomas] can do this dialogue, and then you change it [meaning 'you swap in asking and answering the question']. So you [addressing Nina] ask 托马斯 (Tuōmǎsī, i.e. Thomas) and 托马斯 (Tuōmǎsī, i.e. Thomas) answer. Then 托马斯 (Tuōmǎsī, i.e. Thomas) ask you and you [addressing Nina] answer. Although the answer is... the dialogue is the same, ok.

[Participants in this excerpt: Fang is the grade 11 teacher, while Liyana, Nina and Thomas are grade 11 students.[26] Translations in English are provided in parentheses (…).]

From the excerpt above, it is possible to see that Fang spends quite a lot of time suggesting different word orders for question number 5. In the textbook the word order is 'your Chinese friend is who', but she suggests that the interrogative pronoun 谁 (meaning 'who') can be also put at the beginning of the sentence, thereby suggesting the different word order 'who is your Chinese friend'. Then Fang asks Liyana to answer the question, but she does not let Liyana speak and she immediately provides a sample answer in the form of a very well-structured sentence ('My Chinese friend is my Chinese language teacher') that is meant to be repeated by other students in the conversation exercise. Indeed, she appoints Nina and Thomas as the students who should practice question number 5. From her instructions (i.e., "although the answer is… the dialogue is the same"), it is evident that the teacher does not want the students to change the answer, but only to repeat the structured question and answer she has just explained. I argue that Fang is more interested in the accuracy of sentence structures than in letting the students try to compose answers on their own that might represent their actual situations. This example shows that the few conversation activities in Fang's classes are very closed-ended and structured. Enormous emphasis is given to the accuracy of sentences and to their mere denotative meaning rather than to a more authentic and spontaneous use of language driven by the students.

Another distinctive feature of Fang's lessons is choral repetition, which constitutes most of teacher-student interactions. Choral repetition applies to sentences:

[26] Fang assigned all grade 11 students a Chinese name by choosing characters whose pronunciation is similar to the syllables of the original name. To identify the students in this transcription, I provide their Chinese name written in characters followed by its pinyin annotation and the students' corresponding (English, Afrikaans, African, Arabic etc.) name. As mentioned previously in Chapter 3, all the participants in this study are identified by pseudonyms in terms of both their Chinese names and their (English, Afrikaans, African, Arabic etc.) names. For instance, 丽亚娜 is the student's Chinese name written in characters, Lìyànà is the pinyin annotation of the characters, and Liyana is the student's name.

Fang: [...] so let's read the whole sentence. One, two...

Students: 他是乔布斯. 他是美国人. (He is Jobs. He is American.) [hesitantly]

Nina: 他是美国人. (He is American.)

Fang: Again, one, two...

Students: 他是乔布斯. 他是美国人. (He is Jobs. He is American.) [hesitantly]

Fang: Again, listen to me and then repeat. 他是乔布斯. 他是美国人. (He is Jobs. He is American.) [slowly and emphasising each syllable]

Students: 他是乔布斯. 他是美国人. (He is Jobs. He is American.) [more clearly]

Fang: Again.

Students: 他是乔布斯. 他是美国人. (He is Jobs. He is American.) [more clearly]

Fang: The last time. Ahaha.

Students: 他是乔布斯. 他是美国人. (He is Jobs. He is American.) [more clearly]

Choral repetition also applies to words or, as shown in the excerpt below, to phrases:

Fang: Number five 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher).

Students: 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher).

Fang: 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher).

Students: 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher).

In the case of sentences/phrases repetition, Fang uses repetition in order to make the students memorise the words and the sentence/phrase structures, as she explicitly tells the students:

I have already heard a specialist cite when someone learn some new things, if they read the sentence or the words five times, he or she can remember the whole words or sentences. So that's the...that's about to say ...ehm ... ehm... failure is the mother of success, and who is the mother, who is the father of success? In my opinion is repeat. Repeat ...ahahahah...is the father of success, because both father and mother including success, ahaha. So failure is the mother of success, repeat is the father of success. So if you want to remember each sentence or words repeat, repeat and repeat. The process of repeating is the process of practice, and practice makes perfect, yes? Ahah. So let's read this sentence again. 他是乔布斯. 他是美国人. (He is Jobs. He is American.)

The use of choral repetition seems to reflect what McDonald (2011) defines the "classical paradigm", which, in the Chinese tradition, consists of acquiring familiarity with a selected body of texts, i.e. the classics. This paradigm focuses on reading texts aloud and memorising them. Language learning would proceed through the following stages, namely, memorising lists of characters, reading the texts and then creating some imitative compositions. Although the "classical paradigm" does not explicitly teach the students the

structures of the language as in the "grammar-translation paradigm" (McDonald, 2011), mainly adopted by Bowen, Fang seems to use repetition with the intention to help the students memorise words and phrase/sentence structures. Therefore, whether explicitly or not, the accent is always on language structures within both Bowen's and Fang's pedagogy. Choral repetition also applies to discrete sounds at the sub-syllable level:

Fang: So… read after me. zh.

Students: zh.

Fang: zh.

Students: zh.

Fang: ch.

Students: ch.

Fang: ch.

Students: ch.

Fang: sh.

Students: sh.

Fang: sh.

Students: sh.

Fang: r.

Students: r.

Fang: r.

Students: r.

From this excerpt, and from many other instances in Fang's lessons in which she corrects the students' pronunciation, it can be said that Fang puts a lot of emphasis on the pronunciation of the sounds of standard Mandarin Chinese. She even tells the students that it is possible to discriminate between native Chinese people and non-native Chinese people according to the pronunciation of the tones.

Fang: Ok, very good. So in each sentence when you pronounce each pinyin you should pay attention the different tones. That's the… that's our Chinese people and our foreign friends the difference is like this. Sometimes your tones is not so correct, so we know…ah… she or he is not Chinese. Ahaha.

Students: Ahahaha.

Fang: According to the… to the tones is correct or not, we can… we can according to the different tones can… can tell you are Chinese… you are Chinese or are not. Ahahah. So if I…if all of us can pay attention to the… the tones we can we can speak the… if that's part right [partly correct] Chinese. I think. Practice makes perfect, yes?

Fang's above statement seems to give the students the false impression that China is a linguistically homogeneous country with one standard language made of a standard system of sounds that the students should strive to approximate.

4.4 Students' uptake of Mandarin Chinese: abstract system vs social practice

In this section I explore what the students interviewed in grades 8 and 11 at Blue River School think of the textbooks and the teachers' pedagogies. Their views on the textbooks and the pedagogies ultimately give some insights into how they conceive Mandarin Chinese as a language in ontological terms.

Most students show a general appreciation of the structured and sequential learning of Mandarin Chinese suggested by the teachers and the textbooks.

> I think it's [the textbook] very basic and like normal how… how… how it should be. (Sandra, grade 8)
>
> Ehm… the forming of basic sentences [the student would like to learn more basic sentences in the classroom]. Because for now we passed the dates, and… ehm… and saying… yeah, for now we are doing the paragraph that I live in, wherever we live, my birthday is on… I feel like… I think we should just do simple sentences and then go take it from there. […] Ehm… for me… I actually think it's quite in order, the textbook is really good, because it starts with the basics, which is actually very good, not starting with the most difficult part or the, the, the middle difficult parts, so… I think it was quite well. (Zintle, grade 8)
>
> So I also think that the topics are somewhat relevant because maybe for what we have done so far it's like the basics and stuff, which is to greet and [inaudible]. I think in any language you need to know the basics. (Sarah, grade 11)
>
> Ehm… the textbook and the topics… I think… the topics, even though it might look quite simple, it's actually very helpful because those are the basic things you need to know before, like, actually knowing the other stuff also. (Vicky, grade 11)

The above excerpts from the students' interviews show that the students conceptualise the learning of Mandarin Chinese in terms of starting with "the basics", namely sounds, words and sentence structures, that, in turn, can be combined into simple and decontextualised dialogues pretending to reproduce real-life conversations in Mandarin Chinese. Furthermore, as Sarah's and Vicky's words explicitly suggest ("I think in any language you need to know the basics", "because those are the basic things you need to know before, like, actually knowing the other stuff also"), a sequential and structured language learning trajectory, in which, as Zintle suggests, "the basics" come before "the most difficult part" or the "middle difficult part", seems to be considered the standard trajectory, i.e. the "normal" one in Sandra's words, according to which any language should be acquired.

It is also interesting to note that some students show a specific appreciation for the "artefactualisation of language" (Blommaert, 2008, p. 305) performed by the textbooks (see Chapter 2, section 2.2).

> The HKS 1 [HSK 1] textbook, I think… it's… it learns you basic Mandarin… and I think it's very user-friendly and very easy to like navigate through the textbook. And it's very simple to like understand the things to learn because everything is on one page. For example, if you are starting a new like ehm… chapter or topic, and then […] all the new words that you are learning are on one page and the dialogue is on one page, and everything is like easy to use. (Liyana, grade 11)
>
> I like it [*HSK Standard Course 1* textbook] because it's very practical and user-friendly, cause basically it teaches you… every topic [chapter] is basically everyday life. For example, one topic [chapter] would be in the classroom, so to teach you basic phrases that you would use in the classroom. (John, grade 11)

Liyana and John like the fact that the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook is clearly divided into chapters, each presenting a specific topic and listing the words to be learnt in order to compose "basic phrases" (John) and a "one-page dialogue" (Liyana). The language in use characterised by "variability, negotiability and context-boundedness" (Blommaert, 2008, p. 292) is reduced to an abstract system by dissecting it into words that can be combined into larger units (i.e., phrases, sentences, and dialogues) according to specific grammar structures. The material reduction and dissection of language onto the pages of the textbook (in Liyana's words, "all the new words that you are learning are on one page and the dialogue is on one page") is particularly appreciated by some students.

In terms of which Chinese language variety the students are exposed to, they do not generally appear to be aware of the multilingual reality of China and of the different varieties of the "Chinese language". They seem to conflate "Chinese" with the highly standardised and purified version of "Mandarin Chinese" they are taught. Therefore, the students regard the highly standardised Mandarin Chinese they are taught as a passepartout for communicating with "Chinese" people not only in China but also in Asia, in South Africa and worldwide. This idea of standard Mandarin Chinese as a passepartout is also evident in Liyana's comment concerning the HSK test:

> And I... and for the future, I would like to continue my Mandarin journey to complete like the full like level... is it levels? I think it's the levels of the HK [HSK]... Because Miss Fang, Miss Fang 老师 (teacher) said I passed HKS [HSK] 1, so I would like to complete all of that soon... or as soon as possible as I can because I do wanna travel to China and I do wanna meet new people and converse with them in Mandarin because it's something I'm very interested in... and... yeah... that's my story. (Liyana, grade 11)

Liyana seems to be convinced that she compulsorily needs to pass all the 6 levels of the HSK test in order to be able to travel and communicate with people in China. Her conviction not only speaks of a conceptualisation of language as encapsulated in progressive "levels" (each comprising a certain amount of vocabulary and language structures) but also of a conceptualisation of Mandarin Chinese as the sole existing variety of "Chinese language" worth learning.

Although the students do not seem critical of the structuralist approach to the teaching of a highly standardised version of Mandarin Chinese, a few students raised some objections with respect to the authenticity of the language they are taught, as shown by the following comments:

> Most of the time I think the topics of the textbook are relevant to things that we could use in normal casual conversations, but sometimes there are words or phrases that we would like to learn, that you would maybe... like a quote or something, or a joke or something, like maybe every now and then we could learn something different that isn't in the syllabus. (Brenda, grade 11)
>
> I love the topics [of the textbook] but they could give us like more of few like common conversation like what people have normally and try to learn those... those things, yeah. (Daniel, grade 11)
>
> For me, I feel the Mandarin textbooks are quite restricted in regard to how people normally would talk in China, because we had a teacher, Xiaolin, I think either last year or two years ago. She would explain to us how people wouldn't naturally talk the way the textbook is, and there's obviously more colloquial way of talking, and obviously is more informal than in the textbook. So that's what I think about the textbook. But other than that, the topics are quite relevant, like asking about people, greeting... in a respectful way, counting the days of the week. So I feel the topics are relevant, that's my take. (Nina, grade 11)

Although in a quite timid way, what these students seem to ask for is to combine the teaching of Mandarin Chinese in structuralist terms with a more social approach to language, according to which language is seen as a social practice rather than an autonomous and abstract system (see Chapter 2, section 2.2).

In line with a social approach to language, a few students also expressed their desire for an incorporation of some cultural content within the teaching of Mandarin Chinese.

> I would be interested if we could have a lesson about China itself. It would be cool to learn about the culture and the places and the things they do there. I think it would be cool. (Thomas, grade 11)
>
> Learning about their culture [would be interesting]… because it's not just like a language, cause it's more, it's attached to a culture, too. So I think it would be nice if we could like learn about the culture itself, too, cause we'd be… we… yeah… we'd gain more knowledge about it. (Vicky, grade 11)

The Mandarin Chinese lessons at Blue River School, also in accordance with the Mandarin *CAPS* which does not include the teaching of culture (as seen in Chapter 2, section 2.5), seem to focus predominantly on language intended as an autonomous and abstract system divorced from any particular socio-cultural context.

4.5 Conclusion

I argue that both the textbooks (i.e., *HSK Standard Course 1* and *Easy Steps to Chinese 1*) and the teachers' pedagogies adhere mainly to a structuralist paradigm of language, namely "language-as-object" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021), which conceives language as an autonomous and abstract system composed of discrete sounds combining into syllables, discrete syllables combining into words and words combining into sentences (see Chapter 2, section 2.2). Through the aspired scientificity and sequentality of language acquisition, as well as the focus on accumulating sounds, words and grammar structures belonging to a highly standardised form of language, the textbooks and the teachers seem to perform a "neat packaging of language" (Badwan, 2020, as cited in Badwan, 2021, p. 61), which makes it easy to commodify Mandarin Chinese as a well-defined, structured and pure object.

According to the "language-as-object" paradigm, "identifiable and standardised languages […] are able to be studied scientifically through the application of disciplinary tools and lenses – i.e. accessed in the same or similar ways through the discipline of linguistics" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021, p. 7). Hence, by understanding Mandarin Chinese through the discipline of linguistics (which conceives language as an autonomous system of structures as shown in Chapter 2, section 2.2), the textbooks and the teachers seem to conceive Mandarin Chinese as "an arbitrary and fungible system of representation" (Course, 2018, p. 12) which can be learnt in the same way as all the other (alphabetical) languages. I believe the following excerpt from Bowen's interview exemplifies well this point:

> I prefer putting Mandarin and French together, comparing them, because they are so delicate, but they are also so logical. Like, for French the 'la' and 'le' to show this is male or female. So Mandarin also have some kind of like logic in it. So that's why I found them quite similar. When you, no matter which language, if they have a standard, or they have a philosophy or they have a law to follow with, I find that language is easy to master. So that's my opinion, depending on your cultural background. For me, I'm like Chinese Mandarin speaker, so Mandarin it's like natural to me. But when I'm learning French, I feel like easy to adapt into because it's so logical and my brain was trained in that way, the language as nice and logical, I feel confident and I feel it's easy to read.

Bowen makes reference to and compares what he sees as the standardness, scientificity and logicality of both Mandarin Chinese and French. Therefore, from this perspective, as long as language is understood in structuralist terms, the fungibility, or exchangeability, of different languages conceived as autonomous objects becomes possible.

Lastly, the teachers' ultimate goal to prepare the students for the HSK 1 test in grade 11, and, thus, their emphasis on the importance of learning standard Mandarin Chinese in order to pass this international standardised language assessment, which is influenced by the standardised language assessments for European languages (see Chapter 2, section 2.5), also points to a conception of Mandarin Chinese and European languages as fungible systems, which can be commodified and sold in the same way.

As regards the students, in spite of a timid desire for a more social approach to language expressed by a few students, their general appreciation for the structuralist approach to language teaching of the textbooks and the teachers' pedagogies seems to reflect a conceptualisation of language as an autonomous and abstract system that can be acquired in a decontextualised classroom setting. Their interest in learning "the basics" before moving onto "the middle difficult part" and then "the most difficult part" as "in any language" points to the conception of a language learning trajectory which adheres to a structuralist view of language, i.e. "language-as-object" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021), and equates Mandarin Chinese with all the other (alphabetical) languages. This fungible conception of language, also in line with the "versioning" of the *CAPS* for Mandarin from the *CAPS* for English (De Man, 2017) (see Chapter 2, section 2.5), does not seem to raise the need for further reflections and considerations within the pedagogy of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School. However, as will be shown in the following chapter, the teaching of the Chinese written language raises questions and tensions with respect to the fungibility of Mandarin Chinese with other alphabetical languages.

Chapter 5: Tensions around the commodification of the Chinese script

5.1 Introduction

This data analysis chapter answers the second research question:

2. *What conceptualisations of the nature of literacy held by the textbooks, the teachers and the students inform the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in its written form in this school?*

Following the previous chapter, which explored the ontological dimension of language ideologies with respect to Mandarin Chinese, this chapter goes deeper into this issue by exploring how the written language is intimately connected with ontological dimensions of language. Hence, this chapter attempts to uncover the conceptualisations of the nature of literacy held by the Mandarin Chinese textbooks, the teachers and the students. By looking at the materiality of the written signs (i.e., pinyin and the Chinese characters), as the recent posthumanist and new materialist approaches as well as Shankar and Cavanaugh's (2017) "language materiality" theory suggest (see Chapter 2, section 2.2), the analysis will investigate how the textbooks, the teachers and the students conceive the Chinese written language and how these conceptions are influenced by competing forces. On one side, market-oriented commodification imperatives tend to prioritise pinyin at the expense of Chinese characters or to treat Chinese characters as arbitrary signs merely representing the spoken language; on the other side, socio-cultural views of literacy, which point to the fundamental role of Chinese characters within Chinese language and culture and to their distinctive relationship with spoken language, tend to unveil the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters, which can be also carriers of meaning due to their grapho-semantic components.

5.2 Chinese characters as arbitrary symbols vs the "serology of the Chinese characters" in textbooks and teachers' pedagogies

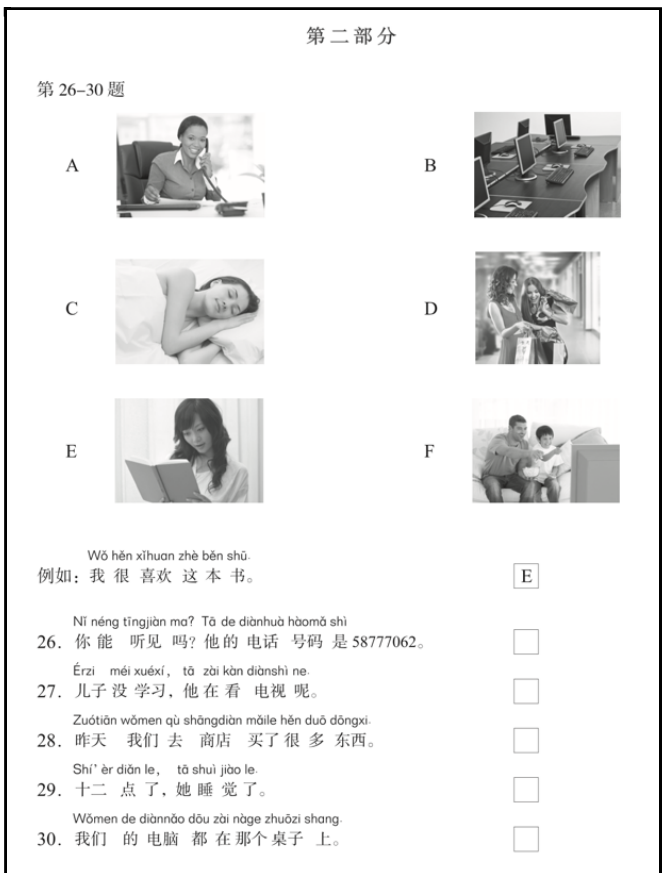
This section tries to uncover the conceptualisations of literacy held by the textbooks and the teachers which underpin the teaching of the Chinese written language. As a preliminary note, I would like to specify that, in line with the common practice of CIs and CCs, the teaching of characters only includes the teaching of simplified characters (see Chapter 2, sections 2.5 and 2.6). As was done in Chapter 4, the textbooks and the teachers' views of literacy are analysed in connection with each other, due to the highly textbook-based teaching of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School.

Mandarin Chinese textbooks

As seen in Chapter 4 (section 4.3), in spite of their attempt to adopt a communicative approach to language, both the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook and the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook ultimately share a similar

structuralist view of language. As regards literacy, on the contrary, they seem to take a different stance, as shown in their prefaces.

In line with the main "combin[ing] testing and teaching, and promot[ing] teaching and learning by testing" (*HSK Standard Course 1*, p. 3 & p. 7) approach championed by the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook, the main objective of this textbook is to prepare the students for the HSK 1 test. This test is composed of a listening part and a reading part. Question format in both parts is multiple choice or matching. Figure 16 shows a section of the HSK 1 reading part. It is worth noticing that questions are written in characters with the corresponding pinyin above them. Therefore, if candidates know the vocabulary written in pinyin, they do not have to make the effort to recognise the characters.



第二部分

第 26–30 题

A　B

C　D

E　F

Wǒ hěn xǐhuan zhè běn shū.
例如：我 很 喜欢 这 本 书。　E

Nǐ néng tīngjiàn ma? Tā de diànhuà hàomǎ shì
26. 你 能 听见 吗？他的 电话 号码 是 58777062。

Érzi méi xuéxí, tā zài kàn diànshì ne.
27. 儿子 没 学习，他 在 看 电视 呢。

Zuótiān wǒmen qù shāngdiàn mǎile hěn duō dōngxi.
28. 昨天 我们 去 商店 买了 很 多 东西。

Shí' èr diǎn le, tā shuì jiào le.
29. 十二 点 了，她 睡 觉 了。

Wǒmen de diànnǎo dōu zài nàge zhuōzi shang.
30. 我们 的 电脑 都 在 那个 桌子 上。

Figure 16-Characters and pinyin in HSK 1 test (*HSK Standard Course 1* workbook, p. 123)

Since students are not required to know the characters in order to pass the HSK 1 test, the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook, as stated in its Preface, focuses on training the students in listening and reading comprehension. It is interesting, however, to note that reading is intended as reading in characters with the constant support of pinyin.

Contrarily to the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook, the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook states in its Preface that "[t]he series stresses the importance of teaching basic strokes and compound strokes, stroke order, radicals and character structures" (p. IV) and that "[w]riting training starts at the outset and remains a

focal point throughout the series" (p. V). Furthermore, when using this textbook, teachers should "[s]tress the importance of character structures when teaching new words" (p. V). The chapters of the textbook are preceded by a four-page "pre-lesson" (Appendix 6) explaining the unique features of the Chinese script, which is composed of characters that are "ideographic in nature" (p. VIII), as well as the "unique" (p. IX) relationship between characters and their pronunciation. This "pre-lesson", which also invites the students to practice the physical tracing of the characters, seems to set out right from the start the importance of the "material culture" (Dickinson, 2017, p. 265) of writing in Chinese language.

With respect to the use of characters and pinyin throughout the textbooks, it is also possible to notice that pinyin is almost omnipresent above characters in the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook. On the contrary, pinyin is used above characters only in the sections 'New Words' and 'Texts' in the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook, while learners are required to rely only on characters in order to complete all the activities and exercises.

In the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook the new vocabulary of each chapter is listed in characters without an explicit explanation of the graphic features of the characters. As shown in Figure 17, the section 'New Words' presents each vocabulary entry as a unit of 'character/s – corresponding pinyin – (grammar function) – English translation'.

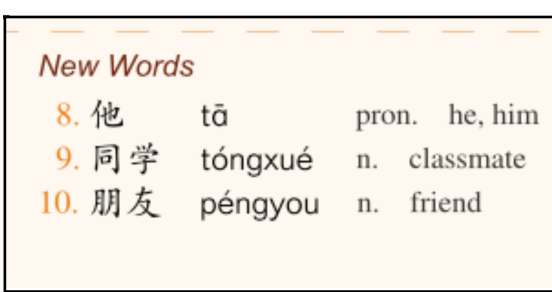


Figure 17-'New Words' in *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook (p.23)

This way of presenting the characters seems to reflect Boodberg's (1937, as cited in McDonald, 2011) emphasis on the role of "convention" in linking together graph (i.e., character)-phoneme (i.e., pinyin)-semanteme (i.e., English translation).[27] Furthermore, I argue that this way of presenting the characters seems to underlie a conception of characters as "symbols" in the Peircean sense (Merrell, 2001), namely signs which are arbitrarily linked to their meaning only by virtue of a certain convention. The meaning appears to reside within the sounds as they supposedly occur in speech, as in all other alphabetical languages, rather than within the graphic features of the characters, which are completely ignored. Drawing on McDonald's (2011) argument, which dismisses the graphic features of the Chinese characters as unrelated to their interpretation, and on Peirce's concept of "symbol" (Merrell, 2001) (see Chapter 2, section 2.6), I call the approach to Chinese characters presented in the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook "symbolisation approach". According to this

[27] Phoneme is intended here as "syllabic phoneme" (Boodberg, 1937, as cited in McDonald, 2011, p. 119).

approach, Chinese characters are conceived as “symbols” merely representing the spoken language and in which the relationship between the sign (i.e., Chinese character) and its meaning is arbitrary and unmotivated because defined only by convention, as in other alphabetical writing systems.

In a slightly different manner, the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook introduces the new vocabulary of each chapter (starting from chapter 1) by showing the radicals (i.e., grapho-semantic components) of certain characters. As shown in Figure 18, the section ‘New Words’ also presents each vocabulary entry as a unit of ‘character/s – corresponding pinyin – English translation’, but some characters among the vocabulary entries are re-written on the left with the radical highlighted in red.

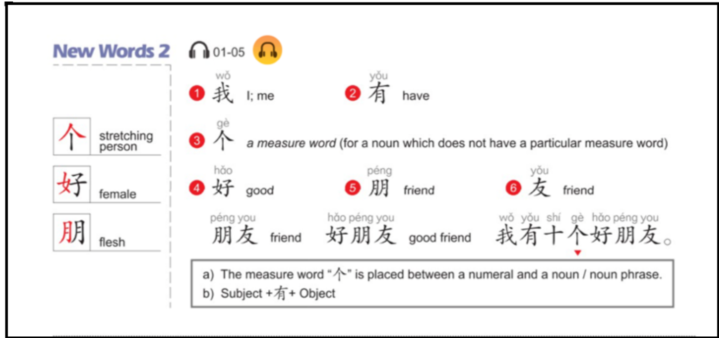


Figure 18-'New Words' in *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook (p. 6)

By taking a closer look at how the word 朋友 (péngyou, meaning ‘friend’) is presented in the two textbooks (Figures 19 and 20), it is possible to see the different approach that they adopt in teaching the vocabulary and the characters.

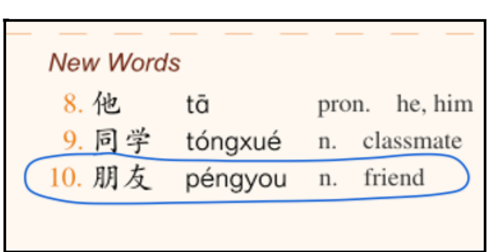


Figure 19-Vocabulary entry 朋友 in *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook

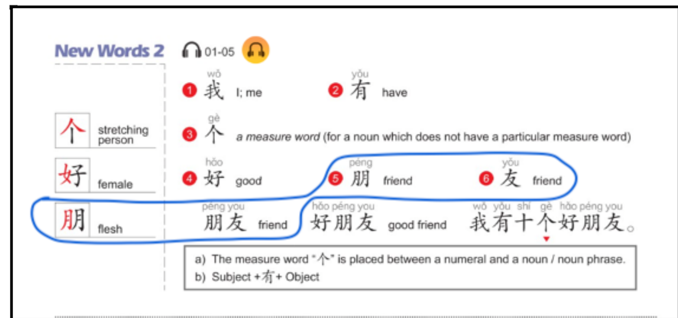


Figure 20-Vocabulary entry 朋友 in *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook

In the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook, 朋友 is simply listed as two arbitrary symbols corresponding to the pinyin ‘péngyou’ and to the English word ‘friend’. In the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook, 朋友 is also listed as two symbols corresponding to the pinyin ‘péngyou’ and to the English word ‘friend’. However, on the left side there is an explanation of the character 朋 (i.e., the first character of the word 朋友), according to which the character 朋 contains the grapho-semantic component 月 representing ‘flesh’. Thus, it could be inferred that the character 朋 pictographically corresponds to ‘two pieces of flesh’, thereby ideographically indexing

the concept of 'friend'.[28] The teachers, at this point, might feel prompted by the textbook to introduce a few other characters containing the 'flesh' radical that students will find in later chapters to show the potential of the radical to point to the semantic field of 'flesh/parts of the body' (脸 meaning 'face', 腿 meaning 'leg', etc.).

Whereas the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook seems to ignore the grapho-semantic features of the characters, the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook attempts to train the students, right from the beginning of their learning journey, to attend to the grapho-semantic features of the characters.

I would like to specify that in the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook there is a section in each chapter focusing on the explicit teaching of characters, which I believe is well designed, as it incorporates explanations of both the material tracing of the characters and their semantic features. In terms of showing the grapho-semantic features of the characters, the character section in each chapter includes one part presenting a few single-component characters with a short explanation of the ideographic/pictographic origins of the characters (chapters 1-15) (as shown in Figure 21) and one part presenting a few radicals (i.e., grapho-semantic components) with some characters related to the semantic fields of the radicals (chapters 7-15) (as shown in Figure 22).

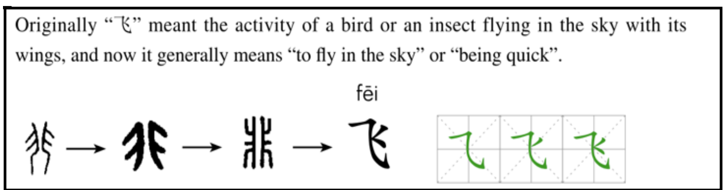


Figure 21-Single-component characters in *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook (p. 117)

偏旁 Radical	解释 Explanation	例字 Example Characters
艹	草字头，一般和草木或者植物有关系。 The radical "艹" is usually related to grass, trees or plants.	茶 chá tea 菜 cài vegetable
宀	宝盖头，一般和房子有关系。 The radical "宀" is usually related to houses.	安 ān to settle 家 jiā home

Figure 22-Chinese radicals in *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook (p. 117)

However, this section on characters is relegated at the end of each chapter, and it appears as unrelated to the vocabulary presented in the previous sections of the chapter. This reinforces the idea that this section on characters is not strictly part of the syllabus, but it is a sort of cultural add-on, whose actual value is left to the discretion of the students.

[28] Even if this graphic etymology of the character 朋 may not be the "correct" one, it shows the different approaches taken by the authors of the two textbooks; namely a more "symbolic" (in Peirce's sense) approach in the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook and a more "grapho-semantic" approach in the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook.

Teachers' pedagogies

When explicitly asked about the teaching of the Chinese script, both Bowen and Meilian acknowledge that they tend to give priority to the teaching of spoken Mandarin rather than to the teaching of the Chinese characters in order to make the students feel they are actually using the language, and, thus, make them "feel accomplished" or "more motivated" in Bowen's words.

> I want the students to feel more accomplished in learning Mandarin or more motivated. So that's why I set goals for them to easily achieve in the oral expression. And if I see there is a character with an easy way to link the knowledge back or extending the knowledge in the future, I spend some time explaining why we have this character. […] But generally I still considerably spend a lot of time to have the students to do oral expression, because that's somehow they can easily achieve and also feel accomplished. (Bowen)
>
> I think… ehm… at the beginning they… you don't need to push the learners to write a lot, because for the high school learners, they actually… they have to know the strokes, the radicals and the characters shape and know this character […] Mmhh… At the beginning some of the learners they don't like writing, ahah… They only want to speak because they want to speak, they want to use this language… Is a new language and they learn and they want to see something at first, they often say 'can we skip the characters because it's very complex' […] (Meilian)

Although both Bowen and Meilian want the students to learn the characters, they recognise that characters, due to their distance from phonetic scripts, can be "tyrannical" (Li, 2018; Weth & Juffermans, 2018) for the students, and, for this reason, they tend to over-rely on pinyin to support and develop the students' oral expression in Mandarin Chinese. As Bowen admits:

> characters are really difficult to read. If I give them [to the students] pinyin they're probably going to find a way to read it out, but if I give them characters, they are just refusing to say anything.

In Fang's classes I also noted that, although she is drawing the attention of the students to the grapho-semantic features of certain characters, she generally focuses more on the correct pronunciation of the characters and, thus, on their pinyin.

> Students: 他是乔布斯. 他是美国人. (He is Jobs. He is American.)
>
> Fang: Very good. If you cannot read out [and write] the Chinese character 美国 (United States of America) you can use pinyin.

As shown in the above excerpt, while doing a filling-the-gaps exercise with the students, Fang makes clear that the students are not required to read and write the vocabulary of the exercise in characters, but they can replace the characters with pinyin.

On one side, the teachers seem to allow the students to over-rely on pinyin at the expense of the learning of characters; but, on the other side, they seem to believe that not enabling the students to learn

the characters can be also “tyrannical”, as they would not acquire authentic Chinese and, thus, they would be marked out as foreigners.

> For Mandarin learners, pinyin is great. To be honest, if we don't have this pinyin system, it's going to be a nightmare for foreigners to learn this language […] [but] pinyin it's not the Chinese writing system […] What I, as a Mandarin speaker, when I teach them, I don't want them to learn pinyin because that's not how you write the language. If you write pinyin down, that is gonna cause trouble. People won't understand you? I don't think so because every Chinese people are able to use pinyin right now, but they still consider you are a foreigner, you have very little knowledge of Chinese. (Bowen)
>
> The pinyin, the pronunciation, the phonetic, they are very important because, like… ehm it's a tool to learn the Chinese characters […] (Meilian)

Both Bowen and Meilian seem to value pinyin as a means to learn the Chinese characters, but not as a script in itself. Bowen even says that, although nowadays a lot of people in China might understand pinyin, they would refuse to see pinyin users as competent and authentic Chinese language users.

The over-reliance on pinyin of the *CAPS* for Mandarin and of the matric test paper is also pointed out by Bowen, who, in line with De Man (2017), criticises the “versioning” of the Mandarin curriculum from the English curriculum, and, thus, its inadequacy with respect to the teaching of the Chinese characters.[29]

> Bowen: […] The curriculum is focusing on reading […], that's the curriculum focus, but that's considerably still leaning on the oral, like are you able to read out aloud, are you able to read and get the reading comprehension a bit, but they didn't… But why I mention this? Still leaning on the oral… because the curriculum, the paper, the exam paper set pinyin on the top, so that's require the students, that's barely requires the students have knowledge about the characters, because you read the pinyin, then you don't read the characters.
>
> Chiara: Oh, so basically all the assessments have both characters and pinyin…
>
> Bowen: Yes.
>
> Chiara: Let's say until Grade 11, ok, so they…
>
> Bowen: No, until Grade 12, even the matric paper.

De Man (2017) argues that the text-based approach of the *CAPS* for Mandarin, which pertains to all the *CAPS* for Second Additional Languages, puts great emphasis on reading. In the same vein, Bowen remarks on the focus of the Mandarin curriculum on reading. However, reading in Mandarin within the *CAPS* for Mandarin is meant as reading in pinyin, thereby pointing to what I call a “phoneticisation approach” to the Chinese script. This approach tends to prioritise pinyin at the expense of the characters, thus making the students over-rely

[29] Although Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School is taught in grades 8, 9, 10 and 11, Bowen is most probably referring to the *CAPS (Grades 4-6) Mandarin Second Additional Language* because this is the curriculum designed for Mandarin beginners, as students at Blue River School are. De Man (2017) notes that in grades 4-6 students are expected to “depend on pinyin to read and write” (p.107). Although students should switch to characters from grade 7 onwards, according to the curriculum (De Man, 2017), a review of past Mandarin matric test papers (designed and managed by the Independent Examination Board, which assesses Mandarin “for all IEB and State Schools” in South Africa, see https://www.ieb.co.za/assessment/high-schools/national-senior-certificate, accessed 20th August 2024) shows that characters are mostly presented with the corresponding pinyin (see https://www.sapapers.co.za/ieb/mandarin-sal, accessed 20th August 2024).

or even rely exclusively on pinyin when both scripts (i.e., pinyin and characters) are co-present. In Bowen's opinion, reading in pinyin is not authentic reading but "oral language", as reading in Mandarin Chinese should be done in characters.

Data presented so far shows that the teachers feel a constant need to negotiate between the teaching of Mandarin Chinese through pinyin and the teaching of the Chinese characters. This negotiation is also compounded by the teachers' recent choice of adopting since grade 8 the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook, which puts a special emphasis on the knowledge of characters, rather than using only the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook, which does not require the students to learn characters.

In terms of how the characters are taught, it seems that the teachers are, again, feeling a tension between teaching them as arbitrary symbols merely representing the spoken language (i.e., "symbolisation approach") and teaching them as also having grapho-semantic features. As seen in Chapter 2 (section 2.6), while the former approach ignores the grapho-semantic features of the characters and treats them as "symbols" in the Peircean sense, i.e., signs arbitrarily corresponding to a certain meaning (and to a certain pronunciation), the latter approach attempts to show that characters, though they are not totally divorced form spoken language, can be also carriers of meaning due to their grapho-semantic components (also called 'radicals'). As seen before in this chapter, the different approach adopted by the two textbooks in terms of how characters are presented also speaks of this tension.

Meilian's and Bowen's comments seem to demonstrate a conceptualisation of the Chinese written language and of its teaching which attempts to distance itself from both the "phoneticisation" (i.e., teaching mainly/only pinyin at the expense of characters) and the "symbolisation" (i.e., teaching characters as arbitrary symbols merely representing the spoken language) approaches.

> Characters were like that, they have different elements to put together, to deliver a message, like what's this character mean. [...] Because you always see the radicals, that's the key for you to understand the character. That's actually help you more efficiently, to build up your vocabulary or build up the idea of the character. [...] That's why I also mentioned the textbook we were using, *Easy Steps to Chinese*, they have a curriculum which show which character has this radical, and what's the meaning of the radical and more radical they start to learn, they can categorise the characters around it. With categorising the characters, you can start to get the general idea... Oh this radical actually has this meaning and all these characters share the same meaning, but extended to different aspects or different angles, and they can make different words to express more detailed or delicate information. (Bowen)
>
> They [the students] have to know the strokes, the radicals and the characters shape and know this character, because compared with English, or the African languages, or the Afrikaans, they don't write exactly the characters, but for Mandarin we... we... we know the characters, we know how to write, the way we have the rules, from the top to bottom, from the left to right, like that, but they don't know. So the first step, you to let them know this character and then... ehm... know the meaning [...] some of the characters may have some meaning inside and then the radicals [...] (Meilian)

In the comments above, the teachers emphasise the non-arbitrary relationship between the graphic features of the characters and their meaning (see Chapter 2, section 2.6), and, thus, the importance to attend to the

"pattern" (Ting, 2020) of the Chinese characters in order to interpret them. Both Meilian and Bowen underscore the importance of the radicals in order to interpret the meaning of the characters and to learn them more efficiently (see Chapter 2, section 2.6), as also emphasised by the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook.

Although Bowen acknowledges that his lessons focus more on the spoken language (also because of time constraints as he mentions more than once in his interview), he points out the importance of learning the Chinese characters, as they constitute the "foundations" of the language (Appendix 7).

> [...] if you can master the writing you got a deeper understanding about the language, like how it becomes in this way and what's the philosophy or what's the ideology behind it. [...] I have to say it's more important for them [i.e., the students] to learn the most important knowledge about how to writing the characters to get the solid foundation, because oral is easy to accomplish. [...] Writing is also important... because we didn't practice or spend that much of time on the writing, learn how to write Chinese characters or learning... or recognising Chinese characters, spending more time explaining the philosophy or the story of how we creating these characters [...] we need to focus more on the writing to let the learners to expose themselves to the idea and philosophy, even say serology of characters, how characters have been designed.

As shown in the above comments, Bowen ties up the Chinese characters with historical and philosophical aspects, thereby pointing to a conceptualisation of literacy as deeply embedded in a specific socio-cultural context (see Chapter 2, section 2.2 and section 2.6). I found particularly interesting the metaphor of "exposing the students to the serology of the characters". In scientific terms, "serology" refers to "the study of blood and other fluids from the body" (Cambridge Dictionary).[30] Talking about "the serology of the characters" corresponds to giving characters a life of their own. As seen in Chapter 2 (section 2.6), Wenzel (2010a) argues that a Chinese character "is an 'image' in the mind, not a passive one on a piece of paper, but an active image that strikes you" (p. 319). Not only does Bowen seem to believe that characters are "active" components of the language (not arbitrary symbols merely representing the spoken language), but he also seems to maintain that they are "inherent component[s] of the Chinese language itself" (Humboldt as paraphrased in Kwan, 2001, p. 217) because they are carriers of meaning (as argued in Kwan, 2001, p. 217; see Chapter 2, section 2.6). Indeed, as shown in the following excerpt, Bowen even seems to believe that the knowledge of spoken Mandarin Chinese cannot overlook the knowledge of the Chinese characters:

> You can easily learn 'nǐ hǎo', and you are still able to say 'nǐ hǎo', but you have no idea what you actually put there. So 'nǐ hǎo' actually means 'you' and 'good', it actually means 'are you ok, are you good'. But everyone still assumes 'nǐ hǎo' just means 'hello', so they don't bring the knowledge of the phonic pronunciation to the characters, they are just translating a sound to another sound, so matching 'nǐ hǎo' to 'hello' that's what missing is understanding the character.

[30] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/serology, accessed on 20th August 2024.

What Bowen is trying to say is that most students, within a grammar-translation paradigm which presumes that languages are equivalent (as seen in Chapter 4, section 4.3), would learn that 'nǐ hǎo', namely these two words written in pinyin, means 'hello'. However, in Bowen's view, by learning only the pinyin (i.e, 'nǐ hǎo') and its English translation (i.e., 'hello'), and, thus, by totally overlooking the corresponding characters (i.e., 你好 which are pronounced as 'nǐ hǎo'), the students acquire only a superficial and inauthentic knowledge of Mandarin because, according to him, the characters and not the sounds carry the meaning of 'nǐ hǎo'. A closer look at the grapho-semantic features of the characters 你好[31] shows the richness of meaning that characters convey and that, according to Bowen, can neither be conveyed through their mere transliteration (i.e., 'nǐ hǎo') nor simply translated as 'hello'. In Bowen's view, the characters 你好 become active and inherent components of the language which cannot be overlooked. It appears as if the learning of spoken Mandarin, in his opinion, should mandatorily happen through the learning of the Chinese script. Bowen's emphasis on teaching the students the "design" of the Chinese characters (in his words, "understanding the character", "[teach] how characters have been designed") seems to point to a conceptualisation of characters as being carriers of meaning, and, thus, "inherent" (Humboldt as paraphrased in Kwan, 2001, p. 217) and "more substantial" (Wenzel, 2007, p. 303) components of the language itself by virtue of their grapho-semantic features.

Hence, the importance attributed to the graphic shape of characters makes the teaching of the aesthetics of characters become an integral part in the teachers' pedagogies. As seen in Chapter 2 (section 2.6), calligraphy has been a fundamental component of Chinese culture since ancient times. In the following excerpt, Fang invites the students to revise all the strokes they have learnt so far. As shown in Figure 23, under the word 笔画 ('bǐhuà', meaning 'strokes'), she draws thirteen strokes to revise. When showing the eleventh stroke, namely the 'lying hook stroke' (circled in red in Figure 23), Fang compares it to a "beautiful lady" lying on the ground:

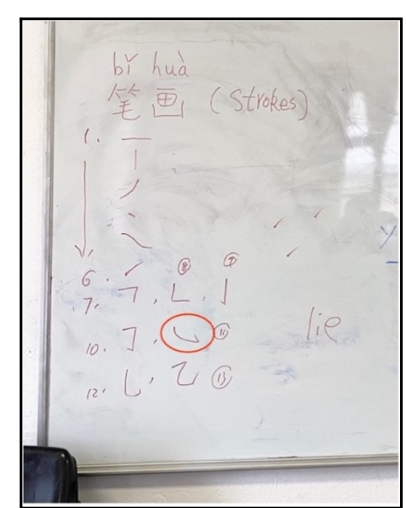


Figure 23-Stroke revision activity in Fang's class

> This hook is like a beauty lying on the ground. Ahahah... is very beautiful... is like ... is like a... is like a beautiful lady. Is 卧钩 (lying hook stroke), 卧 (lie) means lie. It means lie (writing 'lie' on the board). Is 卧钩 (lying hook stroke)... Is 卧钩 (lying hook stroke).

[31] For instance, the character 好 (meaning 'good') is composed of the two grapho-semantic components 女 (on the left) and 子 (on the right). The former refers to the pictographic character 女, which means 'female/woman' and visually represents a kneeling person. The latter refers to the pictographic character 子, which means 'child' and visually represents a baby with legs wrapped and arms outstretched; thus, a woman and a child together point to the concept of 'good'. The explanation of the composition of this character draws on my own previous knowledge of this character.

Despite the main focus on spoken Mandarin in the classroom, I was amazed by how Fang put a special emphasis on the manual tracing of the characters and by how she explained even a basic stroke (i.e., the lying hook stroke) as an iconic sign representing an object in the outer world (i.e, a beautiful lady lying on the ground).

5.3 "Phoneticisation" and "symbolisation" approaches in the students' uptake of the Chinese script

Most of the students interviewed in grade 8 describe Mandarin Chinese as a hard subject mainly because of the characters and clearly state their preference for spoken Mandarin.

> My writing… because my writing it's just… it's not working with me. (Kylie, grade 8)
>
> I… got higher mark when it came to speaking it [Mandarin] instead of writing it cause I can't remember the characters, or…. the…. the spelling of it. (Sandra, grade 8)
>
> It's very difficult because I don't understand the characters and that's where you have to really understand it. (Kim, grade 8)

Since grade 8 students see the Chinese characters as "tyrannical" (Li, 2018; Weth & Juffermans, 2018), they tend to over-rely on pinyin in their learning of Mandarin Chinese, with some of them even neglecting the characters.

> [As a study method] I would, like, use the pinyin because it would be on the subtitles and I would learn it like that: I would listen to it, and then I would read… and then I would read the pinyin and then rewatch it in English. (Kim, grade 8)

It is evident from this excerpt that Kim completely ignores the characters when she is studying the vocabulary and reading the texts in the textbook. After having listened to the textbook recording, she would just read the pinyin script above the characters (what she calls "the subtitles") and match it with the English translation. In the case of Zaira, another grade 8 student, she shows interest in the characters, but she struggles to grasp how they work in relation to the spoken language. She ultimately not only expresses her preference for pinyin but also seems to believe that Mandarin Chinese can be also written through "an alphabet".

> With the writing of the Mandarin characters, I got confused because I normally write in pinyin. […] If we have a new activity in the future, I would like to be the alphabet, the Mandarin alphabet, if then there is an alphabet […] Now I just want to know the alphabet […] (Zaira, grade 8)

Daniel, a grade 11 student (from another African country where French is the official language), acknowledges the uniqueness of the Chinese script and its difference from alphabetical languages, but he seems to love relating Mandarin to French through pinyin.

> I really find Mandarin a kind of different to all the languages I've had, and I want to find like how this language came about because all the languages the way we use the same alphabet but when it come to Chinese it's different [...] I think for me what I like more is when I'm reading those Chinese pinyin or it's pinyi... is it called? Yeah, pinyin. I love like... I love... That's my favourite part because as for French, for us, like the way we read stuff we basically read the way we speak. So I kind of relate when I'm reading Mandarin with French. Like that's one of my favourite part of reading, yeah learning Mandarin. Yeah, yeah, and because like it allow me to like... ehm... learn Mandarin easier and to capture the words after... (Daniel, grade 11)

The above excerpts from Kim, Zaira and Daniel seem to align with the "phoneticisation approach" to the Chinese script, whereby Chinese characters are neglected or downplayed in favour of their transcription in pinyin. Unlike most of the grade 8 students, all grade 11 students show particular interest in learning Chinese characters, and some of them also tend to see the over-reliance on pinyin as "tyrannical" (Li, 2018; Weth & Juffermans, 2018). Indeed, they seem to understand that pinyin will not allow them to become authentic and competent Mandarin Chinese users, as John's comment shows:

> At the moment we don't really know any characters, we know basic characters... ehm... because we do use pinyin most of the time or all of the time basically, but I would like to learn the characters as well because I don't think in China they use pinyin. I don't know if you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think they do, so I would like to know the characters. (John, grade 11)

However, the students' interest in learning the characters is limited to instrumental purposes, such as understanding the written language while travelling, as well as reading and writing CVs or letters. The students equate the learning of the characters for instrumental purposes to the mere ability to associate each character with a sound and to decode-encode the denotative meaning of the characters; however, they do not seem to show any interest in understanding the grapho-semantic features of the characters. Borrowing Bowen's words, they seem to be interested in the "message" (i.e., denotative meaning) conveyed by the characters, but not in the "knowledge" of the characters, namely how the graphic features of the characters convey the message, which ultimately can be also shaped by the grapho-semantic features of the characters. I argue that the students' mere interest in associating each character with a sound and in decoding-encoding the denotative meaning of the Chinese characters speaks of their conceptualisation of the Chinese script as a system of symbols which arbitrarily correspond to a sound and to a certain meaning (usually expressed through the English translation). For instance, the following excerpt shows how Liyana's studying method consists in arbitrarily associating Chinese characters, pinyin and English without any attention to the graphic features of the characters, as the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook suggests (see section 5.2).

> I write down all the keywords [in characters] that I learnt in the lesson that I'm trying to study and then I associate the English words with Mandarin pinyin. So when I read the Mandarin sentence I can translate it into English to make me understand it more because I know the keywords. (Liyana, grade 11)

This arbitrary association of characters with pinyin and meaning (expressed through the English translation) does not allow the students to rely on the grapho-semantic components of the characters to "reason" (Kwan, 2001, p. 217) the meaning of the characters or the general semantic field, thereby leaving them to resort to rote memorisation as the only method to learn the characters, as John's following comment seems to show:

> I would… I basically memorise it [a Chinese character]. I memorise it by writing and reading it, over and over repeating it and it gets stuck in my head. (John, grade 11)

Out of all the interviewed students, I found only two grade 11 students who seem to be aware of and interested in the distinctiveness and grapho-semantic features of the Chinese script, as shown in the following excerpts:

> The characters and the written Chinese it's actually very interesting, because like… you can write one word but it's like… for example, I'm saying… like there's one word, but you can write different ways using different punctuation and turning it into a completely different word or completely different meaning. (Vicky, grade 11)
>
> It's a very special language for me because it's very different to how I usually speak, and the characters and everything it's very interesting to learn how, the meaning of each character, how to form, and all those things. […] My activities that I like is when we are getting… oh, like when the teacher explains specifically the characters and where they come from, how they were created, and the… each of the strokes, the meanings. (Brenda, grade 11)

While Vicky's comment demonstrates her awareness of how the graphic shape of the characters is important to convey meaning, Brenda's comment seems to allude to the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters and to their historical and philosophical roots (i.e., how the signs have evolved over the millennia).

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter on the teaching and learning of the Chinese written language highlighted different ways of conceptualising the Chinese script. Firstly, what I called the "phoneticisation approach" to the Chinese script refers to the over-reliance on pinyin at the expense of the Chinese characters or to the replacement of the Chinese characters with pinyin. Secondly, what I called the "symbolisation approach" to the Chinese script

refers to the conception of Chinese characters as arbitrary symbols which, only by virtue of a certain convention, correspond to a certain pronunciation and a certain meaning. Thirdly, what I call the "serological approach", by borrowing Bowen's words (i.e., "serology of the Chinese characters"), refers to the crucial and distinctive role played by Chinese characters within Chinese language and culture due to the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters, which make them "active" (Wenzel, 2010a, p. 319) and "inherent" components" (Humboldt as paraphrased in Kwan, 2001, p. 217) of the language itself rather than simply representing it.

While the first two approaches conceive the Chinese script simply as a means to reproduce the spoken language (which is ultimately the carrier of meaning), the third approach acknowledges the unique potential of the Chinese characters of being also carriers of meaning due to their grapho-semantic features. I argue that both the "phoneticisation approach" and the "symbolisation approach" to the Chinese characters appear to align with a conceptualisation of literacy as a decontextualised skill (see Chapter 2, section 2.2), as they attempt to equate the Chinese script with any other phonetic script, in which the written signs are arbitrary signs merely reproducing sounds. On the contrary, the conceptualisation of the Chinese characters as also having grapho-semantic features seems to suggest a socio-cultural view of literacy, whereby the Chinese script is conceived as being deeply entrenched within the Chinese social, cultural, historical and philosophical context (see Chapter 2, section 2.2).

As shown in this chapter, both the textbooks and the teachers, in their teaching of the Chinese characters, constantly negotiate between the decontextualised and skills-based "phoneticisation and symbolisation approaches", on one side, and the "serological approach" (i.e., socio-cultural grapho-semantic approach) on the other side. I argue that both the "phoneticisation approach" and the "symbolisation approach" speak of an attempt to make the Chinese script a commodity that could be easily sold and commercialised due to its resemblance to other alphabetic scripts. However, as the teachers seem to maintain, this market-oriented approach ignores the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters, and, thus, deprives the Chinese script of its distinctive nature. The teachers, especially Bowen, feel a constant frustration in their attempt to teach the "serology" of the Chinese characters, and this attempt often remains just an attempt due to the limited teaching time set aside for Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School. Thus, teachers often resort to pinyin in their teaching or to teaching characters as arbitrary symbols in the sense that they overlook the teaching of the grapho-semantic components within the characters.

With respect to the students, almost all of them seem to fully embrace either the "phoneticisation approach" or the "symbolisation approach" in their learning of the Chinese characters, thereby conceptualising the Chinese script as fungible with other phonetic scripts. I argue that the students' view of the Chinese characters could be somehow related to the highly decontextualised and narrow skills-based conceptualisation of literacy within South African schools (as pointed to in Chapter 2, section 2.4). The emphasis that South African teachers put on phonics and on the basic comprehension of words and sentences

from early school grades (Bua-lit Collective, 2018) could be one of the reasons why the students are led to think that what matters most in learning the Chinese characters is the written sign-sound correspondence and the decoding-encoding of basic denotative meaning. Hence, I argue that the students are ultimately missing the opportunity to appreciate the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese script and its distinctive way of carrying and conveying meaning.

The appreciation of the "material culture" (Dickinson, 2017, p. 265) of the Chinese script could also inspire the students to rethink the ontological dimension of written language and its relationship with spoken language in ways that go beyond the phonocentric and representational view of language, according to which written language only serves the purpose of representing (the sounds) of spoken language. In considering deaf people's access to and affordances of spoken language, Snoddon (2022) criticises a representational view of language and argues in favour of "the existential primacy of writing" (p. 722). In Snoddon's (2022) words, "[i]n writing, we can become a writer, which is a way of being in the world and not simply representing it" (p. 725). This is because, she continues, "[i]nstead of acting as a means for encoding knowledge, writing is where knowledge and meaning emerge" (Snoddon, 2022, p. 729). I argue that an emphasis on the teaching of the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters could not only show the students the richness of written language as a source of meaning in itself, but it could also enable them to think of written texts "as physical objects comprised of many elements that are all subject to cultural processes of meaning-making" (p. 268). I believe that rethinking both the importance and the "physicality" (Dickinson, 2017) of writing might help students not only appreciate the human and cultural value of different language and literacy ontologies, but it could also enrich students' ways of "grasping" and "designing" meaning in a world in which the widespread use of digital technologies privileges multimodality in communication.

Chapter 6: Mandarin Chinese within South Africa's linguistic market

6.1 Introduction

This data analysis chapter answers the third research question:

3. *What ideological value do teachers and students attribute to Mandarin Chinese within the South African linguistic market and how does this ideological value attribution relate to the conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in this school?*

While Chapters 4 and 5 pointed out how Mandarin Chinese and its script are ontologically conceived by the textbooks, the teachers and the students, this chapter focuses on the "ideological value attribution" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 12) aspect of the "bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4) by looking at what ideological value students and teachers ascribe to Mandarin Chinese in their discourses concerning Mandarin Chinese as a school subject in South Africa. By drawing on the theoretical concepts of the linguistic market and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977), the commodification of language (Heller, 2010, 2017), and the hierarchisation of named languages (Badwan, 2021) implied by the scale theorisation approaches to language (Blommaert, 2010), I investigate, firstly, the main reasons stated by the teachers and the students for investing in Mandarin Chinese, and, secondly, how Mandarin Chinese is positioned by the students within South Africa's, I would say "disputed", linguistic market. In the conclusion of this chapter, I attempt to shed light on the relationship between the ontological conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese and of its script and the ideological value attributed to Mandarin Chinese.

6.2 Reasons for investing in Mandarin Chinese

Students' interview responses show that students in grades 8 and 11 are learning Mandarin Chinese in school for many different reasons, such as a general interest in learning other languages and cultures, a passion for Japanese/Korean/Chinese entertainment, and a superficial interest in Mandarin Chinese because, as the students say, it seems to be "different" and "cool". However, one salient reason for learning Mandarin Chinese, which is common to the teachers and to most students, is because Mandarin Chinese is an "opportunity", and seems to be able to open other "opportunities", mainly in terms of travelling, communicating with people, and future jobs/careers.

As regards travelling, the students seem to conceive Mandarin Chinese as an "international" language that they can use not only for travelling and communicating with people in China, but also for travelling and communicating with people in other Asian countries and worldwide.

> And then Mandarin, it's one of the most globally spoken languages in the world, so... yeah... I also would love to explore the language [...] I would love to travel, obviously one of the places I would love to travel is Asia, so... ehm... I think Mandarin will actually quite help me a lot. (Zintle, grade 8)
>
> Everywhere you go, you never know, you might encounter a person that lives in America or something and speaks Chinese, and like... yeah, it's good for you. (Vicky, grade 11)

In terms of job/career opportunities, the students appear to see China as a very powerful country from an economic point of view, and, thus, Mandarin Chinese is seen not only as a "magic bullet" (Hubbert, 2019, p. 51), which might open job opportunities for the students in China and worldwide, but also as a gateway to acquire and be part of China's technological innovations.

> So when I was shown Mandarin as an option I decided to take it because for the job career [...] that I want to pursue, there's many openings or options for me to pick from in China. So for me to learn Mandarin at an early stage in my educational career would be good for me, I think. (Thomas, grade 11)
>
> I really think it's one of those languages which is important like learn because [...] the Chinese themselves... like... they... they are also being part... like being part of all the innovations that's happening in the world. [...] In the future [...] working somewhere in China or working with people that came from China, so I really would like to be able to speak and understand what they are saying because my job will be more like international stuff and I can be flexible for working as an engineer anywhere, in the world, yeah. (Daniel, grade 11)

Thus, Mandarin Chinese seems to provide the students with some of the main opportunities that a powerful language should grant their users according to Chan's (2016, as cited in Badwan, 2021) Language Power Index, namely "travel widely, earn a livelihood, communicate with others, acquire knowledge" (p. 31). Hence, Mandarin Chinese is seen by the students as powerful "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1977), which could be used to gain other forms of capital.

In addition to travelling and job/career opportunities, some students mention a presumed kind of distinctiveness, or "cool quotient" in Hubbert's (2019, p. 51) words, that knowing Mandarin Chinese, even only a few words or sentences, might ensure them.

> It's quite cool that I know how to say a few words in Mandarin and they [i.e., my cousins and siblings] don't, which is… we quite tease each other. (Zintle, grade 8)
>
> Learning like other languages which is like… it's so fun… ahahah… and it's so like cool to say that you know all these other languages as well. You could just like brand to people, I don't know… Ahahah!!!! […] It [i.e., Mandarin] was cool, it was different, and also… […] you can easily just say 'I'm having Mandarin but you are not', like so… and it's very different, I like to… it's a better advantage like I said before as well, so I really enjoy it. (Sarah, grade 11)
>
> So for me basically Mandarin has always intrigued me because it was always spoken about, so as always highly spoken of. You know, people always said it was so difficult, and that intrigued me because it made me think that if I can learn Mandarin then that basically means I'm smart. (John, grade 11)

The above excerpts show how, according to the students, Mandarin Chinese generally enjoys a high reputation as a very special or difficult language which can improve the social reputation of the people who can speak it. Sarah's metaphor of "branding [oneself] to people" by learning different languages and especially Mandarin Chinese, defined as an "advantage", speaks of the "corporatisation of the subject" (Badwan, 2021, p. 18; see also Besley & Peters, 2007) (as seen in Chapter 2, section 2.3), and, again, of the conception of Mandarin Chinese as powerful linguistic capital which enables social mobility.

I found interesting the fact that, quite ironically, some students consider Mandarin Chinese as a valuable commodity because of its "being different" from other (alphabetical) languages; however, this superficial characterisation of Mandarin Chinese as "being different" is contradicted by the students' learning approach. Indeed, when they get down to the nitty-gritty of learning Mandarin Chinese, they tend to reduce the language to an abstract system of structures and the script to a system of phonetic signs (i.e., pinyin) or arbitrary symbols, thereby conceptualising the learning of Mandarin Chinese and of its script as equivalent to the learning of any other alphabetical language (as shown in Chapters 4 and 5).

As regards the teachers' as well as Jing's opinions[32] concerning the reasons pushing the students to invest in Mandarin Chinese, they all point out China's economic performance, and they consider Mandarin Chinese as an international language opening both study and job opportunities for South African students.

[32] Since Fang did not agree to be interviewed, it was not possible to listen to her opinion on this matter.

> I think it's… we… some of the learners, they can choose, when they choose Mandarin as the second additional language, and they have plan to… ehm… to visit China or they want to study in China, and Hanban also gives the opportunities for them, so first I think it's a good chance for them. And second, it's like the two countries [i.e., South Africa and China] population, the economy, so the booming, so it's booming, ahah. So I think a good time for the two countries. (Meilian)
>
> I think the sports, the arts, and the movies, they gonna be still the very very little portion… of the love or passion, ahah, of the language subject. I think it's still because of the economy, because of the opportunity for… especially for young people. […] Chinese language gonna be the most important language in the next 20-30 years […] It trends to be getting bigger market, so I think that's still the major reason to attract the people to explore a little bit and learn a little bit more. (Jing)
>
> I was defining Chinese as […] non-official, a language you choose because of its economic status, that's the way I choose to express a language like Mandarin [in South Africa]. So we should… I believe first Africans choose Mandarin not because they are so fascinated by the Chinese culture, it's about they are so fascinated with the Chinese economy […] and they want to make business with them [i.e., Chinese people]. (Bowen)

Both Jing's and Bowen's comments on Mandarin Chinese as a subject in South Africa are very rich in economic and market-oriented metaphors. Indeed, the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese is becoming "a bigger market" and Mandarin Chinese is a language that South African students choose because of its "economic status". These metaphors point to a commodification and marketisation process of Mandarin Chinese, of which CIs and CCs as well as international standardised language assessments (such as the HSK) are strong promoters (as seen in Chapter 2, section 2.5). It is interesting to note that both Jing and Bowen tend to separate Mandarin Chinese from "Chinese culture" and from "the sports, the arts and the movies", as they maintain that students choose Mandarin Chinese as a subject not because they are interested in the cultural aspects of the language, but because of its instrumental value. This could be also the reason why (as seen in Chapters 4 and 5) Mandarin Chinese and its script tend to be taught and appropriated in a decontextualised and almost "scientific" and "technical" way (though with some tensions especially as regards the Chinese script), thus not only echoing the approach of international language testing systems and of the *CAPS* for Mandarin but also suggesting an ontological equivalence between Mandarin Chinese and other (alphabetical) languages.

In terms of job opportunities, Bowen underscores the relationship between the instrumental knowledge of Mandarin Chinese and the material benefits that it could bring to the students.

> By learning Mandarin you can go to some of […] foreign Chinese companies, like Huawei… …like they have […] a factory in another country, in some of the African countries, and if you are really good at Mandarin, you can easily get a place into… in that company and… I heard some of the countries, they even tripled the salaries. (Bowen)

In line with theoretical approaches that posit the materiality of language in its deep entrenchment with socio-economic and commodification themes (Heller, 2017; Kell & Budach, 2024), Bowen's words seem to suggest that Mandarin Chinese is valuable linguistic capital for South African students, which they could materially exchange with "high salaries". In this sense, Mandarin Chinese can be conceived "literally, not metaphorically, as a form of capital that can act as a commodity" (Heller, 2017, p. 251).

Although both students' and teachers' discourses on the role of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa emphasise the instrumental value attributed to Mandarin Chinese, I would like to conclude this section with a few comments pointing to an approach to language (mentioned in Chapter 2, section 2.3) that Badwan (2021) calls "humanising language" (p. 42), whereby language is not conceived in instrumental terms and as a commodity but as "a means of living, connecting, feeling and being human" (Badwan, 2021, p. 50).

> By exposing the students to multiple languages, it's always a very human way to training the young people. I mean, to expose them to different cultures, to building them as... to build them as global citizens at the very beginning. I always thinking that's gonna totally change the way they think the world when they go to the university. (Bowen)
>
> [Learning Mandarin would allow to] pay attention to the people in our communities. It would be cool to communicate with them in their own home language, and learn their culture. (Thomas, grade 11)

Thomas's comment emphasises "bonding" (Badwan, 2021, p. 45) through language. Bowen's comment, despite the neoliberal rhetoric of "building students as global citizens", points to the personal and human growth that learning different languages, including Mandarin Chinese, might nurture. In their attempt to verbalise the "human value" (Badwan, 2021, p. 45) of learning Mandarin Chinese, Bowen and Thomas make an association between language and culture ("multiple languages and different cultures", "communicate with them in their own language, and learn their culture"), thus pointing to the intimate link between language and its social, cultural, historical and philosophical context. I argue that, when approaching the study of a foreign language, learning about this "context" (though it is not always easy to define without running the risk of stereotypes) has a human value and might have the potential to expand our notions about the nature of language and literacy. All this seems to be disregarded by the decontextualised teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese and of its script at Blue River School (as shown in Chapters 4 and 5).

6.3 The high instrumental value of Mandarin Chinese within South Africa's linguistic market

As Frank (2016) underscores, the introduction of Mandarin Chinese within the South African curriculum has raised a unique response within South African media, and, in some cases, it has been held responsible for hindering the development of African languages in schools. Indeed, South Africa's official languages are not

equally promoted and valued in schools (as seen in Chapter 2, section 2.4). Because of the power imbalances among the different languages spoken in South Africa, I argue that Mandarin Chinese entered an "already disputed" linguistic market.

Drawing from the students' narratives of their linguistic portraits, this section attempts to analyse how Mandarin Chinese is positioned in relation to other South African official languages. The instrumental value which students attribute to Mandarin Chinese, as seen in the previous section, is also the main parameter through which Mandarin Chinese is compared with other languages. As mentioned in Chapter 5 (section 5.3), the students also seem to hold an instrumental view with respect to their learning of the Chinese script (i.e., understanding written language while travelling, reading and writing CVs and letters), which could be interpreted as speaking of an instrumental view of literacy more in general, whereby the decoding-encoding of denotative meaning is what counts. Thus, languages and their scripts are seen as instruments whose value mainly depends on the job, study and travel opportunities they can be exchanged with.

Mandarin Chinese is generally conceived by the students as an international and professional language which, according to Brenda and Daniel, can enjoy the same high status of English.

> English is a universal language, so that would be good to have. And Mandarin… there are many opportunities in the Asian countries […] So I think it would be in that sense a powerful language. (Brenda, grade 11)
>
> I really think that [Mandarin] will be a powerful language, like it will be similar to… to… ehm… English because of how… like… Chinese are also expanding the technology advancements, like people somehow will need to learn about it at least in the professional, like in jobs and stuff. (Daniel, grade 11)

Mandarin Chinese is defined as a "powerful" language, similar to English, that should be learnt to grab study and job opportunities in the Asian countries and even worldwide.

With the exception of two students, all the portraits of the interviewed students in grades 8 and 11 include Afrikaans as a "second" language. Afrikaans is generally conceived as a school subject ("forced" subject for a few students) or/and as a "local" language spoken within the family and/or the community. Most students compare Afrikaans with English and tend to stress how English has been replacing Afrikaans in their interactions with family and friends. It is interesting to note that when the students talk about Afrikaans, no additional comments are made in terms of the different varieties of Afrikaans they might be exposed to in school (i.e., standard Afrikaans) and at home (i.e., non-standard Afrikaans varieties usually forbidden in schools). The same could be said for the students' general definition of English as both their "home language" and the "school language", without any comment on the different registers and varieties of English that they might use at home and at school. Indeed, as Anthonissen (2022) found in her study of linguistic repertoires of South African university students, "information on non-standard and contact varieties in the repertoires

did not emerge" (p. 72). This could be partly due to the fact that, as in Anthonissen's (2022) case, questions formulated in the language portrait activity (Appendix 4) focused on "languages" and did not emphasise "language varieties". However, I argue that the main reason for the absence of non-standard and contact varieties in students' portraits and narratives might be due to students' conception of languages as decontextualised and abstract objects, separate from each other, that exist and can be named by virtue of a standard form. The highly decontextualised and abstract teaching of standard Mandarin Chinese seems to embrace this conceptualisation of language. When Mandarin Chinese and Afrikaans are explicitly compared, Mandarin Chinese emerges as a global language, whereas Afrikaans is seen as a local language relegated to a narrow context.

> I agree with it [i.e., having Mandarin as compulsory subject in South African schools]. It's actually a clever idea, because, like, for example, Afrikaans… Afrikaans is a South African language, but you won't go to America or Australia or China and like, if you, if I must speak Afrikaans to those people, they won't understand. But with Mandarin, you will be able to communicate with different people from different parts of the world, so it's actually a good idea that they are implementing it, because, yeah, we are learning more. (Vicky, grade 11)

Vicky's instrumental view of language leads her to attach a high value to Mandarin Chinese because it is seen as a "passepartout" for communicating with people not only in China but also worldwide, whereas Afrikaans is considered as a local language, and, thus, less useful. Vicky even seems to imply that Mandarin Chinese should replace Afrikaans as a language subject in South African schools.

Similarly, when students were asked whether they would choose to learn an African language (among the South Africa's official languages) as a school subject if they had the chance to do so, most students did not show a particular interest in learning an African language, or, if they did, they would still learn Mandarin Chinese in addition to an African language[33] as second additional languages.

> [Between Af1 and Mandarin] I choose Mandarin because […] I hope, like, at a later stage, in terms of career and all of that, ehm… yeah… and… just hold on… Yeah… ehm… Af1, that language, you… only here people talk it in… us, in South Africa, you won't hear it in other countries. (Vicky, grade 11)
>
> [Between Af1 and Mandarin] I think I would choose Mandarin. I would choose Mandarin because I think it could have a bigger impact on my life later when I'm applying for jobs or for personal reasons […] especially if I am planning to work outside of South Africa, because South Africa is the only country or Africa as a whole is the only continent that speaks Af1. (Thomas, grade 11)
>
> When the school said that they offered Mandarin [inaudible] rather than like local things like the South African languages […] It's more like [inaudible] overseas and that's maybe the opportunity and stuff of like overseas […] the South African stuff would have been an interesting language, maybe, if I need to take it up, but I'm saying I'm satisfied with the choice that I made with Mandarin… like I wouldn't replace it. (Sarah, grade 11)

[33] In the excerpts below 'Af1, Af2, Af3' stand for the names of African languages which are not stated to conceal the identity of the school.

As for Afrikaans, Af1 and other African languages are not seen as useful as Mandarin Chinese for travel and career purposes. Again, while Mandarin Chinese is seen as an international language granting opportunities, African languages are very localised into a narrow, economically stagnant, and parochial space. Sarah's quite derogatory terms used to define African languages, namely "local things" and "the South African stuff", also speak of the low value attached to them. I believe it is especially worth noting how Zintle, the only African home language speaker in this study, who explicitly states in her interview that she cannot read and write in any of the African languages composing her linguistic repertoire, puts a lot of emphasis on learning Mandarin Chinese in both its spoken and written form for her future career (i.e., opening a Mandarin learning centre), but she is not interested in taking any African language as a school subject.

> In the future I think it [i.e., Mandarin] could be really beneficial for me because [...] Mandarin is one of the most spoken languages globally. [...] I prefer learning how to speak and write Mandarin because obviously those two correspond, and in the future, who knows, I could also open my own learning centre of Mandarin. [...] I would definitely not choose my home languages [as school subjects] because I'm terrible at speaking Af1, Af2 and Af3, but I just speak a little. I would actually... yeah... I think I would go for Mandarin. (Zintle, grade 8)

This section attempted to show how students hierarchise languages according to their instrumental value (Badwan, 2021) and what position is given to Mandarin Chinese within this hierarchical order. By borrowing Blommaert's (2010) concepts of "sociolinguistic scales" and "orders of indexicality," it could be said that Mandarin Chinese is operating at a higher scale level or on a higher indexical order, similarly to English, whereas Afrikaans and African languages are operating at a lower scale level or on a lower indexical order. Lastly, by drawing on Blommaert's (2010) concept of "polycentricity", I believe it is worth noticing that students in their lives are constantly moving among different centres in which different linguistic resources are required and used. For instance, although the students recognise the usefulness of Afrikaans in order to speak with certain family members, some of them do not show a particular interest in Afrikaans as a school subject, and they seem more interested in having English and Mandarin Chinese as school subjects. Therefore, the students appear to disqualify certain centres, i.e. contexts in which Afrikaans is spoken or taught, in favour of others, i.e. contexts where standard English and standard Mandarin Chinese are taught.

6.4 Conclusion

In Chapters 4 and 5, the exploration of the conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy underpinning the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese and of its script focused on the ontological component of the "bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4). Chapter 4 showed that, despite a few students expressed their interest in a more social approach to language demanding for more authentic language in the classroom (different genres, registers, etc.) and for more

cultural and social content (lessons on Chinese culture and Chinese contemporary society), the textbooks, the teachers, and the students mainly conceive Mandarin Chinese as an autonomous and abstract system of words and grammar structures. Similarly, Chapter 5 showed that, in spite of the teachers' attempt to integrate into their pedagogy the teaching of the Chinese characters and to draw students' attention to the materiality of the graphic features of Chinese characters and to their way of carrying and conveying meaning through grapho-semantic features (as also shown by the teachers' recent adoption of the *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook), the students and the *HSK Standard Course 1* textbook mainly conceive the Chinese script as a decontextualised system of either phonetic signs (i.e., pinyin) or "symbols" in the Peircean sense whose graphic features are unrelated to their meanings and whose function is simply to represent the spoken language. I argue that these conceptualisations of both Mandarin Chinese and its script focus on a conception of language and literacy as being purely denotational, thereby downplaying a more socio-cultural approach to language and literacy. These conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese and of the Chinese script as being purely denotational contribute to reducing the language and its script to "an arbitrary and fungible system of representation" (Course, 2018, p. 12), which can be ontologically equated with all other (alphabetical) languages. I also argue that commodification processes of language teaching and learning through textbooks and international standardised language testing systems (i.e., HSK modelled on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) are responsible for an excessive standardisation and equalisation of languages and of their learning trajectory.

Chapter 6 focused on the ideological value attribution component of the "bipartite nature of ideologies as 'ontologies plus values'" (Hall & Cunningham, 2020, p. 4). Firstly, it showed the high instrumental value that teachers and students attach to Mandarin Chinese, whereby Mandarin Chinese is seen as having a market-value that could be exchanged for travel experiences and job opportunities. Secondly, it investigated how Mandarin Chinese is positioned by the students within South Africa's linguistic market in comparison to other South Africa's official languages. Most of the students clearly hierarchised the languages of their linguistic repertoire according to their instrumental value, and they seemed to suggest the idea that, in their opinions, Mandarin Chinese and English are operating at higher scale levels whereas Afrikaans and African languages are operating at lower scale levels.

With respect to the relationship between, on one side, the conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese and of its script (i.e., ontological dimension of language and literacy ideologies) and, on the other side, the ideological value attribution to Mandarin Chinese (i.e., ideological value attribution dimension of language and literacy ideologies), I argue that once languages and their scripts are ontologically conceived as "all equivalent objects" (Course, 2018, p. 13; see also Bauman & Briggs, 2003, as cited in Course, 2018) having a mere denotational nature, i.e., conceived as communication tools, it becomes relatively easier not only to compare and hierarchise them according to their instrumental value, but also to exchange them on the linguistic market,

in which different “language[s]-as-object[s]” (Demuro & Gurney, 2021) are given different prices. Indeed, if language and literacy were understood according to a “humanist approach” (Badwan, 2021, pp. 50-51) to language (see Chapter 2, section 2.3), whereby languages and their scripts would be seen as not merely denotational (i.e., as communication tools with an instrumental value) but as “some things” which can be also ontologically different (i.e., social practices with a human value), this would imply comparing “different things [and not] different kinds of the same thing” (Course, 2018, p. 9), with the former comparison being more difficult than the latter.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Discussion of the main findings and theoretical contribution

In 2014 the close relationship between South Africa and China led to the introduction of Mandarin Chinese as a school subject into the South African school curriculum, not without substantial political contestations as shown by Frank's (2016) study on South African media's perspectives on this issue. This political component and the relative dearth of research on the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa sparked my interest in exploring what is currently happening in South African schools where Mandarin Chinese is taught mainly with the support of and/or within the framework of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. This interest was coupled by my past experience of being a student of Mandarin Chinese in both an Italian and a Chinese university and my current experience of being a foreign language (Italian) teacher in South Africa.

The theoretical approach that informed this study merges critical and post-structuralist approaches with relatively recent ontological approaches to language and literacy studies (McKinney, Zavala, & Makoe, 2024) with the aim of exploring both the ontological component and the value attribution component (Hall & Cunningham, 2020) of teachers' and students' language and literacy ideologies with respect to Mandarin Chinese. I believe this knowledge cannot be overlooked because the way language and literacy are ontologically conceptualised and valued by the Mandarin Chinese teachers and by the South African students may have implications for the way Mandarin Chinese is taught, learnt, offered and chosen as a school subject (perhaps, sometimes, at the expense of other languages, i.e. African languages). On a broader theoretical level, the exploration of ontologies and values with respect to Mandarin Chinese and its script can help investigate conceptualisations of the nature of languages and their scripts more in general, which, in this study, appear to be mainly underpinned by neoliberal market-driven processes of language commodification. I argue that these processes, exemplified by international language syllabuses and standardised language assessments (such as the HSK), see languages and their scripts as decontextualised communication tools with the same denotational nature. People attribute to these communication tools high or low instrumental (and economic) values according to the affordances and opportunities they seem to endow their users with.

The exploration of the conceptualisations of the nature of language held by the Mandarin Chinese textbooks, the teachers and the students which inform the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese showed a strong adherence to a structuralist paradigm of language. Teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese is conceived as a sequential and almost scientific process which consists in accumulating sounds, words and grammar structures according to a pre-packaged syllabus defined by the textbooks, whose aim is to prepare students for international standardised language assessments for Mandarin, such as the HSK. As noticed in Chapter 2, the HSK is designed for testing Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language, but the different levels (6 levels) and the general approach are influenced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Xie, 2011, as cited in Feng & Adamson, 2019). This points to a sort of equalisation of Mandarin

Chinese with European languages in terms of teaching, learning and testing. The structuralist view of language is also coupled with a firm focus on the "standardness" of language (as defined in Chapter 4, section 4.2), which is heavily influenced by teachers' national ideologies of language; namely, Mandarin Chinese is the only language variety worth learning and students are not even made aware of the existence of other Chinese language varieties. I argue that these conceptualisations of Mandarin Chinese reflect the paradigm of "language-as-object" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021), whereby "languages [are] stable (finite) sets of rules, retaining and transmitting predictable meaning across time and space" (Demuro & Gurney, 2021, p. 7). Hence, the focus of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in this study is on the denotative meaning that language can allegedly retain and transmit in different contexts, thereby pointing to a conceptualisation of the nature of Mandarin Chinese as merely and purely denotational. Indeed, as shown in Chapter 4 (sections 4.3 and 4.4), Mandarin Chinese is taught and learnt mainly as an abstract system, with only a few students wishing to explore a more socio-culturally authentic language. I believe it is worth noticing how this conceptualisation of languages as autonomous and abstract systems, and thus, I would say, "asocial" and "acultural", seems to echo not only the "versioning" of the Mandarin curriculum from the English curriculum (De Man, 2017) but also the way languages are conceptualised within South Africa's language education system. As discussed in Chapter 2 (section 2.4), in the South African education system languages are treated as bounded, autonomous and abstract entities clearly separated from one another, namely, a view that contrasts with the highly heteroglossic reality of the South African linguistic landscape (McKinney, 2017). Interestingly, the students' language portraits showed the representation of South African official languages as separate, bounded and abstract systems. This visual representation shows that the students do not problematise the notion of "a language" neither in terms of different language varieties (i.e., they used the term "Afrikaans" for both standard Afrikaans in school and non-standard Afrikaans varieties at home) nor in terms of fluidity among languages in their actual language use. These aspects were not even mentioned by the students in their interviews. I argue that students' visual representations of and narratives about languages point to their lack of awareness that languages are social and cultural practices and, ultimately, to a conception of language/s, in Demuro's and Gurney's (2021) words, "as stable (finite) sets of rules, retaining and transmitting predictable meaning across time and space" (p. 7). As a result, languages are conceptualised merely as communication tools, whereby "communication" is conceived in mere denotative terms. Thus, languages share the same denotational nature, and, in this sense, they appear as equivalent and, thus, "fungible" (Course, 2018, p. 12) objects or tools in ontological terms.

The exploration of the conceptualisations of the nature of literacy held by the Mandarin Chinese textbooks, the teachers and the students which inform the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in its written form showed a more complex argument as well as tensions between different and competing conceptualisations of literacy. Tensions are evident between different approaches in the teaching and learning of the Chinese script, namely what I called in this study as "phoneticisation approach",

"symbolisation approach" and "serological approach". The "phoneticisation approach" reduces the Chinese script to exclusively phonetic signs by relying only pinyin, and, thus, overlooking entirely the importance of learning the Chinese characters. The "symbolisation approach", though acknowledging the importance of learning the Chinese characters, reduces them to Peircean "symbols" simply representing the spoken language, thus downplaying the often-motivated relationship between the graphic shape of characters and their meaning (Gu, 2000; Ting, 2020). On the contrary, the "serological approach", by pointing out the importance of attending to the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters, attempts to show the distinctive nature of the Chinese script, its embeddedness within Chinese culture and its unique relationship with spoken language. While the "phoneticisation and symbolisation approaches" privilege the spoken language as the carrier of meaning over the written language and see Chinese characters, in Dickinson's (2017) words about "graphemes", "only as relatively transparent symbols of 'sounds' or 'words'" (p. 266), the "serological approach" to the Chinese script seems to suggest an attribution of fundamental importance to the written language, whereby Chinese characters, again in Dickinson's (2017) words about "graphemes", should be seen "also as complex, culturally engaged material elements, produced through embodied linguistic practices" (p. 266). The data analysis in Chapter 5 showed that, while the "serological approach" is firmly supported by the teachers and it shapes the way they see the Chinese written language, it remains often concealed by the other two approaches due to time constraints, to students' willingness to focus more on the spoken language, and to the requirements of the HSK 1 test, which does not require the students to read and write Chinese characters. I argue that students adopt either a "phoneticisation approach" (mainly in grade 8) or a "symbolisation approach" (mainly in grade 11) in their learning of the Chinese characters. In particular, I was quite surprised by the fact that most of the students often made superficial comments about Mandarin Chinese as a "cool" and "different" language, but they (except for a few students) did not mention anything about, for instance, the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters, thereby suggesting a conceptualisation of the Chinese script as a script whose signs simply have the instrumental function of representing sounds as they occur in speech. Indeed, students' interest in learning the characters seems to be limited to the association of characters with their pronunciation and their denotative meaning (usually expressed with an English translation). They do not seem to be interested in exploring how the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters are combined to iconically or indexically suggest the meaning of characters or their semantic field (Gu, 2000; Wenzel, 2010a). I argue that the students' decontextualised view of literacy, which appears to equalise the Chinese script with other phonetic scripts, could be influenced by the highly decontextualised and skills-based approach to literacy which characterises the teaching and learning of literacy since the early grades in South African schools. As shown in Chapter 2 (section 2.4), this approach mainly focuses on phonics and basic comprehension (Bua-lit Collective, 2018). Thus, Chinese characters are learnt by the students merely as tools to decode-encode sounds and denotative meanings for

instrumental purposes, such as understanding the written language while travelling, looking for a job or working.

In sum, the exploration of the conceptualisations of the nature of both language and literacy informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese at Blue River School pointed to a very decontextualised view of language and literacy, whereby the former is conceived as an abstract system of vocabulary and grammar structures and the latter as a system of phonetic signs/arbitrary symbols. As seen above, both conceptualisations speak of a view of language and literacy as having a mere and pure denotational nature, which, I argue, contributes to shaping languages and their scripts as mere instruments or tools to communicate denotative meanings, thus making them "fungible and arbitrary system[s] of representation" (Course, 2018, p. 12) with the same ontological nature. However, I argue, once languages and their scripts are thought of merely as communication tools, it follows that different instrumental values (high or low) are assigned to different languages and scripts according to the extent to which they allow speakers, readers and writers to access opportunities through them. This is what was found when exploring the values teachers and students attach to Mandarin Chinese and the values that students attach to South African languages when comparing them to Mandarin Chinese. Indeed, both teachers and students see Mandarin Chinese, similarly to English, as a powerful instrument to travel worldwide, access knowledge, study opportunities and jobs. On the contrary, Afrikaans and African languages have a lower instrumental value, as they remain languages attached to South Africa, a reality that, in students' views, does not seem to offer future opportunities. Hence, from a theoretical point of view, it is possible to see how the ontological equivalence of languages and scripts as mere denotational tools paradoxically leads to the attribution of different instrumental values to languages and scripts which make them highly non-equivalent, with ensuing issues of inequality and social injustice.

7.2 Limitations of the study and further research

As mentioned in Chapter 3, this study drew on linguistic ethnography as one of the main research approaches (together with biographical approaches), but it took only "an ethnographic perspective" (Green & Bloome, 1997, as cited in Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 30) because I could not spend much time on the field performing classroom and out-of-classroom observation, as originally planned in my research proposal. In terms of classroom observation, a longitudinal observation in the classes of the three teachers who participated in this study could have probably enriched the data with other teaching materials (in addition to the textbooks) and shown other aspects of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese. For instance, more observation could have revealed the teaching of some cultural and social content about Mandarin Chinese in China and China itself that the teachers and the students did not mention during the interviews. In terms of out-of-classroom observation, I have already mentioned in Chapter 3 that the Mandarin Chinese Department also organises

some cultural activities and events. Since data collection was conducted in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, I was not able to observe the dynamics of these activities and events, but it would have been interesting to take part in them and to include them as data sources. As regards the exploration of the conceptualisations of the Chinese script, I believe that including students' notebooks and other artefacts, coupled with discussions around them, within the data sources could have given more insights into their engagement with the Chinese written language. In sum, more "material" observation on the ground could have probably shown more nuanced perspectives on the nature and value of language and literacy; namely, between a conceptualisation of language and literacy as mere instruments to convey denotative meanings and a conceptualisation of language and literacy as socio-cultural expressions with a social, cultural and "human value" (Badwan, 2021, p. 45). Indeed, while performing the interpretation of the data and reading between the lines of the students' interview transcripts, sometimes I felt that I emphasised too much the instrumental value attributed to Mandarin Chinese. However, I chose to focus mainly on this aspect of the valuing of Mandarin Chinese (and of other South African languages) because it was prominently supported by the conceptualisations of the nature of language and literacy as mere denotative communication tools, as shown by the exploration of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in the school. In the interviews some students mentioned a general interest in languages and cultures, but this was not supported by their actual uptake of Mandarin Chinese, and especially of its script, which seemed strongly decontextualised, acultural and asocial. Perhaps, more observation of cultural activities and discussions around written artefacts could have enabled me to explore more in depth students' alleged interest in the cultural aspects of Mandarin Chinese and of its script.

I believe the above-mentioned limitations of this study should be considered as potential aspects for further research in the same research site and in other sites. By extending this type of research in other South African schools where Mandarin Chinese is offered as a school subject could allow comparisons between different school sites and offer a broader picture of the language and literacy ideologies informing the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa.

As mentioned in Chapter 3 (section 3.5), my research positionality as a non-native Chinese speaker/writer should be considered as far as my interpretation of the data and theoretical suggestions are concerned. On one hand, this could be a limitation of this study because a native Chinese speaker/writer could suggest more in-depth additional and/or different views and insights as regards the nature of Chinese language and literacy. On the other hand, I thought it was worth bringing theoretical discussions and debates concerning the nature of Chinese language and literacy into the realm of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese from the point of view of a Mandarin Chinese learner.

7.3 Concluding remarks and recommendations on foreign language teaching

As already mentioned, I performed this study from the stance of a student of Mandarin Chinese (holding an HSK level 5) and a foreign language (Italian) teacher. Therefore, I will not give specific recommendations in terms of how to improve the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese, but, on the basis of the findings of this study, I will attempt to share some concerns and suggest some recommendations in terms of foreign language teaching more in general. Although I specifically refer to "foreign language teaching", I believe these observations could be extended to the broader field of "language teaching".

The decontextualised teaching of foreign languages, which tends to look at languages as standard communication tools, is strongly influenced by processes of language commodification which take the form of international standardised language assessments, such as the HSK for Mandarin Chinese, the IELTS and TOEFL for English, the PLIDA for Italian, etc. Although these assessments attempt to merge social aspects of the language when testing the communicative skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing), I believe that these language assessments ultimately make candidates focus on the format and contents of the test, as well as on language accuracy and correctness, thereby depriving languages of their fundamental socio-cultural nature (different language varieties, genres, topics, etc.). Languages are ultimately seen as pre-packaged objects which can be acquired, taken and used in any situation and for any purpose. Indeed, I believe that the Mandarin Chinese Department's focus on preparing students for HSK 1 at Blue River School, energetically sponsored by the Confucius Institute project, deeply influences the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese as a decontextualised classroom language and its script as a decontextualised system of phonetic signs or arbitrary symbols.[34] Based on my experience as a Mandarin Chinese student, I found that this type of teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese not only did not help me become truly functional in the use of the language as an instrument, but it also concealed the richness of the variability of language in speech and of its socio-cultural connotations, which I discovered later when spending time in China. In terms of the teaching and learning of the Chinese script, I found it very useful and fascinating to be introduced by an elder Chinese professor to the grapho-semantic components of Chinese characters for a short period of time. However, the need to rush to acquire stocks of vocabulary and grammar structures for exams and for the HSK then led me to progressively overlook the grapho-semantic features of characters and to look at them as arbitrary symbols whose graphic shape just needed to be memorised and not understood or further explored. I believe that attending to the graphic features of the Chinese characters and to their semantic components, understanding their pictorial origins and evolution, and (maybe) practicing character writing through calligraphy lessons might not only help students expand their vocabulary by "reasoning" (Kwan, 2001, p. 217) the characters and by grouping vocabulary items into semantic fields (Wenzel, 2010a) but also show students the socio-cultural embeddedness (Kwan, 2001; Wenzel, 2010a) and, I would say, the "beauty and charm" of

[34] It might be interesting in future studies to look at the format and requirements of the new HSK to see whether there is any difference in this regard.

a different way to convey meaning in written form. As suggested in Chapter 5 (section 5.4), pointing to the grapho-semantic features of the Chinese characters in the teaching and learning of the Chinese script could enrich students' experiences of and engagements with literacy in general. It could open students' eyes to the "material culture" (Dickinson, 2017, p. 265) of writing, which I believe is more and more important in our digital and multimodal era, and to its "existential primacy" (Snoddon, 2022, p. 722), because writing should not be seen as compulsorily subordinated to speech but as "where knowledge and meaning emerge" (Snoddon, 2022, p. 729).

In conclusion, I believe that being taught Mandarin Chinese by a team of professional and passionate teachers (as Bowen, Meilian and Fang under the guidance of Jing are), who constantly attempt to reflect on and improve the teaching and learning of the language and its script, is a unique opportunity for the students at Blue River School. However, the results of this study showed that the teachers who participated in this study and, more generally, we, as foreign language teachers, should be concerned not only about making students communicate denotatively in the foreign language, which often entails help them pass highly abstract and decontextualised standardised language tests which could be used for study and work purposes, but also about making students appreciate and embrace the cultural, social and "human value" (Badwan, 2021, p. 45) of languages. This is not an easy task, but I believe it is worth working on it in order to suggest an alternative to the "highly commodified [way in which] many people perceive the importance of language in our life" (Badwan, 2021, p. 46) so that language, and people, can "be protected, cared for and respected" (Badwan, 2021, p. 49).

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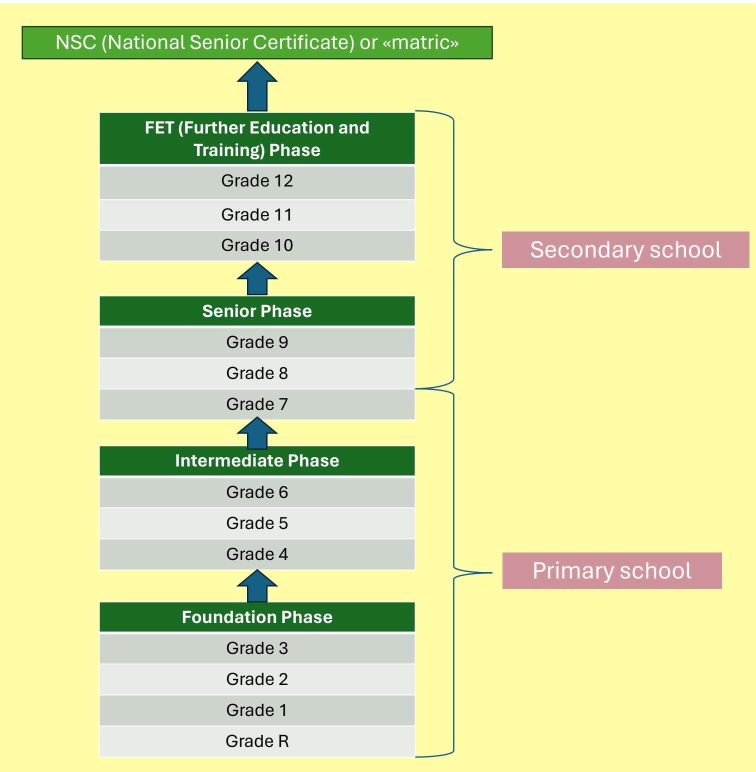
Appendix 1 – Basic education system in South Africa



Basic education in South Africa includes the following phases to which the *CAPS* correspond: the Foundation Phase from grade R to grade 3, the Intermediate Phase from grade 4 to grade 6, the Senior Phase from grade 7 to grade 9, and the FET (Further Education and Training) Phase from grade 10 to grade 12. However, the division between primary schools and secondary schools does not exactly correspond to these phases. Indeed, primary schools generally include grades from R to 7, and secondary schools include grades from 8 to 12. Therefore, the Senior Phase (grades 7-9) spans over both primary and secondary school. In grade 12 students take part in the National Senior Certificate examination, which is commonly known as "matric" (Wilson & Aditi, 2017).

Information to create this diagram and write this short description of South Africa's school system were sourced from:

Macha, W., & Kadakia, A. (2017). Education in South Africa. *World Education News & Reviews (WENR).* Retrieved on 11th June 2024 from https://wenr.wes.org/2017/05/education-south-africa

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Appendix 2 – Information letters and consent forms

<u>School Principal's information letter and consent form</u>

Learning Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, UCT master student's research project

Dear ………………..,
I, Chiara Reali, am a master student in the School of Education at the University of Cape Town. The study I would like to conduct for my master's thesis aims to explore the teaching and learning practices occurring in the Mandarin Chinese lessons and what teachers and students think of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, especially in relation to their linguistic background. I kindly ask your permission to conduct research during the Mandarin Chinese lessons in Grade 8 and Grade 11. Following the introduction of Mandarin Chinese as a second additional language in the South African curriculum, few studies have been conducted on the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, and this study aims to expand research in this field.

Data collection will be in the form of in-class non participant observations of 4 to 5 Mandarin Chinese lessons per class. I would like to clarify that I will not take part in any teaching activity. I will observe the teaching materials, the teaching practices and learners' activities while taking notes and audio-recording.

In addition to in-class observation, I would like to interview the Director of the Mandarin Chinese Department as well as the Mandarin Chinese teachers. The interviews will be audio-recorded. These interviews will give me the opportunity to know more about the Mandarin Chinese teaching project at the school, to discuss relevant issues that may have arisen during observation, and to know more about the teachers' experience.

As regards the students, I would like to conduct focus group interviews with some students. I will negotiate with the teachers a suitable time for these short interviews so that they will not impact the teaching. The interviews will be audio-recorded. As part of the research project, I will also ask the students to complete a short form and the 'language portrait' activity. Students will be invited to use different colours to represent their different linguistic resources and to map them out on a body outline drawing. At the beginning of the observation period, I will kindly ask the teachers if they may allow me to use 5-10 minutes of their lesson to explain this activity to the students. The form and the language portrait can be completed at home and then returned the next lesson.

The audio-recording of the lessons and the interviews is important to analyse the data more in details at a later stage. The audio-recordings will be securely stored, and no one will be able to access them. Participation is voluntary and the confidentiality of the school, the Director of the Mandarin Chinese Department, the teachers and the students is guaranteed. The school will be given a pseudonym, and pseudonyms will be used for all participants in the writing up of the research. The Director of the Mandarin Chinese Department, the teachers and the students, as well as the parents/guardians, will be duly informed through an information letter and they will be asked to sign a consent form. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.
If you agree in participating in this study, I kindly ask you to fill in the consent form. You are more than welcome to ask any questions regarding this study to me, Chiara Reali (email address and phone number), or to my supervisor, Prof. Catherine Kell (email address).

Yours sincerely,
Chiara Reali

Name (print):

Signature:

Date:

I understand that the participation of the Director of the Mandarin Chinese Department, the teachers and the students in Grade 8 and Grade 11 is voluntary and that anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.

I consent to	YES	NO
1. Teachers and students being observed and audio-recorded in the classroom.		
2. Allowing the researcher to take photographs of textbooks and teaching materials used during the lessons observed.		
3. Director of the Mandarin Chinese Department being interviewed.		
4. Audio-recording of the interview with the Director of the Mandarin Chinese Department.		
5. Teachers involved being interviewed.		
6. Audio-recording of the interviews with the teachers.		
7. Allowing the researcher to use 5-10 minutes in one of the Mandarin Chinese lessons to explain the language portrait activity, and allowing the students to complete the language portrait activity (at home).		
8. Allowing the students to fill in a short form (at home).		
9. Some students being interviewed in group interviews.		
10. Audio-recording of the students' interviews.		

Mandarin Chinese Department Director's information letter and consent form

Learning Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, UCT master student's research project

Dear ……………,
I, Chiara Reali, am a master student in the School of Education at the University of Cape Town. The study I would like to conduct for my master's thesis aims to explore the teaching and learning practices occurring in the Mandarin Chinese lessons and what teachers and students think of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, especially in relation to their linguistic background. I kindly ask your permission to conduct research during the Mandarin Chinese lessons in Grade 8 and Grade 11. Following the introduction of Mandarin Chinese as a second additional language in the South African curriculum, few studies have been conducted on the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, and this study aims to expand research in this field.

Data collection will be in the form of in-class non participant observations of 4 to 5 Mandarin Chinese lessons per class. I would like to clarify that I will not take part in any teaching activity. I will observe the teaching materials, the teaching practices and learners' activities while taking notes and audio-recording.

In addition to in-class observation, I would like to conduct an interview with you and with the teachers. If you agree, the interviews will be audio-recorded. These interviews will give me the opportunity to know more about the Mandarin Chinese teaching project at the school, to discuss relevant issues that may have arisen during observation, and to know more about your experience and the teachers' experience.

As regards the students, I would like to conduct focus group interviews with some students. I will negotiate with the teachers a suitable time for these short interviews so that they will not impact the teaching. The interviews will be audio-recorded. As part of the research project, I will also ask the students to complete a short form and the 'language portrait' activity. Students will be invited to use different colours to represent their different linguistic resources and to map them out on a body outline drawing. At the beginning of the observation period, I will kindly ask the teachers if they may allow me to use 5-10 minutes of their lesson to explain this activity to the students. The form and the language portrait can be completed at home and then returned the next lesson.

The audio-recording of the lessons and the interviews is important to analyse the data more in details at a later stage. The audio-recordings will be securely stored, and no one will be able to access them. Participation is voluntary and the confidentiality of the school, as well as yours and that of the teachers and students, is guaranteed. The school will be given a pseudonym, and pseudonyms will be used for all participants in the writing up of the research. The teachers and the students, as well as the parents/guardians, will be duly informed through an information letter and they will be asked to sign a consent form. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.

If you agree in participating in this study, I kindly ask you to fill in the consent form. You are more than welcome to ask any questions regarding this study to me, Chiara Reali (email address and phone number), or to my supervisor, Prof. Catherine Kell (email address).

Yours sincerely,
Chiara Reali

Name (print):

Signature:

Date:

I understand that my participation, as well as the teachers' and the students' participation in Grade 8 and Grade 11 is voluntary and that anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.

I consent to	YES	NO
1. Teachers and students being observed and audio-recorded in the classroom.		
2. Allowing the researcher to take photographs of textbooks and teaching materials used during the lessons observed.		
3. Being interviewed.		
4. Audio-recording of my interview.		
5. Teachers involved being interviewed.		
6. Audio-recording of the interviews with the teachers.		
7. Allowing the researcher to use 5-10 minutes in one of the Mandarin Chinese lessons to explain the language portrait activity, and allowing the students to complete the language portrait activity (at home).		
8. Allowing the students to fill in a short form (at home).		
9. Some students being interviewed in group interviews.		
10. Audio-recording of the students' interviews.		

Teachers' information letter and consent form

Learning Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, UCT master student's research project

Dear ……………………….,
I, Chiara Reali, am a master student in the School of Education at the University of Cape Town. The study I would like to conduct for my master's thesis aims to explore the teaching and learning practices occurring in the Mandarin Chinese lessons and what teachers and students think of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, especially in relation to their linguistic background. I kindly ask your permission to conduct research during your Mandarin Chinese lessons in Grade …….(8 or 11). Following the introduction of Mandarin Chinese as a second additional language in the South African curriculum, few studies have been conducted on the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, and this study aims to expand research in this field.

Data collection will be in the form of in-class non participant observations of 4 to 5 Mandarin Chinese lessons in your class. I would like to clarify that I will not take part in any teaching activity. I will observe the teaching materials, the teaching practices and learners' activities while taking notes and audio-recording.

In addition to in-class observation, I hope I will have the chance to ask you a few questions during a short interview. If you agree, the interview will be audio-recorded. This interview will give me the opportunity to discuss relevant issues that may have arisen during observation, and to know more about your experience as a Mandarin Chinese teacher in South Africa.

As regards the students, I would like to conduct focus group interviews with some students. We will negotiate a suitable time for these short interviews so that they will not impact your teaching. The interviews will be audio-recorded. As part of the research project, I will ask the students to complete a short form and the 'language portrait' activity. Students will be invited to use different colours to represent their different linguistic resources and to map them out on a body outline drawing. At the beginning of the observation period, I kindly ask you if you may allow me to use 5-10 minutes of your lesson to explain this activity to the students. The form and the language portrait can be completed at home and then returned the next lesson.

The audio-recording of the lessons and the interviews is important to analyse the data more in details at a later stage. The audio-recordings will be securely stored, and no one will be able to access them. Participation is voluntary and the confidentiality of the school, as well as yours and that of the students, is guaranteed. The school will be given a pseudonym, and pseudonyms will be used for all participants in the writing up of the research. The students, as well as the parents/guardians, will be duly informed through an information letter and they will be asked to sign a consent form. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.

If you agree in participating in this study, I kindly ask you to fill in the consent form. You are more than welcome to ask any questions regarding this study to me, Chiara Reali (email address and phone number), or to my supervisor, Prof. Catherine Kell (email address).

Yours sincerely,
Chiara Reali

Name (print):

Signature:

Date:

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.

I consent to	YES	NO
1. Being observed and audio-recorded in the classroom during my lessons.		
2. Allowing the researcher to take photographs of textbooks and teaching materials used during the lessons observed.		
3. Being interviewed.		
4. Audio-recording of my interview.		
5. Allowing the researcher to use 5-10 minutes in one of my lessons to explain the language portrait activity, and allowing the students to complete the language portrait activity (at home).		
6. Allowing the students to fill in a short form (at home).		
7. Some students being interviewed in group interviews.		
8. Audio-recording of the students' interviews.		

Note: Bowen and Meilian also participated in the 'language portrait' activity, though this was not planned when they signed their consent. Consent for the 'language portrait' activity was negotiated with them orally and they were happy to participate.

<u>Students' information letter and consent form</u>

Learning Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, UCT master student's research project

Dear student,
你好吗？
My name is Chiara and I am a university student in the School of Education at the University of Cape Town. I am writing this letter to ask your permission to carry out research during the Mandarin Chinese lessons in your classroom.

I am very interested in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, and I would like to explore:

- the activities you do with your teachers during your Mandarin Chinese classes, and
- what you think about learning Mandarin Chinese, especially in relation to the other languages you speak.

As a student of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, your participation is very important as it can contribute to understanding better what South African students think about learning Mandarin Chinese and how they experience it.

If you want to participate in this research project, first, I will invite you to fill in a short form and to do the 'language portrait' activity. In this activity you will use different colours to represent all the languages you speak on a simple drawing. Second, I will observe 4 to 5 of your Mandarin Chinese lessons. I will be sitting quietly in the classroom while taking notes and audio-recording the lessons. The audio-recordings will allow me not to miss anything that happens in your Mandarin Chinese lesson. Third, I may invite you to a group discussion with some of your classmates. The group discussion will be about your learning experience during the Mandarin Chinese lessons, what you think about learning Mandarin Chinese, and about the other languages you speak. This group discussion will be audio-recorded, so that I will be able to listen to it again if I have missed something you have said. Again, no one will ever listen to these audio-recordings.

Please note that I am a university researcher and not a teacher. I will not take part in any teaching activity and I will not give any judgements or marks. There is no right or wrong when filling the form, doing the language portrait activity and participating in the group discussion.

Your participation is voluntary, and there will be no consequences if you decide not to participate. Your names, as well as the name of your teachers and your school, will be changed so that no one will be able to identify you. You can withdraw consent for participating in this study at any time. If you agree in participating in this research, I kindly ask you to fill in the consent form. You are more than welcome to ask me any questions regarding this research whenever you have any doubt!

Looking forward to meeting you! 再见！

Chiara Reali

Name (print):

Signature:

Date:

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that my name, as well as the name of the school, will never be made public. I can withdraw my consent at any time.

I consent to	YES	NO
1. Being observed and audio-recorded in the classroom during the Mandarin Chinese lessons.		
2. Filling in a short form.		
3. Participating in the 'language portrait' activity.		
4. Participating in a group discussion.		
5. Being audio-recorded during the group discussion.		

<u>Parents'/Guardians' information letter and consent form</u>

Learning Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, UCT master student's research project

Dear parent/guardian,
I, Chiara Reali, am a master student in the School of Education at the University of Cape Town. I am writing this letter to ask your permission to carry out research during the Mandarin Chinese lessons in your child's classroom.

I am very interested in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, and I would like to explore:

- the activities students do with their teachers during the Mandarin Chinese lessons, and
- what the students think about learning Mandarin Chinese, especially in relation to the other languages they speak.

As a student of Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, your child's participation is highly valued as it can contribute to understanding better what South African students think about learning Mandarin Chinese and how they experience it.

I would like to observe 4 to 5 Mandarin Chinese lessons. I will be sitting quietly in the classroom while taking notes and audio-recording the lessons. The audio-recordings will allow me not to miss anything that happens in the Mandarin Chinese lesson. No one will be allowed to listen to these audio-recordings. Please note that I am a university researcher and not a teacher. I will not take part in any teaching activity and I will not give any judgements or marks.

If you allow your child to participate in this study, I will invite her/him to fill in a short form and to do the 'language portrait' activity. Students will use different colours to represent all the languages they speak and map them out on a body outline drawing. I may then invite your child to a group discussion with some of her/his classmates. The group discussion will be about the Mandarin Chinese lessons, what they think about learning Mandarin Chinese, and the other languages they speak. This group discussion will be audio-recorded, so that I will be able to listen to it again if I have missed something that the students have said, but no one will ever listen to these audio-recordings. This is not a test, and it will not be marked.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and there will be no consequences if you do not let your child participate. Your child's name, as well as the name of the school, will be changed so that no one will be able to identify your child. You may withdraw consent at any time.

If you agree that your child will take part in this research project, I kindly ask you to fill in the consent form. You are more than welcome to ask any questions regarding this research project to me, Chiara Reali (email address and phone number), or to my supervisor, Prof. Catherine Kell (email address).

Yours sincerely,
Chiara Reali

Name (print):

Signature:

Date:

I understand that participation is voluntary and that my child's name, as well as the name of the school, will never be made public. I can withdraw my consent at any time.

I consent to	YES	NO
1. My child being observed and audio-recorded in the classroom during the Mandarin Chinese lessons.		
2. My child filling in a short form.		
3. My child participating in the 'language portrait' activity.		
4. My child participating in a group discussion.		
5. My child being audio-recorded during the group discussion.		

Appendix 3 – Students' short questionnaire

Learning Mandarin Chinese in South Africa

Dear student,

Thank you for participating in this research project! Your participation is really valuable to understand how students experience and think of learning Mandarin Chinese in South Africa, a very linguistically diverse country. I would greatly appreciate if you could fill in this questionnaire.

Thank you very much for your time!

Chiara ☺

(on the back you can find a sample of this questionnaire with my information)

1. Name and school grade (Grade 8 or Grade 11): ……………………………………
2. Your hometown and other towns/places you have lived in:
3. Your interests and hobbies:
4. List all the language/s you understand and/or speak:
5. Language or languages spoken at home:
6. Do your family members and/or friends encounter Mandarin in their daily lives/activities? If yes, where or in which occasions?
7. Did you have any exposure to Mandarin before you started learning Mandarin in this school? If yes, where or in which occasions?
8. What made you want to study Mandarin?

Something about me…

1. Name: *Chiara*
2. Your hometown and other towns/places you have lived in:

Saronno (Italy) is my hometown, Venice (Italy) where I attended university, Shanghai (China), Cape Town (South Africa)

3. Your interests and hobbies:

I like reading (especially biographies), learning foreign languages and having walks.

4. List all the language/s you understand and/or speak:

Italian, Lombard dialect, English, Mandarin, French and Spanish.

5. Language or languages spoken at home:

Italian

6. Do your family members and/or friends encounter Mandarin in their daily lives/activities? If yes, where or in which occasions?

My dad sometimes deals with Chinese people in his job, but he can't speak Mandarin, so he usually communicates with them thanks to a translator who can speak Italian and Chinese. Some of my friends from university live and work in China.

7. Did you have any exposure to Mandarin before you started learning Mandarin in this school? If yes, where or in which occasions?

I didn't have the chance to study Mandarin in school, so I chose to study Mandarin when I started university. Before studying Mandarin in university, I had some contacts with Chinese people living in my hometown who owned restaurants and shops.

8. What made you want to study Mandarin?

I was curious about studying an Asian language, which makes use of characters instead of the alphabet. I was also very interested in China. My decision was also influenced by my family members, who suggested that Mandarin would open many job opportunities.

Appendix 4 – Language portrait activity for students and teachers

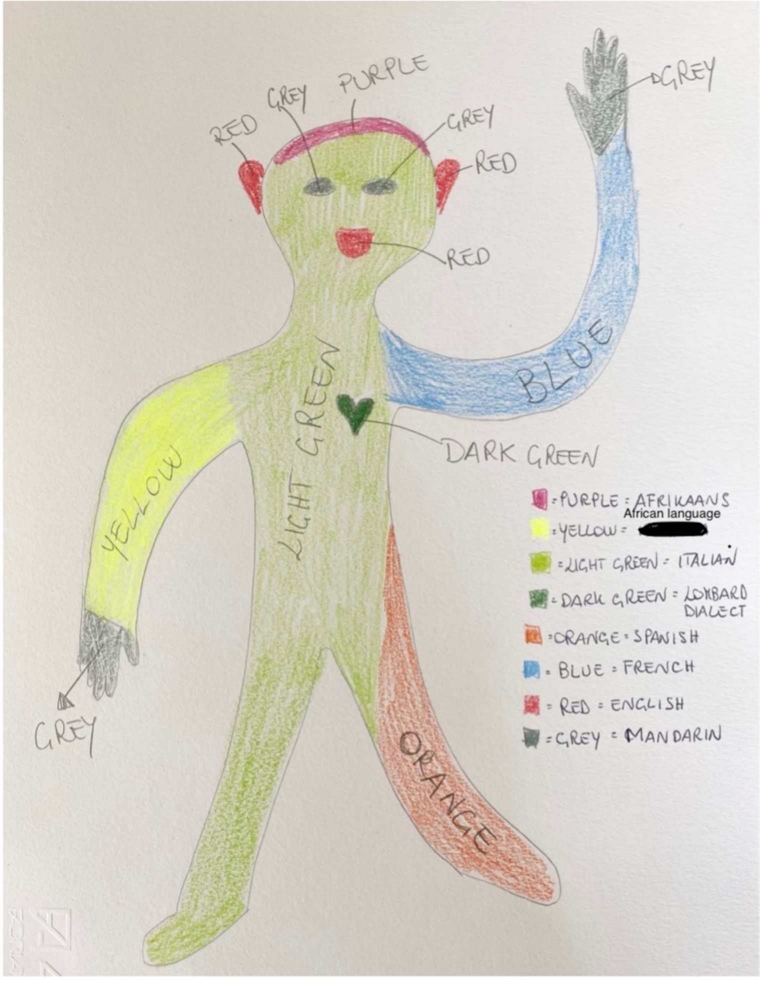
Language portrait

Think about the languages you understand and/or speak with your family/friends/teachers and so on. In addition to the languages you speak and/or understand, what languages do you like and what languages would you like to speak? What colours match these languages? Where would you put these languages in your body silhouette?
Draw/Colour this body silhouette in a way that it will contain your languages.
The language portrait activity would help me understand how you see Mandarin in relation to all the other languages you understand/speak.
On the back you can find my language portrait as an example.

Name:
School grade:

Chiara's language portrait

I chose light green for Italian, which is the language of my family, and dark green for the Lombard dialect, the language of my grandparents. Green is a colour that makes me feel calm. Italian occupies most of my body and the Lombard dialect is the language of my heart.



I chose orange for Spanish, a very energetic language, and blue for French, the language of poetry. I studied both these languages in school and they are part of my identity, as they are also very similar to Italian.

English is in red, a powerful colour, and it is in my ears and my mouth. For me, English is a very useful language that allows me to communicate with many people in different countries.

I chose grey for Chinese, because it is a very mysterious and interesting language, which can be discovered gradually. It is in my eyes because I've always thought of Chinese as a visual language and in my hands because I've always loved writing Chinese characters.

Afrikaans, which is in purple, a colour that I like, is on the top of my head, as I've just started learning it.

A language which I'd love to learn in the near future is 'African language', [35] represented in yellow, a bright and friendly colour, in my arm. I have met many friends who speak this language, and I'd love to talk their language.

[35] The name of this African language (i.e. one of South Africa's official languages) is not stated to protect the identity of the school and of the participants.

Appendix 5 – Prompts for questions in semi-structured interviews

Interview with the Director of the Mandarin Chinese Department

- How and when did the project of teaching Mandarin in this school start? Why was the project started in this school?
- How does the project work in terms of teachers, textbooks, funding, etc.?
- How has the project evolved over the years and how do you think it will evolve in the future?
- Why did the subject of Mandarin Chinese become compulsory in this school? What is the current policy in the school about Mandarin as an optional or compulsory subject?
- What do you think about Mandarin Chinese as a language in today's world and especially in South Africa?
- Why do you think students in this school are interested in learning Mandarin?
- What kind of uptake do the students have and to what extent is teaching Mandarin successful?
- Is Mandarin popular as a subject choice as opposed to other languages?
- What do you think about the introduction of Mandarin Chinese into the South African curriculum as a second additional language? In your opinion, what does the introduction of Mandarin as a school subject offer to South African students?
- How is Mandarin Chinese taught in this school, as a second additional language or as an extra-mural? What's the goal? What do you think about the official curriculum for Mandarin in South Africa and about the matric examination in Mandarin?

Interview with the Mandarin Chinese teachers

- Talk about your language portrait. Describe how you view Mandarin Chinese in relation to the other languages you know or you would like to know. What role does Mandarin Chinese play in your life? What role do other languages play in your life? In their spoken and written form?
- Can you describe your academic background and your experience of learning Mandarin when you were a child in school?
- What made you want to teach Mandarin?
- How long have you been teaching Mandarin Chinese and in which countries? Tell about your experience/s.
- As regards your teaching approach, what do you think is important to teach when teaching Mandarin Chinese? How does this influence your teaching approach? What kind of activities do you usually do with the students?

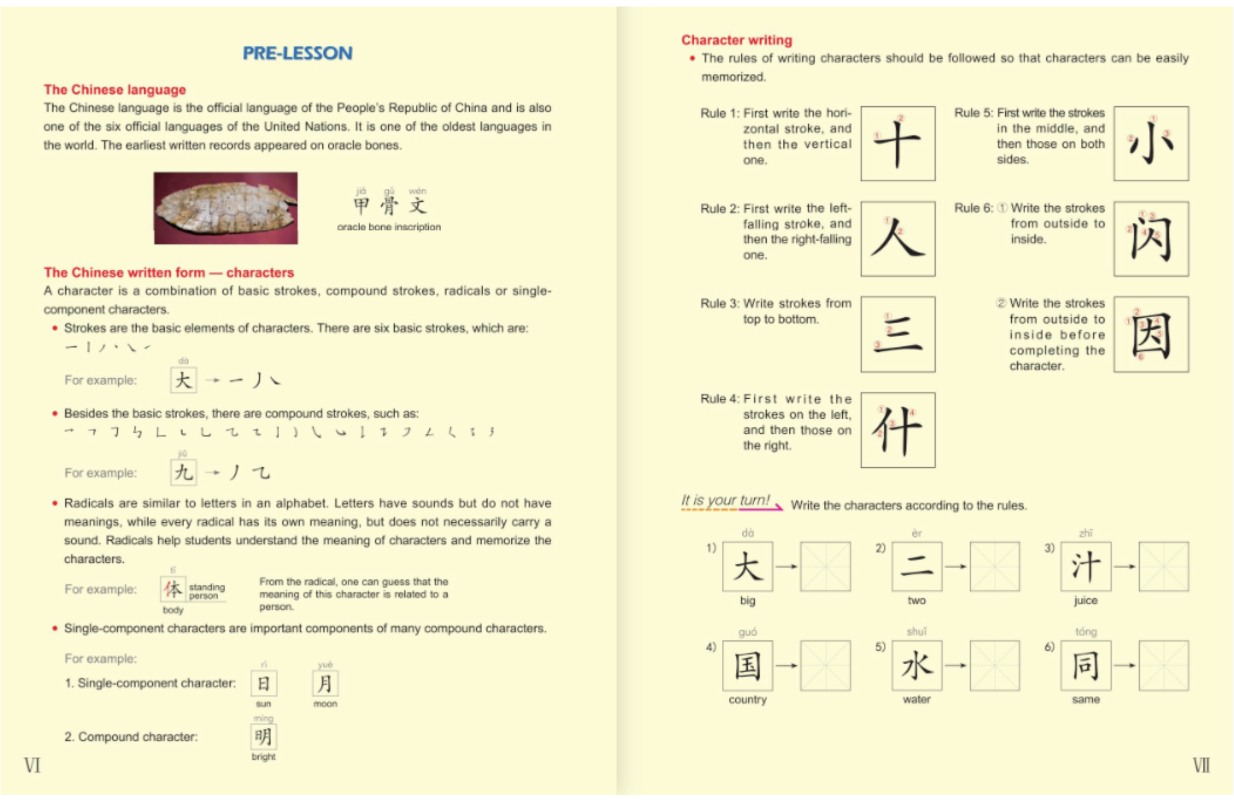
- What importance do you attach to the teaching of the Chinese written language (characters and pinyin)? How quickly are the students able to go into the writing? What role does pinyin play? What mode do you mainly use when you teach?
- What role does the textbook play in your teaching? What do you think about the textbooks you use in class? What do you think about the activities and the topics presented in the textbooks?
- Are the students interested in the activities and topics presented in the textbooks? If not, what do you do? In your opinion, what method do the students need to use to learn the language in both its spoken and written form?
- What do you think about the use of other languages (in addition to Mandarin Chinese and English) in the classroom for learning/emotional purposes?
- What do you think about Mandarin Chinese as a language in today's world and especially in South Africa? What do you think about the introduction of Mandarin Chinese into the South African curriculum as a second additional language? What do you think about the official curriculum for Mandarin in South Africa and about the matric examination in Mandarin?
- Why do you think South African students want to learn Mandarin Chinese?
- What do you think about the school policy concerning Mandarin as a compulsory or an optional subject?
- What kind of uptake do the students have and to what extent is teaching Mandarin successful?

<u>Interview with the students</u>

- Talk about your language portrait, how and with whom you use the languages in the portrait (both in the spoken and written form). Describe how you view Mandarin Chinese in relation to the other languages you know or you would like to know. What role does Mandarin Chinese play in your life? What role do other languages play in your life?
- Why do you want to learn Mandarin Chinese and would you like to continue learning it after secondary school? (for Grade 11 students) / Are you happy about learning Mandarin Chinese and would you like to continue learning Mandarin in the future? (for Grade 8 students)
- What do you think about Mandarin Chinese as a language in today's world and especially in South Africa? What do you think about the introduction of Mandarin Chinese into the South African curriculum as a second additional language?
- What do you think about offering Mandarin Chinese in schools where students' home languages (mainly African languages) are not taught?
- If other African languages (included within South Africa's official languages) were offered at school as subjects, would you have chosen to learn one of those languages?

- In the Mandarin Chinese classes, what are the activities you like and the activities you do not like? Why? And what other activities would you like to do?
- What method do you use to learn Mandarin? What do you think about the spoken Mandarin and written Mandarin? What role does pinyin play and what role do the characters play? What is your goal in terms of learning how to speak and write in Mandarin?
- Are you interested in the topics presented by the teacher? What do you think about the textbooks and the topics presented in the textbooks? Would you like to talk about other topics?

Appendix 6 – "Pre-lesson" in *Easy Steps to Chinese 1* textbook



PRE-LESSON

The Chinese language

The Chinese language is the official language of the People's Republic of China and is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. It is one of the oldest languages in the world. The earliest written records appeared on oracle bones.

jiǎ gǔ wén
甲骨文
oracle bone inscription

The Chinese written form — characters

A character is a combination of basic strokes, compound strokes, radicals or single-component characters.

- Strokes are the basic elements of characters. There are six basic strokes, which are:
  For example: dà 大 → 一 丿 ㇏
- Besides the basic strokes, there are compound strokes, such as:
  For example: jiǔ 九 → 丿 ㇈
- Radicals are similar to letters in an alphabet. Letters have sounds but do not have meanings, while every radical has its own meaning, but does not necessarily carry a sound. Radicals help students understand the meaning of characters and memorize the characters.
  For example: tǐ 体 body — standing person. From the radical, one can guess that the meaning of this character is related to a person.
- Single-component characters are important components of many compound characters.
  For example:
  1. Single-component character: rì 日 sun, yuè 月 moon
  2. Compound character: míng 明 bright

VI

Character writing

- The rules of writing characters should be followed so that characters can be easily memorized.

Rule 1: First write the horizontal stroke, and then the vertical one. 十

Rule 2: First write the left-falling stroke, and then the right-falling one. 人

Rule 3: Write strokes from top to bottom. 三

Rule 4: First write the strokes on the left, and then those on the right. 什

Rule 5: First write the strokes in the middle, and then those on both sides. 小

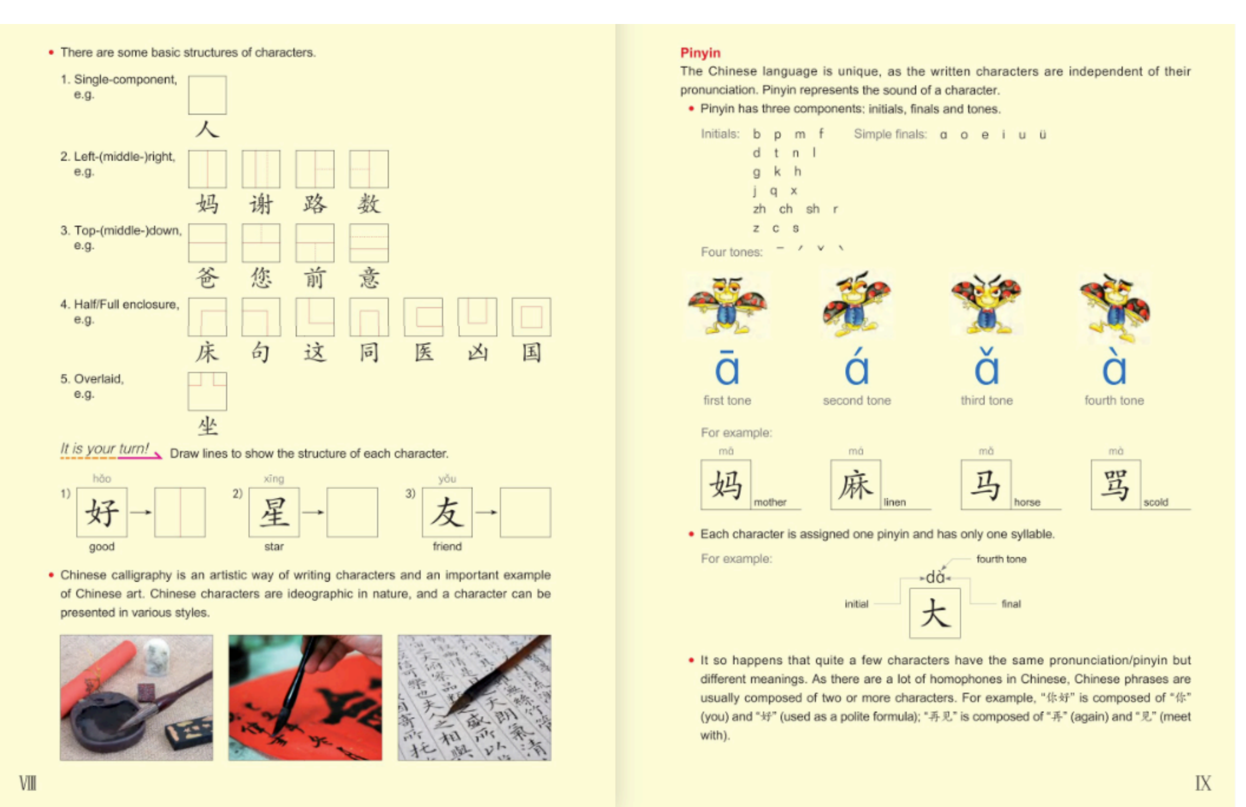
Rule 6: ① Write the strokes from outside to inside. 闪

② Write the strokes from outside to inside before completing the character. 因

It is your turn! Write the characters according to the rules.

1) dà 大 big 2) èr 二 two 3) zhī 汁 juice
4) guó 国 country 5) shuǐ 水 water 6) tóng 同 same

VII



- There are some basic structures of characters.
  1. Single-component, e.g. 人
  2. Left-(middle-)right, e.g. 妈 谢 路 数
  3. Top-(middle-)down, e.g. 爸 您 前 意
  4. Half/Full enclosure, e.g. 床 句 这 同 医 凶 国
  5. Overlaid, e.g. 坐

It is your turn! Draw lines to show the structure of each character.

1) hǎo 好 good 2) xīng 星 star 3) yǒu 友 friend

- Chinese calligraphy is an artistic way of writing characters and an important example of Chinese art. Chinese characters are ideographic in nature, and a character can be presented in various styles.

VIII

Pinyin

The Chinese language is unique, as the written characters are independent of their pronunciation. Pinyin represents the sound of a character.

- Pinyin has three components: initials, finals and tones.

Initials: b p m f / d t n l / g k h / j q x / zh ch sh r / z c s

Simple finals: a o e i u ü

Four tones: ˉ ˊ ˇ ˋ

ā first tone, á second tone, ǎ third tone, à fourth tone

For example: mā 妈 mother, má 麻 linen, mǎ 马 horse, mà 骂 scold

- Each character is assigned one pinyin and has only one syllable.
  For example: dà 大 (initial, final, fourth tone)
- It so happens that quite a few characters have the same pronunciation/pinyin but different meanings. As there are a lot of homophones in Chinese, Chinese phrases are usually composed of two or more characters. For example, "你好" is composed of "你" (you) and "好" (used as a polite formula); "再见" is composed of "再" (again) and "见" (meet with).

IX

Appendix 7 – Interviews with Bowen, grade 8 teacher

First interview with Bowen, 26th September 2021

Chiara: Ok, so Bowen, basically the purpose… I mean, I haven't done so much observation in your classroom… I mean, I've never done it, honestly… I mean, I attended only one class when I was putting together all the consents and so on. So I changed of course a little bit the topic of the interview which is more about yourself, and like your language background and then how this is reflected in a way in your teaching of Chinese. So the first question, it's not really a question… but it's more about… if you can describe a little bit the language portrait that you have just sent and describe maybe how you view Mandarin Chinese in relation to the other languages that you know or that you would like to know, and… ehm… what role does Mandarin Chinese play in your life, and what role do the other languages play in your life both in the spoken and written form. These are just some prompts actually, I mean, for you to, to, to explain your portrait.

Bowen: Oh, yeah, so about that, Mandarin is my mother tongue, so that's for think about the world, so I took the Mandarin with the red colour on my head. And for the English, that's my first foreign language I learnt so I put it on the right hand because that's true, I mean I use it to communicate with the world. I actually try to portray that into the British, the national flag colour, but that's the closer I get. And for the French, I learnt French a little bit in ...., but before that when I do my master degree in China, I also learnt a few lessons. It's always on and off, I've never been able to speak French, but I know the basic knowledge, so I put French on my left hand, I think it's useful, and I do love the language. And then on the feet I portrayed two other languages, on the left feet it's Japanese. I learnt Japanese back in the university when I do my bachelor, and I give everything back to my lectures already. So I know a little bit but I don't think I'm able to read and write anymore, I still want to pick that up. And the Afrikaans… because I'm doing… I started my career and my studies in ...., and now I'm living in the ...., so sometimes I feel Afrikaans is always there and I love ....So I feel like it's more like I'm gonna learn Afrikaans to help me to get a deeper understanding about the community I stay in and the people around me.

Chiara: Mmhh… ok. So basically you were saying that Mandarin Chinese is your mother tongue, so you grew up with Mandarin Chinese…

Bowen: Yeah.

Chiara: Because I remember when I was in China, like many people said that of course Mandarin Chinese was the language that they studied in school, but with their families maybe they talked like other languages… I mean…

Bowen: Oh, it's not other languages, it's other dialects, I know what you are saying.

Chiara: Yeah.

Bowen: Like for people in Hong Kong they have Cantonese or something like that. So, no, I never actually had a local dialect. Even my parents, they communicate with me in Mandarin. Interesting story because the neighbourhood I stayed in it's like people… people from different from China, they gathered into that place. And that's why the Mandarin the best option to make the communication. But if you have to say dialect, I… my dialect, I got influence a little bit by the people how they speak in Beijing, that's maybe a little bit, but the Mandarin the base and the tones and the vocabulary, they live in the dialect in Beijing, so, yeah, that's just a my advantage.

Chiara: Ok, because Bowen, you are from Beijing basically, you were born and raised in Beijing…

Bowen: No, no, no, it's not like that, that's almost where I stay, so it's… my house… half an hour flight, and if you take the bullet train it takes an hour, a place called ...., I can send you the location…

Chiara: Ok, so basically you were born in ......

[…]

Bowen: Mmhh…

Chiara: …and then you stayed in ...., which is not very far from Beijing. But then did you move to Beijing or you stayed in ....?

Bowen: No, I actually didn't move to Beijing, but as I say… so let me tell you about the neighbourhood. It's based on the railway station, it's like, for example, like different departments or divisions. So the city I stayed in, ..., that neighbourhood belongs to the railway station management in Beijing, so a lot of people travelled between these two cities, and my parents also travelled between that, so that give me lot of the influence of Beijing, but I never actually grow or spend the time living in Beijing.

Chiara: Ok, ok, now I understand, yeah, so yeah. And so you were talking about Mandarin as basically your mother tongue, so the role that Mandarin Chinese plays in your life… I mean, for me Italian it's my language, then of course I speak English and I studied Mandarin, but yeah… I mean, I basically identify in the Italian language, and I'm not sure whether this is the same for you with Mandarin?

Bowen: Sorry I just got… a message popped up… ehm… can I just reply that? I don't know…

[…]

Bowen: Oh, I always take in Mandarin, I understand the question. I always take in Mandarin as… For example, that's the… that's the original system… that's shifting how I see the world. Not shifting, that's actually forge the way how I see the world. Mandarin always give me the idea. And when I want to express very delicate feelings about myself or when I get very emotional, I have to express myself, I choose Mandarin because it captures that, it always give… I can do that in detail, so it's like… it's in my default mode.

Chiara: Ok! That's a very nice description of how you feel about Mandarin and about the role Mandarin that plays, have always, has always played in your life. So, my next question is about your academic background. Like… if you can describe a little bit your academic background and maybe before that, like your experience of learning Mandarin when you were a child in school in China, I guess. I mean… I guess you attended schools in China and then you studied…

Bowen: Yes, the process of learning Mandarin, it's you handle like backing it up… So I think until high school… actually until high school I never think about to choose the language, Mandarin language as the major. When I go to the high school, the classroom teacher, she went to very valued Chinese department in China, so she got a lot of influence on me, you realise like the language and its power. So I think since high school I realised that I actually wanted to take in language special in Mandarin as the major I want to considering to do in the future. And that's how it changed. And then, for about the thing you mentioned about my academic background, in university, I did the Chinese language and literature as a major. Meanwhile I also took a second major, English. And then after that I took a one gap year and I've been to another university to get the master degree of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language…

Chiara: Ok.

Bowen: That's took… I think I stayed in the university for one and half year. Then I got this recruit programme to teach Mandarin at .... University, and I've been staying there for two years, not exactly two, but almost two years. During that two years I finished my master degree and then I go back to China take the… I think two-month holiday and then I back… I've been assigned, it's like upgrade, I've been assigned to the school I'm working right now, and, yeah, I'm still doing that. Last year… no, no, not last year… is that 2019, and then in 2019 I applied to do my studies at .... University, also focusing on the curriculum studies of Mandarin in South Africa, yeah.

Chiara: Ok, so basically the studies you are doing now in .... is about the teaching of Mandarin to South African students. I mean, it's like focused on language teaching…

Bowen: It's not actually focused on the pedagogy, how you teach them. It's actually trying to see this as a system, and if there's a fault in the system, if there is any improvement to polish this system.

Chiara: You mean from… from the policy point of view?

Bowen: It's kind of like policy, but its definition is curriculum study, so it's not like… ehm… like the paperwork and it's not only about what happen in the classroom, it's the link, how we are creating a curriculum both meets all the requirements from the primary document, but also can be easily hand on for the teachers to use that in their classroom, so that's… ehm… at least what my department is working on.

Chiara: Oh, so it's more like curriculum study.

Bowen: Yes, correct, curriculum study, yes.

Chiara: Ok, ok, I understand, ok. Ehm… so it's a very interesting academic background actually, so because you studied both in China and then you came to South Africa in ……………… So… ehm… ehm… sorry it's not in the list of the questions that I thought, but I just wanted to ask you, why did you choose South Africa? I mean, was it like something that came up to your mind like that or you had friends… I don't know, why did you choose South Africa?

Bowen: South Africa is not my first choice. At that moment I choose Britain.

Chiara: Ok.

Bowen: And then I… then they… I somehow they transferred me, they actually asked my opinion… asked me like if you wanted to go to South Africa, and I'm like, it's fine, it' not a problem. But they also have someone else played in the role, so my supervisor for my master degree in China, she was here […], so she know the environment and she know it's a good place, so she actually strongly tell me that it's a good place and it's a good experience to take that. So I'm willing it to go, but her opinion also just making me more eager to come here and then I came to South Africa. But I want to extend your question. I think you are trying to figure out why I still stay here, if that…

Chiara: Ahahah! Yeah! It's an interesting one, yes, I mean, for how long you will be staying in South Africa…

Bowen: Yeah, I have been staying in South Africa from the day I entered the country so far been six years.

Chiara: Wow!

Bowen: So the reason why I still want to stay in South Africa is… I love the way their life and one more thing the diversity. Why don't even mention how, you are teaching Italian and I'm teaching Mandarin and I also learn French, and I find like Afrikaans it's so fascinating. So I think they have the environment to embracing different cultures, the diversity always gave me, like, somehow of the inclusion, I feel there will be a place for me to doing what I love.

Chiara: Yeah, you know that this is also the sense that I have honestly in South Africa. For example, the fact that when I talk English, of course, I talk English with maybe an Italian accent, you know, but still no one makes me feel…

Bowen: I… I… didn't hear the accent actually, ahahah!

Chiara: Ahahah! But the point is that in South Africa no one makes me feel that my English is not good enough, because…

Bowen: Good enough, yes….

Chiara: … because there are many people who speak different kinds of English, and this is something that I didn't… like… I… I… live in Europe, in Italy, so whenever I go to, I don't know, the UK, I've been there many times, but this is something that, I mean, I don't know, it's like… if it's not their English in a way you are treated like you are a foreigner, you know…

Bowen: I know…

Chiara: … like in South Africa, I've never had this kind of… this kind of feeling, honestly. And this is also why I like it a lot, yeah.

Bowen: Ahahah…

Chiara: Ahahah…

Bowen: The feeling is mutual. Ahahah…

Chiara: Ahahah… So Bowen, another question about the Mandarin… like, you were talking about the academic background…

Bowen: Mmhh…

Chiara: But if you go back when you were attending primary school in China…

Bowen: Mmhh…

Chiara: I mean, how was Mandarin taught by your teacher and how was your experience of learning really the basics of, I mean I guess of writing because you were already talking Mandarin in your family, so… I don't know, how was the language taught to the young children when you were in school?

Bowen: So that's actually a good question I have to say because if I look at that… I feel, like, the Mandarin is the most difficult world… language to learn in the world, so the learning process is very immersive back in China. So, like… we've been learning Mandarin I think firstly, the first we've learning that. But I have to say because Mandarin itself is very constructive, you can just organizing the language in any way you want, put other words into different order means different things. So I have to say firstly it's very immersive, like the environment, and the second thing, like, to learning Mandarin it's… I can't say the word, I can't say in that way, but I hope you get the idea, like it's never the teacher's, like, it's not only the teacher strong. So the way… you have to do a lot of, like, after school readings, they even gave you a list. I think they are still doing that, each year they give you a list like with which novel you need to go and read and what other material need to read to enlarge your vocabularies. And I think start from like… ehm… I think Grade 3, yes Grade 3, we need to start to writing text articles. Like, based on 300 words, you have to express how you see the world, like your observation about the garden and stuff like that, and to describe what happens in your life, who's your favourite person. So I think we start to building Mandarin as a writing exercise for 300 words to finish your story, like start it's a very early age, so that's another thing I think the application of the language is also quite advanced for start with a early age. And then… I think we come to the idea about using pinyin. The pinyin I think they only taught in the first year and then after that, as I mentioned, my neighbourhood don't have the accent problem, don't have the dialect intrusion, so I never think the teacher had the trouble to teach us how to pronounce them properly. So, yeah, that's my experience with primary school.

Chiara: Mmhh… Ok. And what about the writing of the characters, I mean, itself? I mean, how did you learn that? Did you have, I don't know, a list of characters for each lesson that you had to practice many times…?

Bowen: Oh… you have that… that's just repeat, keep repeating, so I think each character we learn when we are like very early age, like in Grade…, let's just say the whole primary school, we have to like writing each character for like 10 or 20 times to become familiar with the character. That's like lower grade, like Grade 1 or 2, and when you… when you build a bank for all the basic characters, you are actually mastering how to writing that part, and I think you know about Chinese characters, they have radicals, a lot of radicals are itself, is itself also a character. So when you are reaching a very different character, you can already, you have the ability to decoding them like what part are there and how you are writing them, it's already like remembering flashback. That's how you are ranking them. But I think a lot of Chinese people run to one situation the way to writing it's not 100% right. People get like 90 or even 99% right, but no one… no one I know like write 100% right, but just the order to writing them maybe a little bit different, but not making much difference, if you are talking about 100%.

Chiara: Mmhh… Sorry I didn't get very well the thing that you were saying about the 99% or 100%... you mean…

Bowen: Oh, yeah… so Chinese writing they have like a certain order to writing the strokes. For that do you remember?

Chiara: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Bowen: Yes, so…

Chiara: I mean… sorry if I interrupt you. I mean, yes, I remember when I was in university and I was learning how to write the strokes, I mean, yeah, at the beginning it was really useful, but now when I write I'm not sure whether I'm actually respecting the stroke order. So, I just write the character… Ahaha, so yeah…
Bowen: Yes, so you see, that actually become the problem because I'm writing characters, I see characters as a combination of radicals and strokes. So if you give me a new character I never saw, I never know, I can first decoding that which radical is in this character, so I can easily to get right way it to writing it. So for example, the… ehm… I don't know… do you know about the radical called 玉 (yù)…
Chiara: Ehm…
Bowen: … which always write like a 王 (wáng).
Chiara: The one about… about yù, the one about the… the… the…
Bowen: The jade!
Chiara: The jade, yes! The one that you have for example in 国， 中国…
Bowen: So the character for jade, they have one more dot than the character for king, 王. Do you remember that?
Chiara: If you write it, it's easier for me to understand which character you are talking about.
Bowen: I just send the message to you, so you can check on your message.
Chiara: Ok…
Bowen: So one is 王 and the other one is 玉.
Chiara: Oh, yes! And you have the small, the little, the… yeah. The one is 王 about king and the other one is 玉 about jade. Yeah, yeah, yeah… with the little dot.
Bowen: So you see… I know 王 before, so when I saw 玉, I can immediately tell myself the dot comes last. So I finish 王 first, then I put the dot for the 玉.
Chiara: Mmhh…
Bowen: So that's how it works for us. If we know the radicals, we know how to write things. Then it's always come to you like a …oh, yeah, I know to write them into the right order. So it's easy for us to write them down. So that's the first thing I wanted to tell you. And the second thing, the radical help if I actually have trouble to understand this character, I can first guess because different radicals gave you the meaning of what this character may about. And the second thing, if I look the dictionary, the radicals are also one of the easiest way to locate them, a character, a character to you.
Chiara: Yeah… So this is how you learnt, but sorry just one question, what do you feel now about all this new technology? Like… because for me now… I mean, I have the hard copy dictionary of Chinese and when, of course, when I… I have to, in that dictionary, when I have to look up for a character I need to go through the radical list first, and then count the strokes, and then look for the character, but now for example, I'm using… I'm using… Oh.
Connection lost.
Bowen: Hey Chiara, can you hear me?
Chiara: Hey Bowen, yes, sorry! I just saw that there was some connection issues on WhatsApp, so… no worries…
Bowen: It's ok.
Chiara: I was just…
Bowen: Oh, yeah, about the technology. Let me say if I got the point right… you are saying about what's the new technology shifting how we learn characters.
Chiara: Yes, exactly! Because now for me, for example, I mean, when I'm using… Of course, if I need to use the hard copy dictionary, I still have to go through the radicals and count the strokes and so on… but now, you know, I'm using the… for example, this online app, which is called Pleco I think.

Bowen: Ah, yeah…
Chiara: So it's just very easy to look for characters, so I mean how do you feel about this change? I mean… now many things that I learnt in university about the characters and the strokes, I mean, I feel that I'm losing them in a way, with this new technology, which is helping a lot, but it's making me forget about all those things.
Bowen: Oh, the feeling is the same. So let me tell you… when I do the moderation, after writing a note this afternoon, so they actually have word that operate them, because I do not write words that often anymore, a lot of time you are just typing, so the input message has changed in China. When I was in primary school I think, yeah, in my primary school… they have one of this typing messenger called 笔, it's talking about the five types of strokes, so you are remembering, you remember like what radicals are there on the keyboard, then you can locate any characters. But then when I go to the middle school and high school, that changed. We started typing or we starting using input, just using the pinyin, that's it. So you put the different pinyin pronunciation together, you can locate the character. So I have to say, first, yes, it's changing, like, how we input the character into the system. And the fact that the, as I mentioned, the radical is important for you to get the general idea of the character. So where's your knowledge of the characters, you can easily grouping them together.
Chiara: Yeah.
Bowen: Because you always see the radicals, that's the key for you to understand the character. That's actually help you more efficiently, to build up your vocabulary or build up the idea of the character at least you have like a type you can put them together. And then as for my students, for my teaching, I'm stressing them if you are not going to consider writing the character as a message you are going to use in the future, then I think the best thing is just to remember how to using the pinyin to express yourself. And as long as you have the pinyin to locate the character, but just you like, just you mention like they have different softwares. Even the iphone announced the new… it's called livetext, you can use your camera and it captures all the texts around the world or any print. It's easy for you to find the word and search the meaning of the word. But then comes the question, you got the meaning but do you actually got the character? So I search for English words, but if I'm not using them, if I'm not typing them, if I'm not writing them down, next time I still just go back and locate it one more time. So, I think that's the question we have to ask to ourselves, like if I'm teaching them, what I'm teaching them? The message or the knowledge?
Chiara: Yeah… No, I mean, yeah… I feel that even though I have all these new technologies like Pleco and so on, but still if I'm reading a text and I know the… yeah… the radical, as you were saying, it's still very important because, I mean, in that way it gives me the meaning of the character. So… and it's… it makes me lose less time, otherwise I need to look for each character, but… yeah… the radical… yeah… I mean, I don't know, I feel that the old way of teaching in a way for me, I don't know, it was very very useful. Then, of course, you can start using these technologies and so on… but when I was learning all the radicals and so on… I mean, and also for me learning the strokes and the stroke order, it was like giving a sense to the character itself and remembering it more clearly, you know… otherwise you just see all these characters, I mean, if you come especially from an alphabetic language, and…
Bowen: Yes, this is so true, and I actually want to add one more point. So do you… I think you know we only have certain syllables in Chinese, in Mandarin, like there is not like thousands even ten thousands of syllables are there, they only have certain amount of syllables. So that means a lot of the characters, they are sharing the same syllable or the same pinyin. So with radicals, that's actually the quickest way to locate which character you are going to use. That's that's that's come to the question, for all the beginners, they don't have that much to use, so pinyin is actually more convenient, as you mentioned an alphabetical language would be using, but if you are reaching to certain amount of the characters, you are actually reaching the bottle-neck, like 'oh my God, now I have to memorise all the characters'.

Chiara: Ahahah…

Bowen: … because they start sounding the same.

Chiara: Exactly! No, no, no, this is what I feel. Now, I mean, for me, if I read a text in pinyin I wouldn't understand anything. I mean… if you learn just a few dialogues and you know that you are talking about those words… I mean, but then if you start… can you imagine, like… I don't know a magazine article all written in pinyin. Would you understand that? I mean, for me it would be impossible actually to understand the meaning, I don't know… only with pinyin, so yeah…

Bowen: Yeah, and also for me, like I'm a Mandarin speaker, I learnt the pinyin at a very young age, but if you just give me like a full page of a pinyin writing article, I'm not able to decode it immediately, I have to read it at least twice, then I can tell you which word are they trying to say here.

Chiara: Mmhh…

Bowen: But also one more thing… like for my parents, they… I think they learnt some of the pinyin, but pinyin is not their primary way to learning the language. So like older people in China, they don't actually go learn pinyin, but they learnt the character.

Chiara: Mmhh… Interesting… I mean… So you can…

Bowen: You can actually do a research about when the Chinese… when the… when the People's Republic of China started the building the pinyin as to… for us people to learn Mandarin. That's also back to that time, like… what do you call that?... The… a literacy rate… like people actually know things, people are able to building a language, people are able to read, but at that moment that rate is very low, so a lot of people should be given a knowledge to building the language or exercise themselves in a writing language, so that's the government comes to this idea, maybe with the simplified characters and pinyin, we can actually help people to boosting the literature, the literacy rate in the people back then.

Chiara: Ok, yeah… So but, yeah, it's really interesting what you are saying about also how the different generations actually learnt the language in China. Ehm… so Bowen, I'm going back again to yourself. So, my question is now, what made you want to teach Mandarin? I mean, why? Why did you choose this profession, in a way? Ehm… yeah, over other things.

Bowen: Ah! It's gonna be a really funny story, I never saw I'm gonna be a teacher. I actually swear I never want to be a teacher…

Chiara: Ahahah…

Bowen: Yeah… ahahah… but when I got to the university… it's actually ...., it's focusing on teaching new teachers, so yeah, somehow I became a teacher, but still in that moment I never realised I have the potential to be a good teacher, because I think it's full of responsibilities, and then after… I mentioned the one gap year, so the one gap year I took I actually did to become like an English teacher in an institution and for that part of the time I was preparing to take the test to go to do my master's degree, they also had a… like a test for you to apply or able to apply a master degree, to do your master degree. And back then I considered my advantages, I was majored in Chinese literature, Chinese language and literature and I have a background doing English as a second major, so I say, yeah it's better for me to do this major of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language or that's more practical. But that has been in my mind of when I am doing my bachelor degree because in the .... we have Chinese language and literature, we also have some students focusing on teaching Chinese to foreigners, and we have been close friends with some of the students in that department and I found, oh that's really cool, yeah! That's why I choose to do this.

Chiara: Yeah! So it was more because you found yourself in that kind of environment.

Bowen: Yeah, yes, yes, I found my way. Ahahah…

Chiara: Ahahah… And… ehm… can I ask you now, so I couldn't count the years, so how long have you been teaching Mandarin Chinese?

Bowen: Oh, six years.

Chiara: Six years!
Bowen: So first time I've been in South Africa and then teaching Mandarin Chinese, and the year before I only learned how to teach them. So there long much of teaching experience.
Chiara: Ok, and… you have been teaching Mandarin Chinese only in South Africa, not in other countries.
Bowen: I've been tutoring students in China, but not actually teaching them.
Chiara: And those students in China, were they Chinese or they were like foreigners?
Bowen: No, they're from Congo, they're from like… a country called Burundi, yes so… I think we also have students from Rwanda.
Chiara: Oh, in China.
Bowen: Yes, so they go to China to study Chinese, and in my university…
Chiara: Ah!
Bowen: So one of my job is tutoring them.
Chiara: Ok, so you were basically tutoring students from Rwanda and then I didn't get the other countries that you mentioned.
Bowen: Ehm… we have Congo…
Chiara: Congo… mmhh…
Bowen: Yes, and another country I think it's called… Burundi?
Chiara: Burundi, Burundi… ah yes, yes, Burundi. So they were mainly actually from Africa, from African countries…
Bowen: Yes, because there is a Confucius Institute in Burundi, and somehow we are interested to taking a lot of like African students under our wings, and we also have Korean students, but I never tutoring them.
Chiara: Ok.
Bowen: Not I… Not because I don't want to, but I never had the chance to working with them.
Chiara: Ok, ok, so you were mainly tutoring African students, ok.
Bowen: Yes.
Chiara: And… ehm… so I would like now to switch a little bit on your teaching approach. So if you consider now your teaching at Blue River School, what do you think is really important in teaching Mandarin Chinese…
Bowen: Mmhh…
Chiara: … and how does this influence your teaching approach?
Bowen: Ehm… so for that… ehm… oh… that's actually a very big question. So… For all the students I've been teaching, I always trying to them working out two things, let's put it in that way. One thing it's building their vocabularies and one thing building a […] like to learn more characters, to group their characters, to have them to memorise that, and the fact the other thing is to creating more useful sentence structures for them to use. I think that some people call it like inductive or… yeah…
Chiara: Yeah.
Bowen: Yeah, something like that. So basically the idea here is, I always tell my students, like, learning Chinese and using Chinese is like playing legos.
Chiara: Ahahah…
Bowen: So you have to building a lot of the blocks, and the different way you put the blocks together it's gonna show different things. So that's how… my teaching philosophy. Ahahah!
Chiara: No, no, no… that's an interesting answer actually, especially the lego comparison. And so, I mean, what kind of activities do you prefer doing with the students and do you think they are most useful for the students? I mean, in your lessons. If you think about your lessons, I mean… the main activities…
Bowen: So far I feel like the students like to be challenged. And they like things, they like the way… ehm like to accomplish something. So what I normally do, I start with the basic question… ehm… I start with the basic sentences. For example, when you were with us, we were talking about dates. So let's go back there…

Chiara: Yes. I remember!
Bowen: Yeah! So when we are talking about the dates it's easy for you to just say I give you the 5th of July and you translate that into Chinese. Then I start to add up or adding things on it, so what's the day for Heritage Day, what's the day for the New Year, what's the day for Christmas. So you have to thinking more… you actually start having more challenge to get that answer. And then, for example, I ask the students to record their birthday, like which day it is. Is the thing that date, I say for any's birthday, when is that? And you can translate that into Chinese, tell me the date. So just the outcome is the same, just specific dates, but the way I'm thinking it, the way I'm processing the knowledge to building more blocks, to creating more challenge to them and I always find the students are more interested to finish all the small missions. Like, it's not too difficult for them, but still challenging enough.
Chiara: Mmhh… yeah… mmhh… ok. And… ehm… Yeah, I remember when you, for example, you divided them in groups also and they had to… then to go… then to choose one person and go to the board to write the dates and there were all different, in a way, different ways, and… like some of them were correct some of them were not, and then you came up with the correct one, but all the student groups, they were… it was a sort of also… a small competition that made the students more involved in completing, as you were saying, these small missions…
Bowen: Mmhh… Yeah, that's what I'm saying… I'm not a big fan for like a big class, to have a big class, because I was thinking Mandarin learning it's better in a small group, then you can more focused and you can give more individual attention. But in the class, like, to cut them into groups it's always a good way and, as you can see, when you do the class management for a foreign language learning process, it's better to… who are interested to work together to get that and then they have to write down the dates, they actually have two things. First thing, I want them to helping each other because I'm not always there, as you know, I only saw them like twice a week [*it is actually once every two weeks*], and then… some of the students, they have been doing very well, they know all of the knowledge, they know the master, they have the idea how it works and maybe they can help other students much better than I can do.
Chiara: Mmhh…
Bowen: And the second thing is… I need to save the real time to reflect, to think about the answer. So I encourage them to give the answer, they come to the idea together, so with some of the students writing the day before the month, with some of the students actually counting the months wrongly, like July becomes August, something like that. So I need that, so then I can see how they think about it and what's been missing there or what need to be adjusted there.
Chiara: Mmhh… Yeah… I mean, I actually agree with what you are saying and it's what somehow I'm trying to do with… I mean, I don't have big classrooms, but I can understand that, I mean, it's actually challenging to give a class in a 30… in a class of 30, more… like more or less 30 students. So it's…
Bowen: Yeah, and also because you are not there like regularly meeting them, like every two days or every three days, so it's more challenging.
Chiara: Yeah…
Bowen: Because your class management it starts from the ground every single time.
Chiara: Yes… But ehm… Bowen, in what you were saying, so how important is the writing and the learning of the characters? Also… not only during the… I mean during the class, during the lesson, but also in the tests and in the assessment. I mean, which one… I don't know if it's the correct question, but which one would you privilege more, like the oral language, the written language, or they need to go hand in hand?
Bowen: So the new… for the Blue River School we have this… let's call it revolution. I want to call it that. Ahahah… But it is more like that we are just trying to be more professional about the students because not everyone… not every single student can make it in 11 Grade. So we were thinking to expose them to the different part of the Mandarin, the oral speaking, the writing and then… start from Grade 8 and Grade 9… not

everything to Grade 10, we want to like specialising them, so some will still gonna focusing on learning the Chinese language itself and for others just closing themselves to Chinese. So back to Grade 8 and 9, at this stage, when we are talking about this group of like students with that background and they start to learn Mandarin, I think the oral and the writing is equally important, because if you can master the writing you got a deeper understanding about the language, like how it becomes in this way and what's the philosophy or what's the ideology behind it. But then there is the oral expression, you actually start to express yourself in another language, that actually shifting how you think about things… and then when you can do the oral expression, the difference or the obstacles you've been conquered when you come back in the behaviour, it actually gets you there to express yourself or […] to express yourself in another language. So for me, I think they are equally important. But, however, if you ask me in South Africa right now, which one is more important… I can… I have to say it's more important for them to learn the most important knowledge about how to writing the characters to get the solid foundation, because oral is easy to accomplish. So, for example, they are doing it right now for five hours, obviously […] but I can use another five hours to recover the knowledge, but the writing, that's the foundation of the characters, is always taking more or longer time to do, so I do believe the writing is more important. A lot of the institutions and the… let's just say institutions, they believe the oral is more to have the outcome.

Chiara: Mmhh…

Bowen: Yeah.

Chiara: Mmhh… That's an interesting one because usually when, I mean, when we start teaching a language to beginners, you know, like… I don't know, we are mostly brought to think that the oral is most important, but for Mandarin… what you are saying it's really interesting because you are saying that the writing is basically the foundation for the oral and that it's… I mean, if you don't build the foundation of the writing then… ehm… after some years it's quite impossible actually to recover it, and go back, and… yeah… so it's quite interesting, but… yeah… it's interesting, I mean, I'm not sure whether this applies to all languages, but definitely yes to Mandarin, I mean, if you don't start from the beginning… then, I mean, then… yeah…

Bowen: Let me… let me… let me just say that, Mandarin learning can become easy come easy go. Like, for me, when I think about that because of French… the French I've been started like twice already but I never actually reaching the A1, I never reaching the place that I want to take it, the A1 is… but so far it's been, I think it's been more than one year I have detached French, but still because I know the words, because I know the way French is supposed to be read, so if I have a document written in French, I still can decode it.

Chiara: Mmhh…

Bowen: And for the oral expression, I believe, my personal believe is if you are a foreign language user it's always, it's not that difficult for you to regain the knowledge how to see that foreign language, but it's always difficult to regain the other ability, to say it right or open your mouth to say that. So when I have like the idea I can say it right, I'm willing to say it. But if I always have the idea I won't be able to make it right, I'm gonna make a fool of myself, then I may not have the courage to express myself like more willingly. That's just from my personal experience, and I feel like in that way, so I always believe in that way.

Chiara: Mmhh… ok! So Bowen now… ehm… I want to… since you were talking about the writing and so on, I just would like to switch to the textbook that you are using. So in your teaching what role does the textbook play? And what do you think about the textbook you are using in the class?

Bowen: I think… so in my situation… I think the textbook is quite essential to the students because we only saw them like… ehm… let's say one hour every two weeks. But the textbook is with them all the time. So as the role of the textbook it's… it's… let's put it in this way… because I feel I'm going to offend a lot of people by saying that, but the textbook is like the Bible and I'm like the priest, and I'm decoding the sentence, I'm decoding to say it, so you can have like a general idea or that's how… oh, what it's trying to express. But I'm not going to decoding every single sentence from the page 1 to… ehm… from the cover to the back. So when

I gave you the idea which sentence structure it should be and what's the function of the sentence structure, then you can start to working from there on your own because the textbook is there with you all the time.

Chiara: Mmhh… Yeah… And about the activities and the topics presented in the textbook? I mean, what do you think about them? Do you follow them… in a way… how can I say… really carefully or it's… I mean, it's a structure for you and then from there you…

Bowen: It's… ehm… let me say it's flexible, but they have guidelines… I'm not going to just… I'm not going to just change the phrase of the activity, I may adjust the activity. For example, they have oral expression of the dates, they maybe have like… ehm… writing the date in Mandarin characters. So, depending on the level of the students, I may thinking about so far let's just go for the oral one. And even like sometimes I think they are ready, but still I think it's easy to start with the oral and then we can do the writing one. So… I'm trying to, let's just say, I'm trying to follow up the path they set as the activities in the textbook, but still I have to make adjustments depending on all the students taking it.

Chiara: Ok. And about the topics? I mean, do you think the topics are useful for the students or would you add other topics or it's fine?… I mean, ehm…

Bowen: Topics… I mean, like so far I don't feel like they have a textbook that the topics are so impropriate I have to adding too much, but each time when it's reaching to learning a topic in Chinese, we always have to adding something more because the way we are using the language, it's been adapting or changing all the time. So they may have like the saying that is expressed in the textbook it's maybe not the only way to say it, and we want the students interesting to add more words to gain the knowledge. This is not the only way to say it, so they have other ways which already have the ability to say it, so sometimes we add more information of that.

Chiara: Ok. And let's go now to the students. So do you think the students are interested in the activities, topics in the textbook? And, I don't know, if there is something that doesn't work, I mean, what do you do? Like… what do you think about the relationship between, let's say, the students and the textbook?

Bowen: The relationship with the students and the textbook is like… it's like a burden, for Blue River School, because the students, they don't even have a locker, they have to carry it. If you just see their schoolbag, that's become actually become a burden to them physically. But ehm… for the… let's say more advanced students, that's a book to open their minds. There are a lot of students in… still were taking this class more compulsory, compulsory or compulsorily, that's the word you will be using or mandated to taking the Mandarin class. This the textbook doesn't helping that much. But it's… I believe the textbook I want them to have it in the classroom because it's like their bank of knowledge, some of the knowledge or all of the knowledge we learn in the textbook. So if you have that, I think it's gonna make the students more comfortable or more competent to practice Mandarin in my class.

Chiara: Ok. And what do you think is the main method the students use to learn? I mean, like the repetition or, I don't know, doing short assignments…

Connection interrupts.

Bowen: Hello!

Chiara: Hey Bowen! I'm sorry I think it's my internet because there's a terrible storm now… ahahahah!

Bowen: Don't worry! Oh, yeah… the method, the main method… you have to give me examples, but I have to say I prefer to do the translations, like, the students actually translate from their language to Mandarin.

Chiara: Ok, so… not repeating but translating more… I mean, this is what you think they… it's most useful for them, more useful for them.

Bowen: No, it's not more… like… yeah, actually you put it in that way, it's more useful because when you choosing a method you have to think about the situation. I only saw them, like, as I emphasised so many times, you gonna recall this… ahahah… so I don't have that much time with them. So if I don't have time with

them, I have to give them something they can work on their own. So just like physically repeating the sentence can help but it's not going to stay there forever, it's not going to bring them further.

Chiara: Ok, good, yeah… Ehm… ok, thank you so much for this pedagogy of… let' say of… I mean, your teaching approach and how the students respond to that. I just would like to think [*I should have said* 'ask'] what do you think about the use of other languages in the classroom for learning or emotional purposes? I mean, I saw in your teaching that you were using Mandarin, but of course also English, and have you ever heard the students, I don't know, talking in other languages in the classroom, like Afrikaans or any other African languages? Or do you think it might be useful for them? And would you allow that if it were useful? Because I'm not sure how the students behave.

Bowen: I, I, I, so… what do you mean? Like the students talking or like the teaching language I use?

Chiara: Well… I mean… when the students… because you know in South Africa there is all this issue of English, like… especially, I don't know, in rural schools when English is used, but maybe most of the students maybe speak an African language… and…

Bowen: Yeah, I acknowledge of that, and I personally I believe it's better using a language they are comfortable with.

Chiara: Mmhh…

Bowen: But I also have my limitations. That's why I also thinking about learning Afrikaans and I don't think I can manage to learn an African language, but, yeah, in the portrait I spoke about Afrikaans and an African language in the same position. But, yeah, I totally agree and I remember one of the school assistants told me, like, English to them maybe their third or fourth language and Mandarin… learning Mandarin through the English can be horrible for them. Yes, I actually agree with that, I understand about that. But in high school students, because English is their teaching and learning language, so I think it's ok for them to learning Mandarin through English.

Chiara: Mmhh…

Bowen: But still, for example, if I'm teaching a like… a school of students… they actually, most of them taking Afrikaans as their home language, if I can use Afrikaans to help them to learning that, that would be perfect. That gonna causing less trouble and building more, like, sense of secure. I actually want to use that word, sense of secure for them to learning this, because they can easily say 'Oh, I think I got this right' or 'I actually got it wrong', because when using English trying to explain the Mandarin two groups of students, also English having is their foreign language or the first additional language, it's gonna having that trouble, like we lost part of the language in translation.

Chiara: Mmhh.. yeah… because, you know, Bowen, I asked the same question to some of the Grade 11 students, you know, in Fang's class…

Bowen: Mmhh…

Chiara: And actually they told me that for them English was perfectly fine. I mean, they don't need any other language to teach Mandarin… I mean, Mandarin mediated through English for them it was perfect. I was just thinking about Grade 8, because you know in Grade 11 they have been having English as their… ehm… let's say… language of teaching and learning…

Bowen: learning and… yeah, learning and teaching…

Chiara: Yeah… so maybe in Grade 8 yes… if they come mainly from an Afrikaans, I don't know, family, maybe they would be more… yeah… they would be more, I don't know, keen on learning through Afrikaans… but, I mean, if the teacher allows that, I mean… of course we have limitations… I'm, I've also started studying Afrikaans but I'm not proficient at all… so…

Bowen: Ahahah…

Chiara: Ahaha! But like… yeah… I mean, your philosophy about… it's good this… I mean, like if you see two students talking in Afrikaans, I mean, you would never say like 'what are you talking about?' if you still see that they are working on the mission or the topic that…

Bowen: Ehm… yeah… about that… I think no matter which language they're using, the teachers, they always have the sense, like are they engaged this classroom or not.

Chiara: Mmhh…

Bowen: So no matter which language they are using, you know if they got the thing or they are having a discussion about that. So… this take back to my experience of learning English. When the teacher asked us to cut in group and discuss the thing, we actually preferred to use Chinese because it's more efficient to make the discussion down. And then we can work on how we're gonna translate that into English. I had the experience, so I know they're maybe have the chance, so I just prefer to give the students the benefit of doubt until I know it's not the right thing… not the discussion they're doing, they're something else.

Chiara: Yeah… ahah…

Bowen: But I think that depending on the sense of the… like just the sense of like the teacher ability. In your classroom, you are always… you're kind of like the host of the place, so you actually know if the guest is still happy to staying here.

Chiara: Yeah… yeah… that's a really nice image… yeah… ehm… so I think for the moment it's fine with all the pedagogy and so on. I just would like now… only two questions and then I promise I've finished. So it's more about the policy… so the South African language policy.

Bowen: Mmhh…

Chiara: So the question is… what do you think about Mandarin Chinese as a language in today's world and especially in South Africa? And what do you think about the introduction of Mandarin Chinese into the South African curriculum as a second additional language?

Bowen: Yes, that's my… ahahah!!!

Chiara: No, because there's such a big political debate and then if you see the newspapers…

Bowen: I know… So I recently… When I writing my proposal, I was defining Chinese as […] non-official, a language you choose because of its economic status, that's the way I choose to express a language like Mandarin. So we should… I believe first African choose Mandarin not because we are so fascinated by the Chinese culture, it's about we are so fascinated with the Chinese economy, and how they are boosting their economy and we want to make business with them. So I think it's political condition based on the… let's say based on the trip or from the benefit from the business. And the way they introduced Mandarin into South Africa, I feel like it's just in a hurry… Like… I… even from now I feel like the system still need to building up as I mentioned in my study… it's focusing on how to polishing the system, to make every… ehm… not make every […], but there's something like that, when the government build the system and the system functional… The system was there before the policy and when the policy comes, it's still don't making much of change, unless some of the students actually can using this policy to like benefit their… or… benefit their further study, like go to college. So I don't like the way how they introduced it, but I do love the idea… I'm a Mandarin teacher and this is motiving your country and they recognising the status of Mandarin… blah blah blah.

Chiara: Ok, so… your position, basically, if just… so… I mean you're saying that basically… it's not really the attraction of the Chinese language and culture but it's more for economic reasons, like the attraction is because the economy of China and…

Bowen: Yeah! I believe that because they have two languages and two languages that's older than Mandarin, I guess. So I don't think because the beauty of the language they introduced that. They have the French and the Germany… oh… the German… even have the Hebrew. I think it started with we have like these small communities actually using the language, people say that the heritage language, but without the economic

status, I don't think a lot of people actually learning Hindu language, but we have a huge Indian community in South Africa, right?
Chiara: Mmhh… yeah… yeah… and so what you were saying is that basically it was already there, I mean it was already in South Africa this desire to, in a way to… I mean, to learn the language, to benefit some students that they want then make use of the Mandarin to, I don't know, to go to China maybe because the economy is so good or travelling, I don't know. But so what you are saying is that… because… yeah… there's this political debate about the fact that there are African languages which are not valued enough, but on the contrary the government is pushing for Mandarin… so what you were saying is that the desire for Mandarin was already there, the interest maybe was already there. And then the policy only came, but it's not the policy that made people want to study Mandarin… ahah…
Bowen: Yes! I don't think a policy can make people love Mandarin, just like a policy won't like let the people to take the vaccine, it's the same thing… ahah…
Chiara: Ahahah, yeah…
Bowen: You must well, like if you are willing to take that you take that. And I have to say, like for other African countries because it's more like visually. By learning Mandarin you can go to some of like foreign Chinese countries… oh, no, no, no, foreign Chinese companies, like Huawei…
Chiara: Mmhh…
Bowen: …like they have… they have a… like a factory in another country, in some of the African countries, and if you after you are really good at Mandarin, you can easily get a place into… in that company and… I heard some of the countries, they even tripled the salaries, the average salary they would give in a Chinese company. So, I mean, if I am a people in that country, I definitely gonna say yes to Mandarin. It's basically the same thing why people are learning English, because it opens doors for them, they can travel around the world, maybe I still believe about… I'm not sure now. But, yes, so the Chinese language learning actually opens doors for them. I think they have the willing and the… let's say, just pushing the boat into the ocean and eventually the boat it's gonna sail.
Chiara: Mmhh… and Bowen, so… that's a very interesting position, I mean, your position, and just… I mean, do you think that the teaching… for example, let's say that at Blue River School the students will learn Mandarin, ok? But let's say that they don't continue then, after the secondary school. I mean, do you think that this will… I mean, what's the goal of the teaching for the Mandarin in secondary school if students don't continue then? Well… I mean…
Bowen: That actually… We actually have a really, we really thought of last year when I'm moving from another school, the classroom you were there I was teaching there, I was building their department, the Chinese department back then. So when I come back to Blue River School, I always said… so we are having students willing of learning Mandarin eventually after the Grade 12, they are able to, they will be able to at least apply a scholarship or have the ability to continuing their studies in China. So that's the academic goal, that's the first thing. And the second thing is more like practical. The students will able to take Mandarin as one of their matric subjects and accomplish it and even reaching a very good result by learning Mandarin all these years.
Chiara: Mmhh…
Bowen: And then, I think, this is more like… ahahah… this is more generally… I mean, by exposing the students to multiple languages, it's always a very human way to training the young people. I mean, to expose them to different culture, to building them as… to build them as global citizens at the very beginning. I always thinking that's gonna totally change the way they think the world when they go to the university.
Chiara: Mmhh… Ok… Yeah… I get your point. I mean… it's… the fact… yeah, I mean, then maybe not all of them will continue with Mandarin, but those who…
Bowen: Yeah, not all…
Chiara: Yeah.

Bowen: And I always, I always think that… and I believe that, like, the Mandarin language learning is not set for everyone. But, like, do you… can you actually benefit from the learning to get some idea and even some like basically lesson to… For example, if in the future you run to a situation you need to translate a Chinese article, at least you can, you will able to check if there have grammar points… grammar mistakes or like if this is a proper way to using the word. Yeah, at least I thought about that. So not everyone is cut for learning the language professionally, but still, like, it's good to expose yourself into a different culture by learning its language.

Chiara: Yeah… I get your point… yes. And the last question it's about the teaching at Blue River School, and when I was at school you already gave me a sense of what you think. So, because before Mandarin was compulsory for everyone. And now you have changed a little bit. So now it's compulsory only for Grade 8, Grade 9, and then I guess from Grade 10 they can choose whether they want to continue or not. So what do you think about this school choice, and… and… yeah… about the fact of making Mandarin compulsory?

Bowen: I actually… I was pushing that. I actually agree with that and I think that's the right thing to do. So, let's taking Mandarin as subject away, you can't force all the students take mathematics all four years because not everyone is actually able to learning mathematics in Grade 10, 11 and 12. And when the Grade 10 students, the only thing they think about is are they able to using the field subjects to make the way to a university, to a good university, to the top university. So, all subjects at Grade 10 supposed to be, they are like on the same line, you need to choose which subject you want to do. So I think that Mandarin should be also one of that, and the school actually gave us the option like… to think about how we're gonna do Mandarin in the future. And I think for the Grade 10… and Grade 10, 11… let's just say 10, 11 students… it's supposed to be their own choice, like do I have the energy or do I have the ability to continue my Mandarin study? And if for the Grade 8 and 9, I encourage the school, and if you talk to the Principal, I think she is also thinking about we don't have enough subjects to help the students expose themselves to. So I think the Grade 8 and 9 students, they have, like, that's crazy, but if they have like… thousands of subjects were there, every day they can experience something different. Maybe one of the things can trigger them and then they finally know 'Ok, I'm good at that, I think I can actually accomplish that subject' and then that's just keep going and eventually they'll be using the subject to pass their matric.

Chiara: Ok, so you mean, like, in Grade 8 and 9, you still think it's good to expose all the students because, I mean, if they don't try, then, I mean, they will not know then what Mandarin is, like all the other subjects in a way… So it's…

Bowen: Yeah, I, I, I still believe that to have Grade 8 and 9 students, like, compulsory or mandated…

Chiara: Mmhh…

Bowen: … to expose themselves to Mandarin, yeah.

Chiara: Yeah…

Bowen: I think it's not so like… in short term maybe it's not good, but still I think it's very good for the students, because they learn like English, Afrikaans and an African language or… yeah… so, when they have Mandarin, they know they actually have different types of languages…

Chiara: Yeah, but when I talked to some Grade 11 students, they… some students actually told me that, I mean, maybe, if Mandarin were not compulsory, then maybe they would have never chosen Mandarin because they felt some… a little bit intimidated or… by the language itself. But then, once they started, they realised that it was good for them and then they continued studying Mandarin, so… if it were not compulsory, they said 'I would have never tried that', but because of the fact that it was compulsory, then 'I had to, I had no choice', but then some of them are happy that they… that it was like that; otherwise, they would have never taken Mandarin, maybe.

Bowen: So like different schools in South Africa, it's also like selective, you can decide to do Mandarin or you decide not to do in Grade 8. So they actually have the privilege because they have more than one second additional languages…
Chiara: Mmhh…
Bowen: I think they have two or three. So, back to Blue River School… ehm… I'm not saying these are the like high-ranking or something, I'm saying this for students with that background, they are not most advantaged background, so when they… all the six years I'm staying in South Africa, a lot of people, a lot of parents, they want their children to learn Mandarin or they already found different ways to have their children to learn Mandarin. But for this group of students, they know, the country has the subject of Mandarin, but how easy do they can get, get access to learning that. I'm not saying like learning Mandarin is a privilege, but I'm saying learning Mandarin is quite a unique experience you can have in like… just, just in your home. So, like, yeah, that's what I'm trying to say, like this is the unique experience you can have daily, but if we can offer this to more public schools or more like general population of the students, I think it's, it may actually change a little bit to the students how they see the world, how they see the language education or how they think about like social [inaudible], like they actually have good people over there, they are treating people or they look the world differently.
[…]
Chiara: Ok, thank you Bowen, I really thank you for your time that went over one hour honestly… ahahah! But it was so interesting…
Bowen: It's ok!
Chiara: … to talk to you.
Bowen: Yeah! I like that. Besides the research, I always thinking as a language teacher to another, I always want to work, as I mentioned, I always want to know what other second additional language teacher being doing. What's their challenge? How can we work together?
Bowen has some questions concerning the curriculum of Italian as a second additional language in South African schools, and Chiara answers.
Chiara: As far as the Chinese one, I mean, what do you think about that one? Do you follow that or it's too difficult to follow? Because, I mean, for example, Grade 8, they only have one lesson every two weeks, so I think the expectations are quite impossible to meet.
Bowen: We are trying follow the structure.
Chiara: Mmhh… ok.
Bowen: But the content of the curriculum, the content to cover it's not suitable for the language level of the second additional languages.
Chiara: Ok.
Bowen: So that's why we also want to make suggestions. But so far as I tell you, if you are using the [incomprehensible] to compare the second additional language curriculums, even for the English, you can compare the one in English to the one in French. Besides the grammar points, the whole document is exactly the same.
Chiara: Mmhh…
Bowen: So they didn't make so much adjustments to each languages. It just changes some of the grammar points or the topics. [incomprehensible] So I don't think the curriculum is well written or the curriculum is actually a very functional guideline, but at least it's there, but, as I mentioned, if Italian don't even using that as a guideline, so what they be using? And then a lot of languages, the second additional languages, actually don't have to using that at all, so what's the point of having the curriculum?
Chiara: Ahah… I understand…

Bowen: And if there is no point to having the curriculum, should we consider the second additional language curriculum system need to be improved?
Chiara: No… I understand… So because what you mean is you have the Mandarin one, but you don't think it's…
Bowen: Yeah…?
Chiara: I mean, you don't think it's so good. Ahahah, and then you say why…?
Bowen: I don't think it's practical.
Chiara: Yeah…
Bowen: In certain level then maybe good enough, but I don't think it's practical. That's what…

Chiara reiterates her availability to discuss second language teaching in South Africa in the future. Chiara thanks Bowen for the long interview, and then they say goodbye to each other.

Second interview with Bowen, 21st May 2023

During the data analysis, I felt the need to ask a few more questions to Bowen concerning his views on the Chinese written language. This second interview delves deeper into the conceptualisations of the Chinese script and its relationship with spoken language.

Chiara sent to Bowen an excerpt of the previous interview concerning his views about the importance of written language in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese, and she asks him to elaborate more on that.
Bowen: I generally believe the oral and the writing is equally important because you have to have the fundamental knowledge about the characters, that's deepening your understanding of the culture, which Chinese language is deeply rooted into. And then the oral expression, that's more like the practice. You are walking with two legs, you can't just leave one leg, only focus on writing or just the oral expression, so that's why I say it's equally important for you to mastering the Mandarin, but then it comes to the curriculum. I mention writing is more important because we lack of that education about characters, so most of the foreign language teaching, especially for Mandarin, that's a foreign language teaching, I think we are focusing more on oral expression or oral can easily to be achieved instead of like spending a lot of time on the character learning or the character practice. So efficiently people choosing oral over the writing, but the writing is as equally important as the oral learning, yeah.
Chiara: Ok Bowen, so this is how I imagined. Your opinion is that you think students need both legs, they need to learn the knowledge of the characters and the oral expression, how to speak Mandarin. But as you were saying the curriculum actually focuses more on the writing than the oral expression.
Bowen: Oh, no no no, that's like… the curriculum, as I mentioned, yes, they were trying to focusing on the… let's say reading instead of writing. The curriculum is focusing on reading and the language in the context or some literature, that's the curriculum focus, but that's considerably still leaning on the oral, like are you able to read out aloud, are you able to read and get the reading comprehension a bit, but they didn't… But why I mention this? Still leaning on the oral… because the curriculum, the paper, the exam paper set pinyin on the top, so that's require the students, that's barely requires the students have knowledge about the characters, because you read the pinyin, then you don't read the characters.
Chiara: Oh, so basically all the assessments have both characters and pinyin…
Bowen: Yes.
Chiara: Let's say until Grade 11, ok, so they…

Bowen: No, until Grade 12, even the matric paper.
Chiara: Oh, even the matric paper.
Bowen: Yeah. So that's why it's leaning more over to the oral. I think that's cause the confusion about… why I mentioned that… writing is also important… because we didn't practice or spend that much of time on the writing, learn how to write Chinese characters or learning… or recognising Chinese characters, spending more time explaining the philosophy or the story of how we creating these characters.
Chiara: Ok, but still the focus is on pinyin. I mean when students actually read characters, when actually students read there is both characters and pinyin. I mean… what you do with characters is just to get them interested in understanding the philosophy about the characters and so on, but they are actually not required to read a text only in characters or write in characters.
Bowen: Yeah. I don't know if this is good example. For example, in English we say busboy or raining cats and dogs, so have to have a more authentic way of native way of thinking to get what you are trying to say, if you are reading the word, you don't get exactly the meaning. Characters were like that, they have a different element to put together, to deliver a message, like what's this character mean. So you have to go there to become a native speaker or to think more authentically as a Chinese speaker. I don't know if this makes you understand more clear.
Chiara: You are saying in a way that make the students approach more what a native Chinese speaker would be.
Bowen: Yeah. So where's the knowledge of characters? So, we all assume the learners considerably thinking the Chinese characters don't have a phonic system, but actually the characters do have a phonic system, it's like a pattern of pronunciation, not exactly how to sound it out. So that's why offering the learners that knowledge or decoding the characters to them, characters not only have a meaning system, also including a phonic system. It's not that obvious but show a pattern. So that's why I mentioned, if you eventually are learning Mandarin as a subject or in the future as a major, understanding the writing characters or able to writing characters, that is quite important because most of the curriculum setting and even now the technology it's more easy to achieve the oral accomplishment of the language instead of writing or recognising the characters.
Chiara: Ok.
Bowen: Is this clear now?
Chiara: Yeah. I was actually quite confused by the fact that I thought the curriculum was focusing more on the written language, like reading instead of the oral practice, like becoming more fluent when speaking, when you do the oral.
Bowen: I can give you this example. For the past few years, if a learner is not efficient in Chinese character writing, they can still pass the matric Chinese subject, because that's how much is requested for a learner to write, barely nothing. They can just rewrite and actually most of the words are in the writing paper. So the students don't need to spend that much of an effort to focus on the writing characters or understanding the characters. So that's why from the curriculum aspect I think the writing is also quite important, we need to put more weight in. But in general for Chinese as a language, a foreign language, I think both writing characters and oral expression is equally important.
Chiara: And this is what you are trying to do in the classroom when you teach? Also in Grade 8 and 9 you think that the teaching of the characters is still very important, I mean, you put an emphasis on that. Is that correct? I mean…
Bowen: What I'm teaching… let me give you two factors I always think about when I'm arranging my teaching material. First, I want the students to feel more accomplished in learning Mandarin or more motivated. So that's why I set goals for them to easily achieve in the oral expressions. And if I see there is a character with an easy way to link the knowledge back or extending the knowledge in the future, I spend some time

explaining why we have this character. That's why I also mentioned the textbook we were using, *Easy Steps to Chinese*, they have a curriculum which show which character has this radical, and what's the meaning of the radical and more radical they start to learn, they can categorise the characters around it. With categorising the characters, you can start to get the general idea… Oh this radical actually has this meaning and all these characters share the same meaning, but extended to different aspects or different angles, and they can make different words to express more detailed or delicate information. So that's how I feel about organising my lessons. What is quite useful, efficiency, and that's why choose more time on explaining the characters. But generally I still considerably spend a lot of time to have the students to do oral expression, because that's somehow they can easily achieve and also feel accomplished.

Chiara: Ok. I understand. And so you basically use more the pinyin, like for the students to read and learn the words, you rely more on the pinyin than on the characters in that sense.

Bowen: If the students are relying more on the pinyin then I rely on the pinyin myself. So when I write on the board, or if I'm showing them my powerpoint, my slides, it's always I show both characters and pinyin. But what I did, if this character keeps repeating and it's also sounding exactly the same. You know… sometimes characters can sound differently. So in that case, if I have marked the character once, I won't remark it again. So the students have to see… Oh this is actually the same character, they pronounce the same. I try to force the learners to pay more attention to the characters instead just paying attention to what's on top, the pinyin.

Chiara: Ok, so what I get from what you told me is that you want the students to feel accomplished, and to use the language. So the oral expression, speaking and using the language is the main part of your lessons and what you want the students to do. But still you are preparing them with the characters, showing how the characters are made, teaching them the radicals for let them get a deeper understanding of the language and maybe preparing those students to continue or having then Mandarin as a major, so you are balancing both, right?

Bowen: Yes. And I mentioned in our conversation or in the interview, I do mention… you see… not all of them gonna carry on with Mandarin. So, some of them, their learning period end in Grade 9. So after Grade 9 they are no longer in touch with Mandarin. So that's why it's important for me to lay a considerably solid ground for them. First is to wrapping up what they have been learning for these two years, no matter when they are pulling out that memory or information, they can always say 'I understand what I'm trying to say' in Mandarin, maybe just as simple as 你好 or something more complicated. But also I want those who want to continue start to learn the most efficient way understand how characters were made and how you categorise those characters together. And also to learn how to organise sentences, how to organise the order of the characters. So in my teaching I don't only consider those who are finish learning this year, I also need to consider those who are gonna carry on in the future. So they have like the minimum and the maximum. So I'm trying to moving up and down. Even when I'm teaching, I keep saying this, if you understand that much, this is good enough, you don't have to carry on, but if you want to learn a little bit more, now you can take some extra notes about what I'm trying to say. I don't want to confuse those who are struggling with Mandarin with other information. But for those already able to mastering all the things we learn, I want to give them more, to say the variance of the characters and the variance of how we are using the words, and to see they can actually say a lot of things with those few words and those few sentences they have learnt.

Chiara: So I went through De Man's thesis about the Chinese curriculum, the Chinese Mandarin curriculum in South Africa and what she was pointing out in her conclusions is that the curriculum seems to focus too much on the reading part.

Bowen: Yes!

Chiara: There's a lot of emphasis on the reading and the curriculum is not very clear about the character and the pinyin policy sometimes. It seems that… so this is why I was a little bit confused in the sense that… there is the curriculum, but not all of you follow step by step that curriculum.

Bowen: I can give you this information, you can do your own research on this. You download the curriculum, the French one, the German one and the Chinese one. And you use the Adobe, the pdf reader, they have a feature to compare the documents. You can see the Chinese one, the Mandarin one is just a few editing of the French one and of the German one. And for that case if you are looking back, all these official languages were adapted from the English second additional language curriculum. So in that case it's most of the curriculum so far is kind of like a sample of other languages. But why this become an issue for Mandarin, because German, French and English, they are somehow related, so somehow that works, but Mandarin is a totally different language. So that's why it doesn't work and it's creating a lot of troubles. I agree with De Man. Yes. So I agree with her. Just as I mentioned to you, the curriculum it's focusing on the reading part, the language in context, but what's in the practice, if you go to see the exam paper, all the readings have pinyin on the top, so that requires minimum effort of recognising the characters. And if you read the paper 2, then you gonna start realising, it's also minimum required for writing the characters. Because when they rewrite, they're just changing a few words. That's not writing in Mandarin, just like copy, paste and editing. So that's why I said the curriculum it's not… the curriculum from that aspect… we need to focus more on the writing to let the learners to expose themselves to the idea and philosophy, even say serology of characters, how characters have been designed, to group them together and show the different meanings.

Chiara: Ok. So you are more towards, let's say, implementing more the characters in the curriculum because the curriculum seems to treat Chinese as an alphabetical language, but it's not. So you think they should focus more on writing, and when you mean writing, you don't mean writing in pinyin of course. I think you mean writing in characters. Ok, I get it. So now it's very clear, Bowen. Thank you for clarifying this point.

Bowen: No, it's fine. It's my pleasure. So I mentioned speaking Mandarin and writing characters is equally important if you are learning Mandarin, but from the curriculum that made me feel like writing into being more weighted, that's why I gave you the conclusion writing is quite important if you want to learn Mandarin in the right way. Then you mentioned, this is quite an interesting opinion because for other languages oral is most important, but for Mandarin I gave you writing is important. That's why I gave you the example Mandarin can be easy come easy go. That's what I'm just saying, you can easily learn 'ni hao', and you are still able to say 'ni hao', but you have no idea what you actually put there. So 'ni hao' actually mean 'you' and 'good', it actually means 'are you ok, are you good', But everyone still assume 'ni hao' just means 'hello', so they didn't bring the knowledge of the phonic pronunciation to the characters, they are just translating a sound to another sound, so matching 'ni hao' to 'hello' that's what missing is understanding the character, and I gave you the example of the French because the French is an alphabetic language, so I can still read the French because that's how the language itself. But as I mentioned, if they are confident or not. For example, there are some French words I still feel I'm gonna make mistake of it, so I'm not going to read. So the same thing, characters is really difficult to read. If I give them pinyin they're probably going to find a way to read it out, but if I give them characters, they are just refusing to say anything.

Chiara: So we were talking especially about the reading, you were saying French, even if you stop studying it for one or two years, it's not that difficult to get a text…

Bowen: Yeah, I'm still able to understand, comprehend the paragraph. But for Mandarin with pinyin the students have their own knowledge about what's there. That's why I say it's easy come easy go. So you learn, you got it and when you stop learning, you only acquired the knowledge of pinyin, but pinyin it's not the Chinese writing system. So in the future what you remember it's the most frequent greeting, you can say 'ni hao', but you have no idea what those two characters look like. Even if I show those two characters, you still don't know this is just the word you are able to say, 'ni hao'.

Chiara: Ok, so what you were saying at the beginning, like for instance, you get 'ni hao' as 'hello', but if you don't know the characters, I mean you don't know the philosophy of saying 'are you good' with '你' for 'you' and '好' for 'good' with the woman and the child in it, this is the kind of knowledge you are saying. Ok! To me

here it was very interesting because you were comparing an alphabetical language like French and Mandarin. If you just learn the pinyin, but then… if you don't learn the characters, you will just, let's say, forget what is behind the pinyin, what you are saying. But Bowen, what about the oral expression? For me, when you were talking about French, I mean the oral expression of French, to speak out, it seemed more like a matter of self-confidence. You were saying, it's not that difficult to regain the knowledge how to see the language, I think you meant, it's not that difficult to regain the knowledge how to read French.

Bowen: I think I more meant… the pronunciation. So why I make the example of the French. For French, some of the consonant sound, they don't make sound, you don't sound them out. So you actually have letters you don't sound out. But in English it's another situation English feel like each single letter needs to make sound. So English is one way pronouncing. So why I compare French to Mandarin, because French is also somehow, I feel this gives the meaning but this gives the sound. So when I'm struggling to decide is this part sound or not making sound, I feel less confident to say that or to pronounce that. I compare this situation to the same thing, Chinese characters is or without pinyin. So for learners, I give them '你好', these two characters, probably they don't even want to say it, because they are not sure, because they don't know the writing of the characters, they don't recognise that, so they don't say that. But if I put the pinyin on top of these two characters 'ni hao', they're gonna feel more confident just to speak about it or pronounce it. Does this make sense to you?

Chiara: So you are not talking about the speaking in the sense of making a conversation in French, you are talking about reading aloud.

Bowen: Yes, read out aloud, the pronunciation.

Bowen: If you take French and Mandarin, which one do you think it is better… I mean, I know you are a Mandarin native speaker, so for you of course Mandarin is your mother tongue, but if you were one of your students who is learning both French and Mandarin, which one it will be more difficult to read aloud when you have French and Mandarin, because from one side I know that French is…

Bowen: That's actually very easy to answer, depending on your cultural or language background. If you are an English speaker, that's French definitely gonna be easier. But if you are under any sense the Chinese, even the Tibetan language, that's somehow Mandarin is not that difficult or strange to you. But why I prefer putting Mandarin and French together, comparing them, because they are so delicate, but they are also so logical. Like, for French the 'la' and 'le' to show this is male or female. So Mandarin also have some kind of like logic in it. So that's why I found them quite similar. When you, no matter which language, if they have a standard, or they have a philosophy or they have a law to follow with, I find that language is easy to master. So that's my opinion, depending on your cultural background. For me, I'm like Chinese Mandarin speaker, so Mandarin it's like natural to me. But when I'm learning French, I feel like easy to adapt into because it's so logical and my brain was trained in that way, the language as nice and logical, I feel confident and I feel it's easy to read. If I have French articles, I don't know the word, but from the sentence structure and how they are putting those fields we can word I know, I can actually get the rough idea out of it. So as a Mandarin speaker I found French maybe easier than English. If I learnt French instead of English first, I probably gonna mastering French because I found it's so logical.

Chiara: Ok. But you agree with me that… when you read aloud French, I know there are some sounds that you read and some sounds that you don't read, like the 'e' at the end of the words, but, you see, in a way French… I mean, when you read the letters, the letters are alphabetical, so…

Bowen: Chiara… I got your question. Are you saying which one is easier from the aspect of oral expression or pronunciation?

Chiara: Yeah, no… what I'm saying is that… if you have the characters and if you don't remember the pinyin, maybe you understand the meaning, but you will never be able to read it aloud. With French, you can read it

in a wrong way, I mean not in a very correct way, but you will always be able to read it aloud in a way even if it's not one hundred per cent correct…

Bowen: In that case I think all alphabetical languages are easy to pronounce, definitely, that is so true, and even for Mandarin learners, pinyin is great. To be honest, if we don't have this pinyin system, it's going to be a nightmare for foreigners to learn this language. So for that yes, French is definitely going to be easier, easier to pronounce, but… that's just me, I always want to give a 'but'. So Chinese pronunciation, they only have like 400 pinyin out there, so there are actually limitations how you can pronounce Mandarin, it's more important how you put the combinations together. So I still stick to my statement, French and other alphabetic languages are easier to pronounce if you saw the written one, yes.

Chiara: So do you think for your students it's also difficult to read aloud the pinyon or not?

Bowen: I don't think for the students it's difficult to read aloud pinyin if they learn it properly. Why I do mention that? Because the hours we can have with the learners also don't give us much of a privilege to go through pronunciation correction, but, yes, I think students feel easier to read out the pinyin, but… there is another 'but', sorry. The awareness of the tones, that's what troubles them, or that it's a little bit distant from native speakers. So they understand, and get the idea they have different tones, but they lack the awareness of it. So they see the tone there, but they don't or they can't pronounce it out. It's not like they cannot physically do that, because they lack the awareness. They don't say… 'what's the point in the sentence?', I say 'what' or 'what!!' So in English we say different tones, when we wave up or lower down the tone, to express emotional feelings, but in Mandarin it's not emotional feelings. Actually, it's different meanings. But for them, it's kind of like they need to bridging or they need to cut out or separate or distinguish these two different concepts. In Mandarin the tone changing delivers different ideas, not different emotions, it's not like drama. But in English, I think in other languages it's the same thing, the only reason in changing your tone because you have a attitude or emotion you want to deliver or add it to that expression.

Chiara: […] Just to make sure I understood correctly your opinion that Mandarin is 'easy come easy go'. So you think Mandarin is easy come easy go if you only teach the students the pinyin. So if you teach students also the characters, that won't really be the case. Is that what you mean?

Bowen: Yes, I think you understood it right, but if I have to emphasise that, you have to learn the character and pinyin and meaning, these three as a unit or a combination. You can't just cut off the characters or you can't just cut off the pinyin. So for foreign learners, if you don't learn the characters, the pinyin, the meaning, these three elements as a unit or as a combination together, you feel like… how do they say that… let's say, if you are eating with one chopstick or if you go have a steak, you only have a fork or if you have a knife, you won't be able to accomplish the mission. So learning as you mentioned, only learning pinyin, that's a typical way of easy come easy go, because you are still able to say, like, 'ni hao', but the longer you are out of Mandarin, they ask you can speak Mandarin, you can easily pop up 'ni hao', but you have no idea what's these two characters look like, and you still just get the idea this means 'hello', but you don't even understand why 'ni hao' means 'hello'. If this makes sense to you.

[…]

Bowen: For Mandarin itself… let's take English, I think that's easier for both of us to understand. If you are reading Shakespeare, the ancient English, I think that's not even ancient, I think it's more Middle Ages… but the words, the pronunciations, the sentence structures, they already feel a little bit distant from what we are doing right now. So you can take that as reference, that's how you learn Mandarin. Because Mandarin is a section of a long history language. Mandarin can be traced back to more than 2000 years ago. So you are learning an ancient language. So it's like you are reading the cave painting from Egypt, something like that. So that's why we have to think language as a historical thing. So if you are thinking about Chinese is not a common language we are using, then we have to go bigger to this question, what is language to us and for our ancestors? How we pronounce, how has it been learnt? I mean, back then how do we come to the idea

we say 'apple' supposed to sound as 'apple', it's a fruit on a tree, how we created this word for it. So if you are thinking in that way, I think that's gonna shifting the idea to make such a common statement Mandarin is a unique language. I think Mandarin can be considered as a photo of the language, which is still alive nowadays. So that's give you the idea how language should be acquired or learnt thousands years ago. We need to gap the bridge between how Mandarin and English become so distant, or how Chinese language and the alphabetical languages become so distant all through history.

Chiara: It seemed that the introduction of pinyin at a certain point was replacing the characters…

Bowen: At that time, they were thinking about alphabetising Mandarin, so we were thinking to put Mandarin into that, but that doesn't work for the language. So eventually we found a way to adapt Mandarin into nowadays, like the input, even the character design… […] I think our focus is after WWII, for this new world how we see language, how we adapt the language education, I think that's how far we can go, but if you are thinking about the whole human history, how we are developing language. That's somehow the way we are looking at the alphabetical languages, we are looking at Mandarin, this writing form of the language… what is missing in between? Because we have the same ancestors, they must have created both of them, it's not coming from different alien cultures, but from something common. But it has developed in such a way to have somehow two systems existing in the world at the same time. So that's something, I think, we are looking long enough from history, how we actually go to the different ways of the language development. That's maybe something interesting in the future.

Chiara: And if we want to apply that to our teaching and learning reality, especially in South Africa, what you are saying about putting more emphasis on the characters, it's because it does seem that the students… I mean, some students are very interested in the characters because they see characters as fascinating, something cool, you know, but then when it comes to actually study the characters, sometimes they say 'It's too difficult', they see that they are not progressing that much because the characters keep them lagging behind.

Bowen: Yeah…

Chiara: But if you don't teach them the characters, you are basically teaching a language, only pinyin, which is not even true in China, because in China everything is written in characters…

Bowen: I'm gonna give you a weird example… You are an Italian chef, and when you teach how to make pizza, you are not teaching them how to make Hawaii pizza, do you get the idea? What I, as a Mandarin speaker, when I teach them, I don't want them to learn pinyin because that's not how you write the language. If you write pinyin down, is that gonna cause trouble, people won't understand you? I don't think so because every Chinese people are able to use pinyin right now, but they still consider you are a foreigner, you have very little knowledge of Chinese. It's like you bring a Hawaii pizza, no matter how delicious it is, they say it is not Italian.

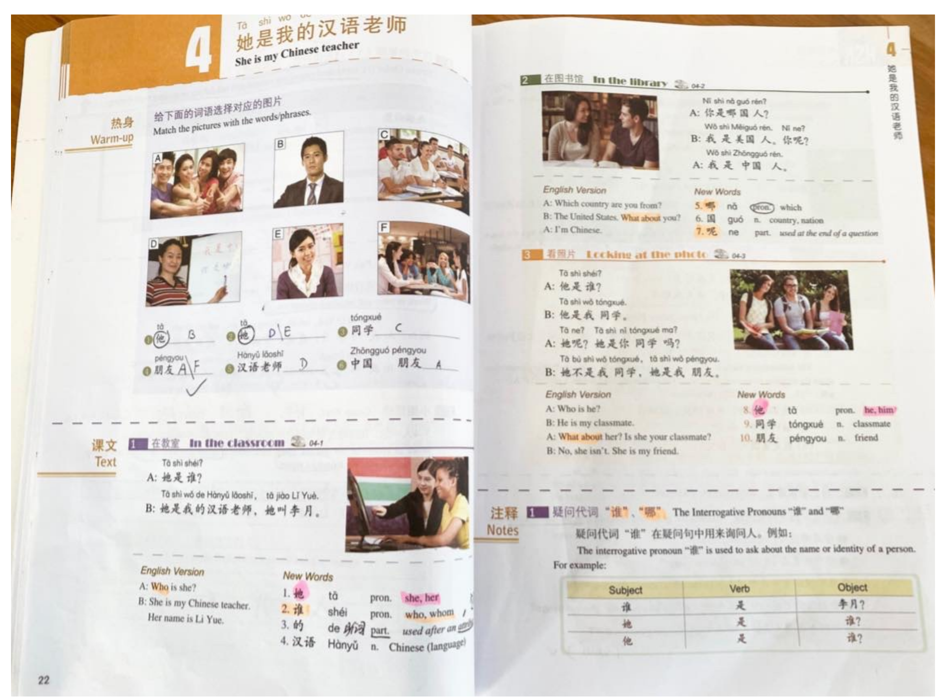
Chiara thanks Bowen for this second interview, and they say goodbye to each other.

Appendix 8 – Excerpt from Fang's lessons in grade 11

This is an excerpt showing the first part of one of Fang's lessons in grade 11. This lesson was audio-recorded on 25th May 2021.

Translations in English are provided in parentheses (…). When the teacher emphasises certain pronunciations, the pinyin is also provided in parentheses (…).

Fang takes out the HSK Standard Course 1 textbook, and shows the title on page 22.



Teacher: [pointing at the title on page 22] 她是我的汉语老师, 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher, she is my Chinese language teacher). According to the information now you…ehm… introduce me to your friend, you say 四, 她是我的汉语老师 (four, she is my Chinese language teacher), is written this? So lesson four, 第四课 (lesson four), the main idea and title is 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher), so read after me 跟我读 (read with me): 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).

A few students: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).

Teacher: Very good, again.

Teacher and (a few) students together: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).

Students: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).

Teacher: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).

Students: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).

Teacher: Very good. 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher). So you should know 她 (she) character. [Pointing to the whiteboard] On the left of 她(she) is 女字旁(woman radical). This is 女 (woman) [pointing to the character on the whiteboard], it is the character for a female. And on the right is another part [she shows the right part of the character 她 (she)]. Yeah. This is 她 (she). For example, here, this in this way

[pointing to the character on the whiteboard]. This is the character 她 (she). The pinyin is [she writes on the whiteboardboard] tā. This 她 (she) it means "she" or "her" for female. And another tā is here. This also tā [pointing to the character 他 (he) on the whiteboard]. The same pinyin. And the different character. On the left is 单人旁 (single-person radical)，撇 (throw) (丿) 竖 (vertical) (丨) 单人旁 (single-person radical). And then the same left right part. This is also tā. It means "he". This is also tā. So the title is 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher), so from this 她 (she) you know your Chinese teacher is a lady, not a gentleman? So here 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher). Ok, let's do the first part [showing the textbook at page 22]. Warm-up, 热身, (warm-up) warm-up. From these six pictures… ehm…let's do this part. Match the pictures with the words or phrases. 给下面的词语选择对应的图片 (Match the pictures with the words or phrases) [reading from the textbook]. In the pictures is 图片(picture) …图片 (picture). And number one, the word number one, let's read it. 他 (he).

Students: 他 (he).

Teacher: 他 (he).

Students: 他 (he).

Teacher: 他 (he).

Students: 他 (he).

Teacher: Number two is also 她 (she).

Students: 她 (she).

Teacher: 她 (she).

Students: 她 (she).

Teacher: 她 (she) . Pay attention. Number two is the… is the… 她 (she) for female, 女性 (female). Number three is…one, two.

Nina: 同学(schoolmate/classmate) [very subtle].

Teacher: Very good. 同学 (schoolmate/classmate).

Students: 同学(schoolmate/classmate).

Teacher: 同学(schoolmate/classmate). 同学(schoolmate/classmate) means classmates or schoolmates, classmates or schoolmates. 同学(schoolmate/classmate), 同学(schoolmate/classmate). For example, you six are classmates, you are classmates, 你们是同学(you are schoolmates/classmates). And number 4 together.

Nina: 朋友 (friend).

Teacher: Eh, very good.

Students: 朋友 (friend).

Teacher: 朋友(friend). Pinyin without tone. You know the character pinyin 友(yǒu) is the third tone, 友(yǒu) in phrases 朋友 (friend) we omit the third tone. Is 朋友(friend) (péngyou), not 朋友(friend) (péngyǒu). Is 朋友 (friend) (péngyou), 朋友 (friend) (péngyou). And number 5 together.

Students: 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher) [very subtle and with broken pronunciation].

Teacher: Very good. 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher).

Teacher and students: 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher).

Teacher: 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher). Just like the title, 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).

Nina: [almost inaudible, but she asks a question on word number 4].

Teacher: 朋友(friend) is a friend. Yes. 朋友(friend) it means friend. 朋友(friend) it means friend. Sometimes your classmates is also your friend but sometimes not. At the same time sometimes your friend is also your

classmates, but sometimes not. So 朋友(friend) is friend, 同学(schoolmate/classmate) is classmates or schoolmates. Different meaning. 朋友(friend) it means friend. And the last one is...
Students: 中国朋友 (Chinese friend) [very subtle and with broken pronunciation].
Teacher: Yes, 中国朋友 (Chinese friend), 中国朋友 (Chinese friend).
Students: 中国朋友 (Chinese friend).
Teacher: You need to say 中国朋友 (Chinese friend) (péngyǒu), you know 友 (yǒu) without tone. 中国朋友 (Chinese friend) (péngyou), read after me 中国朋友 (Chinese friend).
Students: 中国朋友 (Chinese friend).
Teacher: 中国朋友 (Chinese friend).
Students: 中国朋友(Chinese friend).
Teacher: Ok. So you do it together. Yourself, all right. Do it yourself and then we check out the answers. For example, number one 他 (he) for male. We choose B. Ok you do the other part.

Students do the exercise individually. Two students do it together. Then the teacher and the students correct the exercise together.

[...]

Teacher: So first let's listen to the audio for this part. The first, the first audio is in the classroom, 在教室 (in the classroom), text one. Let's listen to it first, then we will read this short dialogue.

The teacher plays the audio of the first dialogue. Audios are played from the teacher's mobile phone.

Man's voice: ... 汉语老师 (Chinese language teacher).
Woman's voice: Lesson four, She is my Chinese teacher.
Man's voice: 课文一 (text one).
Woman's voice: Text one.
Man's voice: 她是谁 (who is she)?
Woman's voice: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher). 她叫李月 (Her is name is Lǐ Yuè).
Woman's voice: New words, 她 (she), 谁 (who), 的 (particle used after an attribute), 汉语 (Chinese language).

Teacher: This is 谁 (who) (shéi) [pointing to the character 谁 written on the whiteboard]. 谁 (who) (shéi) means "who" or "whom". This is 谁 (who) (shéi). In Chinese we can read this one is 谁 (who) (shéi). We can also use another pinyin. It's like this. Is 谁 (who) (shuí). Do you remember i,u 并列标在后 (when "iu" or "ui" comes, the tone mark should be placed above the terminal vowel), the tone above the end of the finals and is ... here [pointing again to the second tone shuí on the board]. But here the second tone we above "e" because a o e, i u ü by the order for the different tones above different finals. Remember? So we put this 二声(second tone) above "e". And here above "i". So read after me 谁 (who) (shéi).
Students: 谁 (who) (shéi).
Teacher: And this one is 谁 (who) (shuí).
Students: 谁 (who) (shuí).
Teacher: This one is 谁 (who) (shéi).
Students: 谁 (who) (shéi).

Teacher: This one is 谁 (who) (shuí).
Students: 谁 (who) (shuí).
Teacher: 谁 (who) (shéi).
Students: 谁 (who) (shéi).
Teacher: 谁 (who) (shuí).
Students: 谁 (who) (shuí).
Teacher: These two pinyin also ok. So read after me. 她是谁 (who is she)?
Students: 她是谁 (who is she)?
Teacher: 她是谁(who is she)?
Students: 她是谁(who is she)?
Teacher: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).
Students: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese language teacher).
Teacher: 她叫李月 (Her name is Lǐ Yuè).
Students: 她叫李月(Her name is Lǐ Yuè).
Teacher: 她叫李月(Her name is Lǐ Yuè).
Students: 她叫李月(Her name is Lǐ Yuè).
Teacher: So, and this one read after me is 她 (she).
Students: 她 (she).
Teacher: 她 (she).
Students: 她 (she).
Teacher: You know. This is 是 (is) t, t, t, not d. Just you maybe mistake is “da”是我的汉语老师 (is my Chinese language teacher). Tā, t- ā, tā, tā, not dā. Yes. There’s a difference. This is t, t- ā, tā. Ok, let’s read it again. 她是谁 (who is she) (shéi)?
Students: 她是谁 (who is she) (shéi)?
Teacher: We can also say 她是谁 (who is she) (shuí) . Yes. 她是谁 (who is she) (shuí). Yes, also ok. 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese teacher).
Students: 她是我的汉语老师 (she is my Chinese teacher).
Teacher: 她叫李月 (Her name is Lǐ Yuè).
Students: 她叫李月(Her name is Lǐ Yuè).
Teacher: 她叫李月(Her name is Lǐ Yuè).
Students: 她叫李月(Her name is Lǐ Yuè).
Teacher: You know 叫 (call/be called) it means be called. Be called 她叫李月(her name is Lǐ Yuè). 她叫李月 (her name is Lǐ Yuè). That means my Chinese teacher’s name is 李月 (Lǐ Yuè). 她叫李月 (her name is Lǐ Yuè). Ok. So let’s go on with the 第二篇课文 (second text), text two, in the library. First, let’s listen to this text, text two, in the library.

The lesson continues […]