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The Past and Present of Chinese Language Teaching in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

China's booming economy is indeed one of the main reasons for the popularity of learning Chinese as a foreign language (henceforth CFL). With this growing interest in CFL, Ireland is likely to be behind global trends as Chinese is not yet included as a State-examined subject at any level in the Irish schooling system. Chinese language teaching (henceforth CLT) began to develop significantly in formal UK schooling during 2004-2005 (Zhang & Li, 2010), whereas the earliest occurrence of CLT seen in the Irish education system was in 2006-2007 when two Confucius Institutes were set up in Ireland. During this time, Mandarin Chinese was also introduced first as a subject and later as a degree in some higher education institutions in Ireland. The current study reviews the past and present of CLT in Ireland at second and tertiary level. This information, together with survey data collected among approximately 3,700 students learning CFL in Irish schools as a subject not examined by the State, provides recommendations for a future State-examined CFL course to be introduced to Irish secondary schools. These recommendations include items such as contact hours, tasks, and content to be implemented in the classroom. Further recommendations are also supplied in relation to the bridging of secondary and tertiary-level CLT. These recommendations come in light of former Irish Minister for Education Richard Bruton's announcement that Chinese will be taught on the State-examined school curriculum as part of the Languages Connect strategy plan.

Keywords: Chinese as a foreign language, Ireland, Chinese language teaching, Chinese language pedagogy

1 Introduction

Chinese is undoubtedly becoming increasing popular to learn as a foreign language. China, for its part, may be seen as taking advantage of current globalisation trends by promoting Chinese language and culture on a worldwide scale (Gil, 2017). In the UK, the only other English-speaking country (apart from Ireland) in Europe, approximately 80% of universities and 20% of secondary schools offer Chinese courses (Tang, 2016). In a report issued by the Education Development Trust (2016), it was found that between 2008 and 2015, the number of students learning Mandarin Chinese as a GCSE subject increased from approximately 2,100 to 3,100. In an attempt to grow this number further, the Department for Education's Mandarin Excellence Programme will see some 5,000 secondary school students on track to becoming fluent in Chinese by 2020. This is part of a £10 million project in which students will learn Chinese for eight hours a week (four hours taught and four hours independent learning) (British Council, 2018; GOV.UK, 2018). The Education Development Trust (2016) also notes that some UK primary schools are also teaching Chinese.

As Ireland has not yet introduced Chinese as an examined subject, it is clear that much work is needed to develop a Chinese language curriculum for Irish secondary schools. Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) suggests that many modern foreign languages are in demand in terms of cross-sectorial skills and in particular, there is a growing need for speakers of Mandarin Chinese. In 2017, former Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, announced that Chinese would become a Leaving Certificate subject (the final exams taken in the Irish schooling system) within ten years (Department of Education and Skills, 2017c). As this will be the first formal teaching of Chinese at the secondary level in Ireland, effective teaching methods and a robust curriculum are required in order to allow students to achieve similar exit levels as other students who have studied Chinese as a foreign language (hereafter CFL) under an established curriculum, such as in the UK. However, before designing and implementing Chinese to the Irish education system, it is essential to understand the status quo of Chinese language teaching in Ireland. Then, recommendations appropriate for the Irish context can be made in relation to the development of the proposed Leaving Certificate Chinese course, with particular focus on the curriculum design.

The UK's earliest Sinology Professorship was established in Cambridge University in 1888 (University of Cambridge, 2018), yet it was probably during 2004-2005 that the formal schooling of Chinese language teaching (hereafter CLT) developed significantly in the UK (Zhang & Li, 2010). The earliest example of CLT in the Irish education system appeared in 2006 and 2007. Two Confucius Institutes, affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education, were set up in two respective universities, University College Dublin in the capital city and University College Cork in the southwest of Ireland, to actively promote Chinese language and culture in Ireland. Mandarin Chinese was introduced as a module in higher education institutions in Ireland, and in the years that followed, degree programmes were offered at several universities in Ireland. As indicated previously, China's promotion of Mandarin Chinese through Confucius Institutes and Classrooms significantly contributed to the development of CLT in Ireland, and indeed worldwide (Zhao & Huang, 2010). Further information on Confucius Institutes and Classrooms is highlighted later in this paper.

The current study aims to review the past and present of CLT in Ireland by analysing the previous and current trends in teaching Chinese. In looking at the history of CFL teaching in Ireland, the paper will demonstrate that the number of both formal and informal classes, as well as the number of students learning CFL, has risen over the past number of years, as a testament to the popularity and support of learning CFL here. In analysing data from secondary school CFL courses that are currently non-examined, as well as examining the descriptors of third-level modules that are currently examined in Ireland, the paper will highlight key pedagogical points that will allow for recommendations to be made for a proposed Leaving Certificate course that is currently in the planning stages in Ireland. This information is vital as the proposed CFL course will be the first State-examined Chinese course to be introduced to Irish secondary schools.

The paper will firstly investigate in greater depth the roles that Confucius Institutes play in promoting CLT in Ireland. Then, information relating to a short course in Chinese language and culture aimed at years one to three of secondary school as well as Chinese courses offered in seven third-level institutions will be reviewed, in order to provide a full picture of the current situation of teaching Chinese in Ireland at both secondary and tertiary levels. Survey data

collected in 2013-2017 will be analysed to show the development of CLT in Ireland and finally, after the present status of CLT in Ireland has been discussed, recommendations for the proposed State-examined Chinese Language curriculum in Ireland will be examined, including recommendations for bridging secondary and tertiary level CLT.

2 Confucius Institutes

From the late 1990s, the booming Irish economy during the 'Celtic Tiger' (period of rapid economic growth experienced by Ireland from the 1990s to late 2000s) made Ireland particularly attractive to immigrants (King-O'Riain, 2008; Pan, 2011; Ruhs, 2005). Being the only other English-speaking country in Europe, Ireland also became an attractive destination for Chinese students (Latham & Wu, 2013). According to the study of Chinese population distribution in Europe, the estimated number of Chinese immigrants in Ireland was 70,000 in 2011, an increase from approximately 60,000 in 2008, and seven times more than those in 1998 (ibid.). The Immigrant Council of Ireland (2017) highlights that a growth in multilingualism should be viewed as an asset, and not an obstacle, in society. Therefore, it is advocated that immigrants maintain their heritage language and culture (ibid.). Thus, the increased immigrants of Chinese origin have potentially pushed further the popularity of learning CFL in Ireland. Against this backdrop of the Chinese population growth in Ireland, as well as China's influential role in the global economy (World Bank Group, 2016), two Confucius Institutes were established in Ireland in 2006 and 2007 to actively promote Chinese language and culture.

The National Office of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, now renamed the Office of Chinese Language Council International, was founded in China in 1987. This office, commonly known by its Chinese abbreviation 'Hanban', involved 11 ministries of the Central Chinese Government (Zhao & Huang, 2010) and initiated the Confucius Institute programme (Starr, 2009) to promote and support the teaching of Chinese language and culture worldwide (Ruane, 2016). The programme was piloted in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in early 2004, after which the first Confucius Institute was formally launched in Korea later that year (Ruane, 2016; Zhu & Li, 2014). In 2014, Hanban (2014) reported that 500 Confucius Institutes and 1,000 Confucius Classrooms (a mainstream school whereby Chinese is embedded in the school curriculum) were to be launched in 134 countries over a 10-year period (Hanban, 2014). Two Confucius Institutes and 12 Confucius Classrooms were set up in Ireland, compared to 29 and 143 respectively in the UK.

The first Confucius Institute was established on September 26th, 2006, at University College of Dublin (hereafter UCD CI) providing support for the teaching of Chinese language and culture in the east of Ireland. One year later, in 2007, a second Confucius Institute opened in University College of Cork (henceforth UCC CI) to cover the west of Ireland. These Confucius Institutes were established within three years of the pilot programme that was rolled out in Uzbekistan. During this time, the Chinese population in Ireland grew significantly, while Ireland was also experiencing a period of economic boom as mentioned previously. Therefore, as the two Confucius Institutes were set up in a seemingly ideal time period for learning CFL, it may be the case that these two variables played a significant role in the promotion of CFL through the Confucius Institutes at this time. When the goal of each institute was compared, Table 1 demonstrates that the most prominent difference is that UCC CI clearly stated the importance of

developing CLT in Ireland, which is absent in the statement of UCD CI, although Chinese language is highlighted as an activity that UCD CI is involved with. Given UCC CI's focus on Chinese language education, survey results presented later in the paper were collected from schools participating in UCC CI teaching activities to understand the current trends of CLT in Ireland.

Table 1
A comparison of UCD CI and UCC CI goals

UCD Confucius Institute	**UCC Confucius Institute**
The mission of the UCD Confucius Institute for Ireland is to work with the Irish government, businesses and academia to develop stronger educational, cultural and commercial links between Ireland and China.	The Aim of UCC Confucius Institute is to strengthen educational cooperation between China and Ireland; support and promote the development of **Chinese language education**; and increase mutual understanding between the people of China and Ireland and, in particular, Shanghai and Cork.

One of the main functions of the Confucius Institutes is to provide teaching resources tailored to their respective institutions (Hanban, 2014). The degree programmes offered by UCC CI and UCD CI were quite different from the outset. UCD CI offered an undergraduate degree in Business with Chinese and by 2009 there were a total of 45 students registered for the degree programme (UCD CI, 2009). In contrast, a Bachelor of Arts in Chinese Studies was initially only offered by UCC CI. By 2009, another two BA degrees were offered (Chinese Studies, Commerce with Chinese), as well as an MA and a PhD in Chinese Studies, with a total of 165 registered students (UCC CI, 2009). However, the total number of students under the UCD CI in 2016 surpassed that of UCC CI's total number of students as this final number actually includes students from three programmes offered in UCD: Business with Chinese; French with Chinese; and Diploma in Teaching Chinese. In addition to this, the final number of students includes those registered for the Computing with Chinese course offered in Technological University Dublin (UCD CI, 2016). The total number of students in the UCC CI in 2016 includes only those registered for the courses offered in the institute (UCC CI, 2016).

Given the larger population of students in secondary schools, the major expansion of CFL courses actually occurred at the secondary level, albeit without State-exam status. UCD CI delivered courses to four local schools from 2009: Belvedere College; Newpark Comprehensive School; Loreto Secondary School and; Holy Child Secondary School (UCD CI, 2009), although the exact number of students taking these Chinese language and culture courses is not known. UCC CI offered Chinese language courses to 24 local schools in 2009 whereby more than 800 pupils learned Mandarin Chinese at this time (UCC CI, 2009). By 2016, 53 secondary schools and 7,011 pupils were benefitting from courses provided by UCC CI, while UCD CI delivered courses to 4,750 pupils and 102 schools (UCC CI, 2016; UCD CI, 2016).

3 Junior cycle short course in Chinese language and culture

Some of the Confucius Institute teaching activities as previously mentioned were implemented as part of an introductory short course in Chinese language and culture. This course, entitled

'Chinese Language and Culture', comprises 100 hours of learning and aims 'to enable students to reach basic proficiency levels in spoken and written Mandarin Chinese, while developing cultural and intercultural awareness' (Curriculum Online, 2017). This course was developed as a set of guidelines, and as a result the content and teaching approaches naturally differ among schools. The 10-year strategy for improving foreign language skills of Irish students, *Languages Connect*, stated that the newly proposed Leaving Certificate CFL course would follow on from the junior cycle short course (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a, 2017b; see also Donnelly, 2017).

While Confucius Institutes provide teachers to teach this specific Chinese language and culture course (and other non-specific courses) in secondary schools, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment created the short course guidelines and will also be responsible for the planning of the Leaving Certificate course (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a). The short course focuses on four main areas of language and culture: personal settings; public situations; school and related settings and; Chinese and young global citizens. While it is unlikely that language and culture can be separated, the course description states that 70% of the teaching should be directed towards language and 30% towards culture. However, it is difficult to know how this is achieved and measured. The task-based approach is suggested to be adopted in the language learning and teaching, and the language learning outcomes also seem to imply that students should achieve a balanced knowledge of both oral and written Chinese. In terms of proficiency, the course specification proposes:

> The level of personal proficiency to be achieved in the short course is broadly aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A1.1 for speaking and listening, with a lower level for reading and writing (Curriculum Online, 2017).

Interestingly, it seems that the CEFR was set out to provide a framework of reference for languages that do not have a logographic writing system, like Chinese. For example, the CEFR does not differentiate words and characters. Therefore, it cannot be applied directly to logographic languages such as Chinese. The European Benchmarking Chinese Language (EBCL) project funded by the European Commission was therefore carried out in 2010-2012 to create a benchmarking framework for Chinese language based upon the CEFR. Some Can-do statements and guidelines for Chinese language teaching and learning have been published by the project team since 2012 (EBCL website). However, even if the level indicated by the short course uses the outcomes of EBCL as a reference, A1.1 is the lowest level of a language's proficiency. It is therefore extremely ambiguous when the learning outcomes in relation to reading and writing are even lower than A1.1 in the short course.

More importantly, as mentioned, the writing system of Chinese is logographic in nature and so the learning of Chinese language usually means the study of Chinese characters. In addition, it also has a Romanised form – pinyin – to represent its phonology (Shen & Ke, 2007). Pinyin therefore enables those who are familiar with the Roman alphabet to pronounce each Chinese character correctly (Shi, 2016). Although written Chinese is set to be one of the junior cycle short course aims, it only vaguely indicates that students need to 'learn to understand pinyin and some basic characters' (Curriculum Online, 2017). It remains unclear to what extent pinyin should be taught in order to assist the teaching of characters which are what the actual

Chinese writing system refers to. The ambiguity of teaching characters and/or pinyin can also be observed from CLT at tertiary level, as highlighted later in this paper. Indeed, it is vital to clarify this at the micro-level and macro-level of CLT for success and continuity in teaching Chinese.

At the micro-level of CLT, there have been concerns with the effect of an over-reliance on pinyin and reading development in Chinese. Chinese writing is different from alphabetic writing since the Chinese characters 'are packed into a square configuration, possessing a high, nonlinear visual complexity' (Tan et al., 2005, p. 8781). It therefore does not provide systematic and reliable grapheme-phoneme correspondences (Xu, Chang, Zhang, & Perfetti, 2013). Specifically, the basic Chinese writing units (i.e., strokes) are not mapped to phonemes (Guan et al., 2011). In addition, Chinese consists of a large number of homophones, which allows a syllable to correspond to different characters with various meanings. Therefore, phonological information, such as pinyin, is unlikely to be as reliable as the orthographic form of a character in reading achievement. While there are benefits to using pinyin in assisting learners with their pronunciation skills, at the same time it is essential to learn Chinese characters in order to develop skills not only in writing Chinese characters, but also in reading Chinese text. Pinyin can therefore be seen as a tool to assist learning correct pronunciation of characters, but should not be relied on for all Chinese written communication.

At the macro-level of CLT, there are three main types of curriculum depending on the timing of introducing characters to CFL learners and the relative amount of time allocated to oral practice and character writing (He & Jiao, 2010). The first one is a 'unity' curriculum which aims to simultaneously develop all four language skills (i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening) of learners. The 'delay' curriculum focuses on introducing pinyin and oral development while delaying learning to read and write (Packard, 1990). The 'lag' curriculum prioritises the oral and aural development with some Chinese writing, whereby a temporary lag with Chinese writing exists. As mentioned, the current junior cycle short course simply offers guidelines for content to be taught during the approximate 100 hours of prescribed teaching. In addition, a specific mode of Chinese character-teaching or learning is not mentioned within the third-level module descriptors. In other words, both second-level and third-level institutions are lacking in information on curriculum design for CLT. Guidance therefore needs to be provided on this curriculum design at all levels to allow for favourable language learning outcomes and cohesion between the two levels of education.

The previous sections have scrutinised the background of Chinese language in Ireland and show that there is a need to understand the current state of CLT in order to contribute to the curriculum development of the newly-proposed Leaving Certificate Chinese language course. Therefore, a survey was conducted by UCC CI in 2013-2017 to offer an overview of the development of CLT in Ireland. In addition to in-depth statistical analyses of CLT at the secondary level, the paper will also investigate the Chinese language courses offered at tertiary level from a qualitative perspective, in order to provide a comprehensive examination of the CLT in Ireland and make further recommendations in relation to the bridging of secondary and tertiary level CLT.

4 CLT surveys in 2013-2017

As demonstrated earlier, UCC CI has the largest number of students and collaborating schools since 2009 and has prioritised and promoted Chinese language education since its founding. The two Chinese courses attended by the participants of the current research are all provided by UCC CI. One course refers to the junior cycle short course which has already been outlined, while the other category of Chinese language and culture course sees participants in an optional year in secondary schools (transition year) learning Chinese in structured programmes that differ from school to school. Rather than following a strict curriculum, the two courses suggest a laissez-faire attitude to CLT among various schools where CFL courses are available. As a result, it is necessary to consult the survey results in order to examine the current CLT situation in Ireland, which may contribute to the refinements of future CLT guidelines.

The surveys have been conducted in approximately 48 local secondary schools since September 2013. All participants were aged 11-17, with more than 50% female participants. As all participants were enrolled in various Irish secondary schools, the majority were also learning another foreign language that was not Chinese, while the majority mother tongue was English. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The questionnaires were given to head teachers or coordinators of the relevant local schools and were asked to distribute them among pupils at the end of a Chinese course, usually at the end of the first or second semester. All participants were asked to complete the questionnaire on a volunteer basis. In collecting the data from CFL students in various schools in Ireland, a clearer picture of the CLT situation could be demonstrated. The number of questionnaires returned by participants from each survey is given in Table 2.

Table 2
Participant numbers per year

Year	Number of participants			
	Male	**Female**	**Missing & Unclassified**	**Total**
2013-14 (pilot)	n/a*	n/a*	n/a*	794
2014-15	318	295	5	618
2015-16	440	570	8	1018
2016-17	416	851	6	1273

*Note: The survey was distributed to all schools on a pilot basis in 2013-2014. This information was not collected in the pilot study.

The questionnaire collected basic biographical information including age, gender and mother tongue, and then focused on two areas: (1) the CLT learning situation, and (2) CLT pedagogy. The survey results will be outlined below according to these two categories, while the information will later be analysed to provide some recommendations for the proposed Leaving Certificate course and some future research.

4.1 CLT Learning Situation

The following questions relate to the learning situation of CLT in Ireland.

4.1.1 Chinese language teaching time per week.

Figure 1 shows that the majority of respondents studied Chinese for 40-80 minutes per week, and there was an increase in this category from 51.6% in 2014-2015 to 60.08% in 2016-2017. Similarly, the number of participants studying between 80-120 minutes per week also increased. These figures no doubt reflect an increase in genuine student interest in Chinese since schools offer these Chinese classes in response to student up-take. This question was not asked in the 2013-2014 pilot survey and so no data are reported from this year.

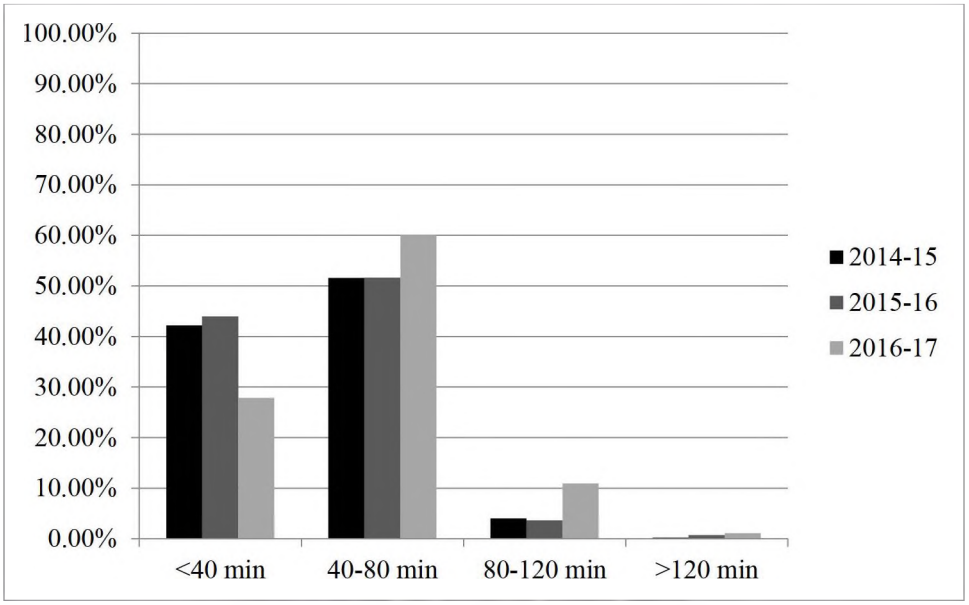


Figure 1. Hours spent learning Chinese

4.1.2 Reasons to learn Chinese

The responses to this question focus on the reasons participants chose to study Chinese. Two reasons dominate: the participants mainly had an interest in the language and culture or, most consistently; they mentioned the fact that learning Chinese was compulsory in their school.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the results from 2013-2014 are different from those of other years, in that far more participants gave 'interest' as their reason for learning Chinese (80% as opposed to 27%, 29% and 32% in subsequent years). This is probably due to the fact that the aforementioned Chinese language and culture short course was introduced to the junior cycle in 2014 (Department of Education and Skills, 2012), therefore prompting students to mostly answer that learning Chinese was compulsory for them.

4.1.3 Desire to continue learning Chinese in the future

The responses to this question in Figure 3 are particularly interesting in light of the finding that the vast majority of learners from 2014-2015 and 2016-2017 reported that they were learning Chinese because it was compulsory rather than because they were interested in the subject. In contrast, a clear majority reported over these same years that they wished to continue learning

Chinese, while the figures for 2013-2014 show that the majority were not keen to continue. Students appear to be motivated to continue to study Chinese language once they have been exposed to it through a compulsory course.

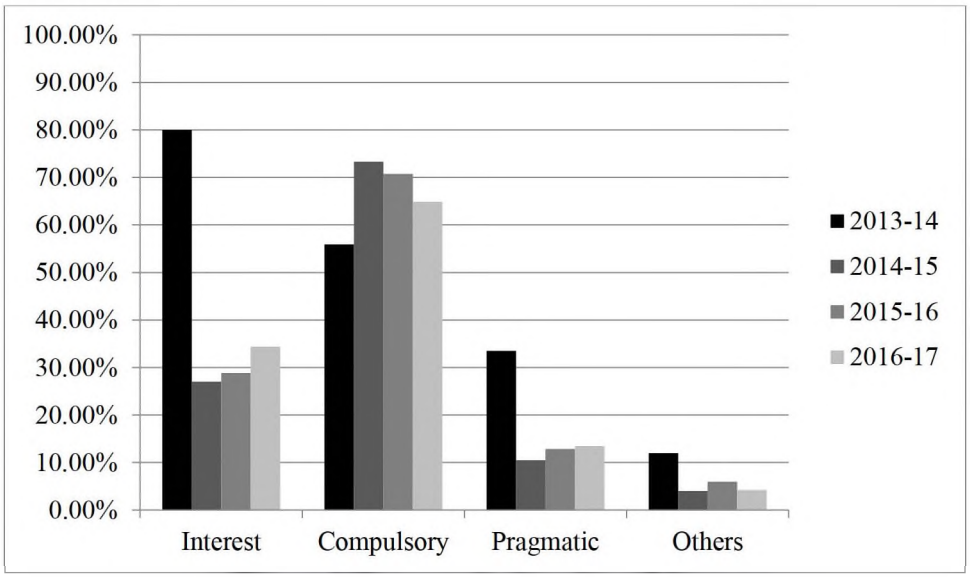


Figure 2. Reasons for learning Chinese

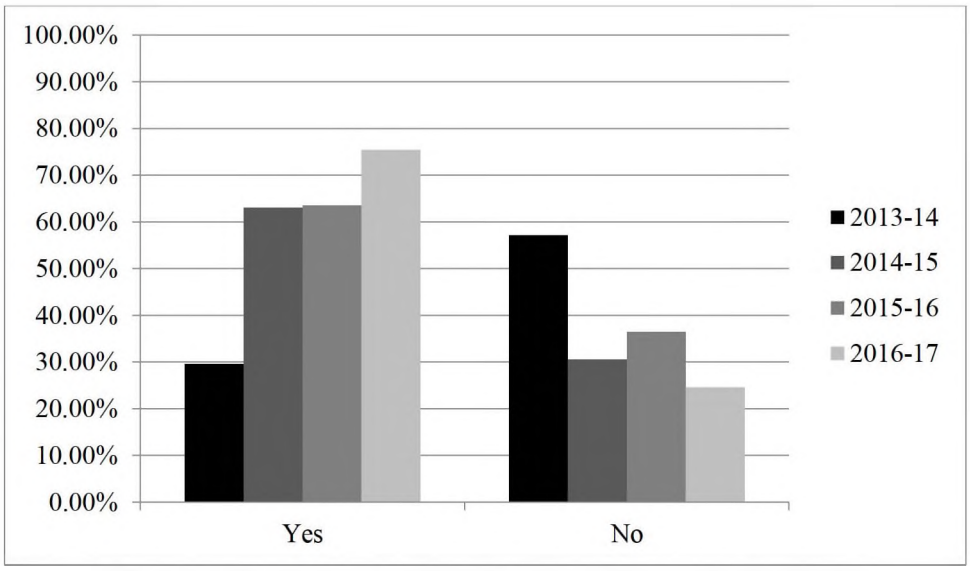


Figure 3. Desire to continue learning Chinese in the future

4.1.4 Other foreign languages learned at school

This question was included to contextualize the current situation and future development of teaching CFL in Ireland. That is, it was worthwhile to examine other foreign languages learned and favoured in order to gauge what these trends might bring for the future of CFL. As shown in Figure 4, while the overall numbers of students learning Chinese increased, the number of students learning French dropped from 70.28% to 59.42% in 2013-2017. In contrast, there seems

to be a rise in the number of students learning Spanish within this period, increasing from 12.09% to 17.20%.

The developing trend for another Asian language offered in schools, Japanese, (which has been offered as an optional State-examined subject since the academic year 2002-2003) remains unclear, as does the development of Italian, German and Latin language courses. It is likely that these subjects have a relatively stable intake of students each year, and given that Chinese also demonstrates this increase in student numbers bodes well for student up-take in the proposed Chinese State-examined course.

Interestingly, a number of participants have placed Irish, the national language of Ireland, in the category of 'others'. The foreign languages listed are options in schools whereby one foreign language is usually studied. However, it is not compulsory in all schools to study a foreign language for the Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate exams. Therefore, given that Irish is the only other compulsory language in school apart from the vast majority of students' mother tongue, English – with the exception of extreme cases such as severe language learning difficulties or non-Irish students – it is not surprising that they have listed Irish as another 'foreign language'.

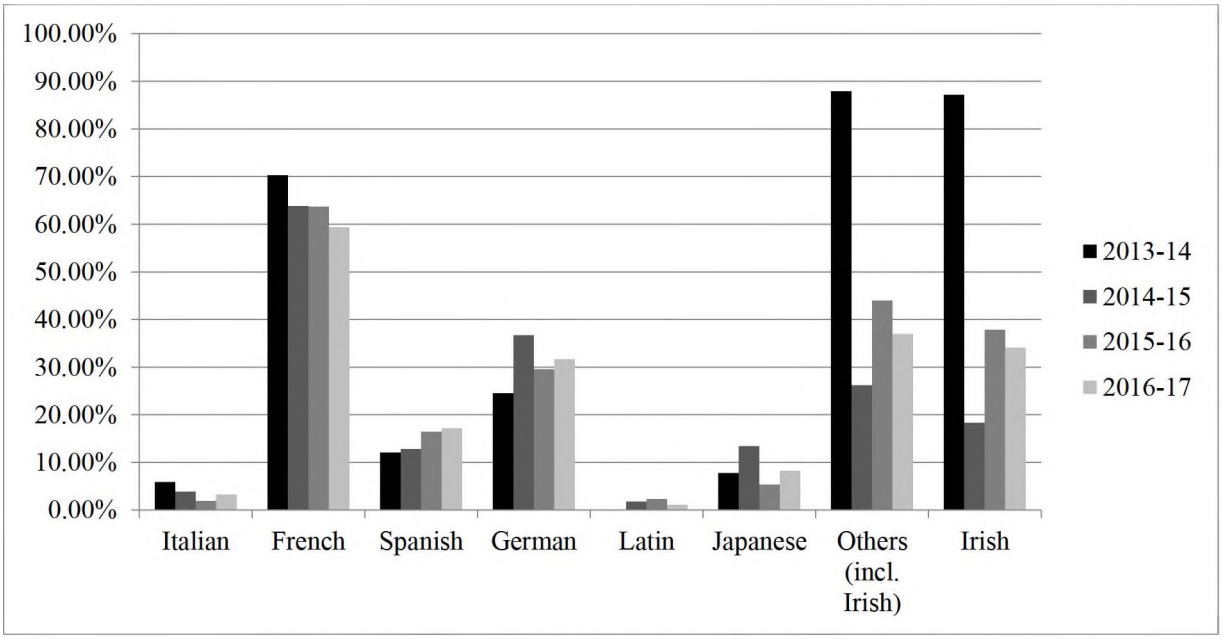


Figure 4. Other foreign languages learned in school

4.1.5 Favourite language course

This question was not asked in the 2013-2014 questionnaire and so the data from the following years are reported here. Figure 5 demonstrates that the percentage of answers declaring Chinese to be the favourite language subject is comparably high (21.26%, 17.65%, and 21.29% from 2014 respectively). Yet, given the fact that the survey was conducted at the end of a Chinese course, it is unsurprising that these participants indicated their preference of Chinese to other languages.

Among the answers to this question, a large number of participants left 'English' in the category of 'others'. Especially in 2015-2016, approximately one-third of participants named 'English' as their favourite language subject. This could be representative of the growing cultural diversity in Ireland's secondary schools, suggesting that diversifying the languages offered in schools as proposed by the former Minister for Education is extremely timely.

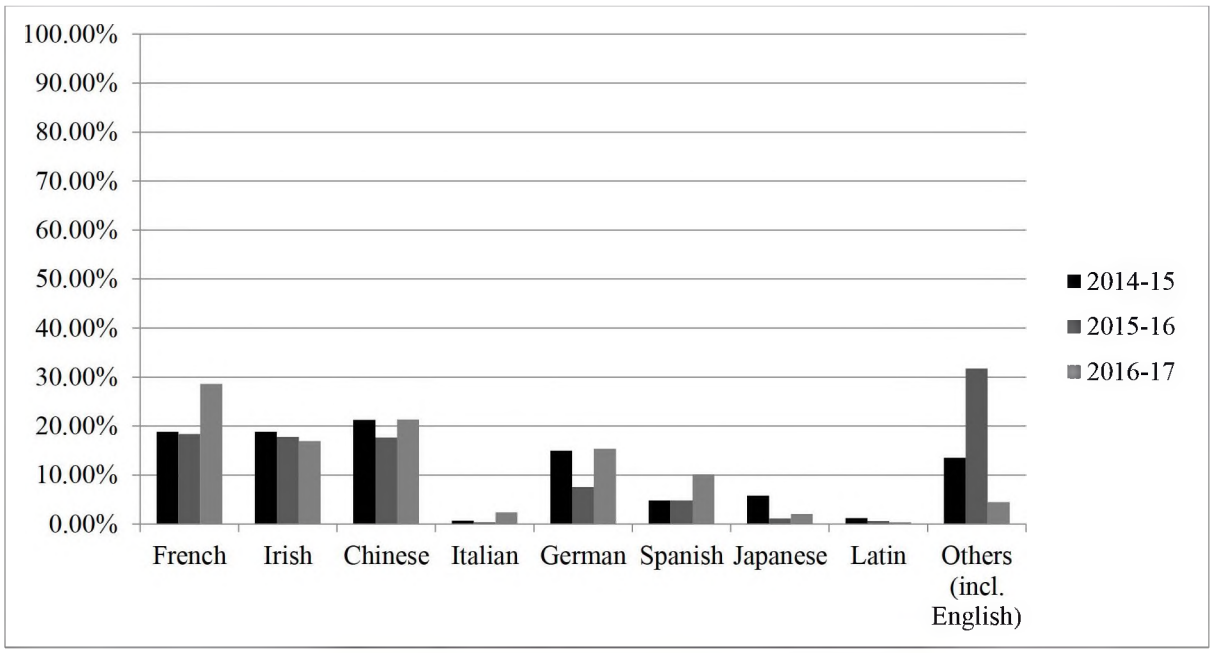


Figure 5. Favourite language course in school

4.2 CLT Pedagogy

The following questions relate to the CLT pedagogy situation in the classroom.

4.2.1 Medium of instruction

This question relates to the medium of instruction in CLT, and was first added to the 2014-2015 survey. The percentage of teachers using English as the instructional medium decreases (44.5% - 36.88%), as shown in Figure 6, while a mixture of English and Chinese gradually becomes more prominent (49.8% - 58.13%) over the years 2014-2015, 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. This no doubt reflects the fact that Chinese was being offered mainly at beginner level.

4.2.2 Types of homework

This question focuses on the types of homework that participants conducted for their respective Chinese course, and Figure 7 shows a rise in grammatical exercises and group projects.

Participants were also asked to state their homework preference (see Figure 8) whereby the majority preferred 'group projects' with 'grammar practice' being the next preferred option. In the aforementioned 10-year strategy plan, conducting projects to improve language learning outcomes is advocated (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a), suggesting that these homework tasks, when implemented, should be well-received by students. Interestingly, between a fifth and a quarter of students put 'copying and writing pinyin/characters' as their preferred homework option, even though this aspect of Chinese language learning is often

considered tedious and labour-intensive. Again, this is a promising finding as many researchers have expressed the need for repetition when learning Chinese characters (e.g. Naka, 1998; Naka & Naoi, 1995; Xu & Padilla, 2013).

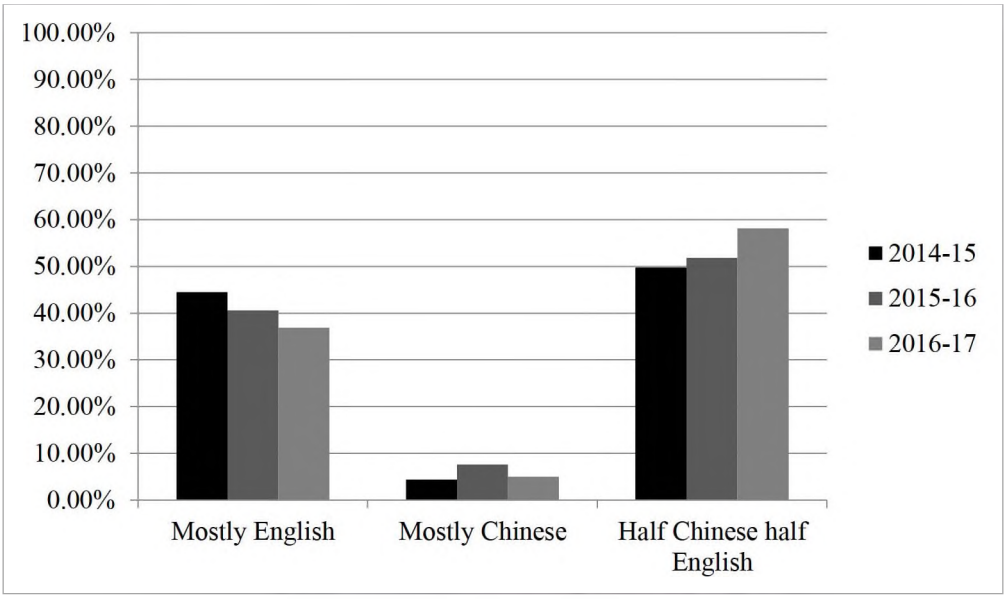


Figure 6. Medium of instruction

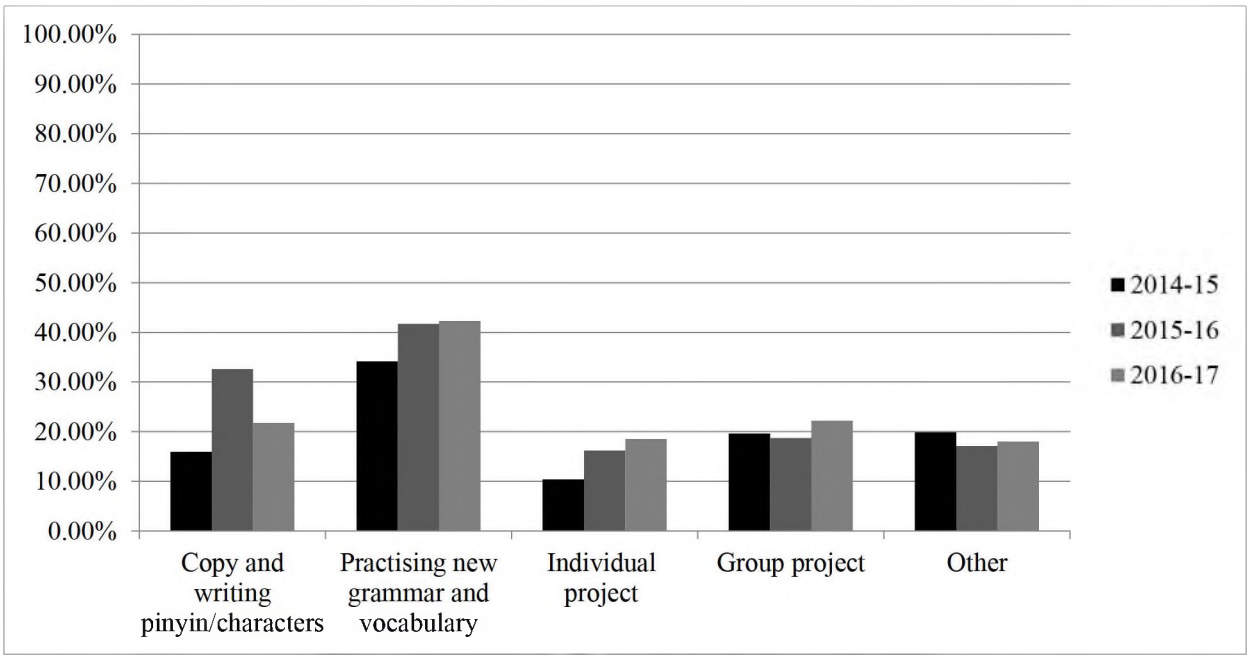


Figure 7. Homework conducted by participants

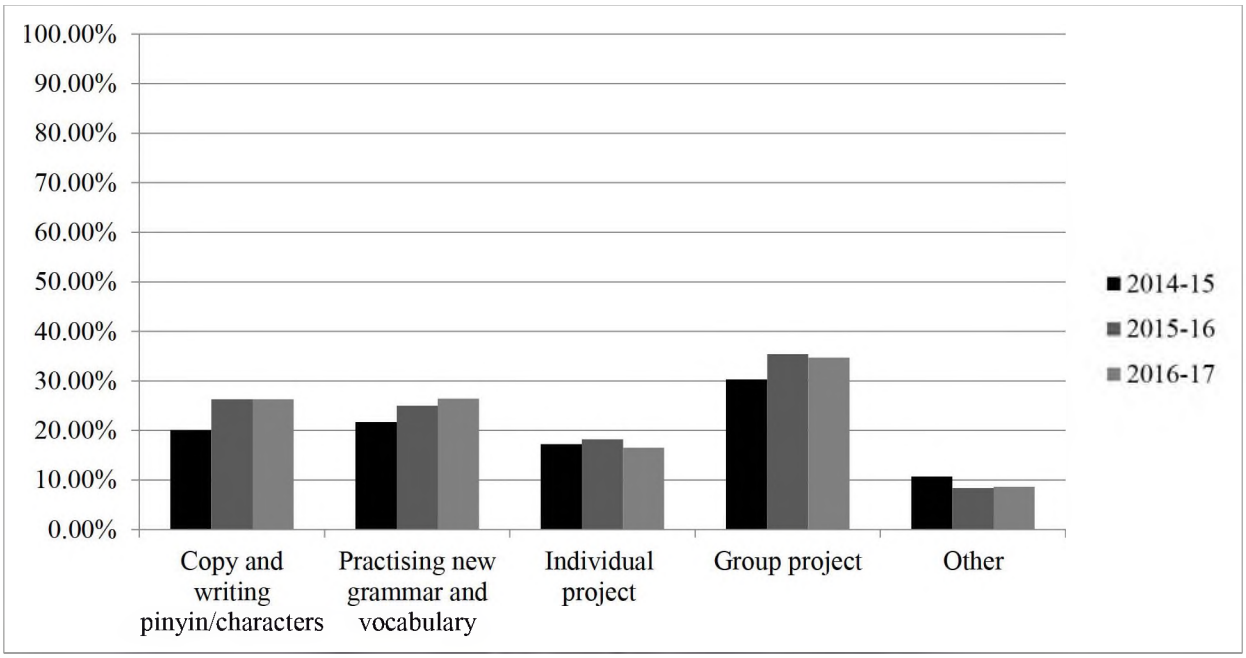


Figure 8. Homework favoured by participants

5 Chinese language offered at tertiary level

The previously-reported survey data of 2013-2017 provides an overview of CLT development in Irish secondary schools. No such survey has been undertaken with students enrolled in CFL courses in Ireland's institutes of higher education. Therefore, to get some idea of Chinese language provision in third-level education, the module descriptors of these examined CFL courses for beginner learners were compared. Key details are summarised in Table 3.

As Table 3 shows, most module descriptors were quite similar in claiming that upon completion, students would have developed basic reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Although not specifically mentioned, it is a common practice that the homework tasks conducted in a course are usually an extension of the content learned in class, and therefore were likely to include reading, writing, speaking and listening activities. This content indeed coincides with the homework tasks of the second-level Chinese course.

Of the seven institutions listed in Table 3, five are universities. This means that already, of the seven universities that are currently established in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2017b), five are offering beginner's Chinese courses which demonstrates the popularity of learning Chinese here. Most of the modules listed in Table 3 form part of a specific degree with other subjects such as translation, business and law. The availability of such courses and degree programmes also highlights the fact that the Irish education system indeed values CFL as a subject.

Table 3
Irish third-level institution Chinese module descriptors

Third-level Institution	**Learning activities**	**In-class hours per week**	**Exit level/ Learning outcomes**
Number one (year-long module)	Reading, writing, speaking, listening skills developed. Role plays	6	Understanding of Chinese culture, listening skills, reading skills, production of short texts and simple translations. 600 characters
Number two (year-long module)	Basic oral productive and receptive skills developed	8	Basic conversation. Ability to ask, understand, and respond to questions
Number three (semester one module)	Pinyin, characters and radicals, basic conversation, basic sentence structure and order	4	Identify sounds and spellings of pinyin, repeat learned words and sentences, understanding of Chinese culture. Recognise 100 characters Recall 50 characters
Number four (semester one module)	Reading, writing, speaking, listening skills developed. Focus on grammar, repetitions, dictations, re-creations of dialogues, group conversations and role plays	7	Understanding of pinyin, ability to recognise some characters, basic conversation, basic writing skills. 100 characters
Number five (semester one module)	Basic productive and receptive skills in Mandarin	4	Aims to bring students to common European proficiency level A1.1 in productive skills and A1.2 in receptive skills
Number six (year-long module)	Reading, writing, speaking, listening skills developed. Focus on grammar	7	Basic conversation, recognise and recall simple characters, answer basic questions 200 characters
Number seven (year-long module)	Basic writing and speaking, basic communication, pronunciation, tones, basic sentence structures, high frequency appearing characters. Focus on online learning	3	Basic conversation, read simple texts, master pinyin, ask questions, write basic characters. Achieve CEFR level A1 proficiency, (HSK level 1) 150 words

5.1 Chinese characters and medium of instruction

While the module descriptors mention various exercises to be conducted during class hours in order to develop students' basic communication skills, there is little mention of how characters are taught, or indeed what the medium of instruction is. The number of prescribed characters to be learned during these beginner courses typically range from 100 to 200 characters, though one

module proposes 600 characters to be learned over a year, meaning that the exit levels of third-level students will vary after completing a beginner's module. While characters are argued to be the most difficult aspect of learning Chinese, it seems apparent that specific learning and teaching techniques could be mentioned.

5.2 Chinese language teaching time per week

The contact hours per week were also not consistent, ranging from three hours to eight hours of classes per week. This will also naturally have an effect on the exit levels of beginner learners; however, expectations of learning outcomes also appear to be rather different in some cases. For example, module two suggests that after eight hours of classes per week over one academic year, students will achieve very basic communication skills. On the other hand, module seven claims that after one academic year of students attending just three hours of classes per week, they will not only achieve basic communication, but also master pinyin and learn 150 characters.

This demonstrates the differing exit levels of beginner learners in third-level institutions. Indeed, when the Leaving Certificate Chinese language course has been introduced to secondary schools, it will be necessary to create a dual pathway in third-level institutions whereby students who have already studied Chinese at secondary level will not need to take the beginners course. Further analysis can be seen in the following section.

6 Discussion

The current paper has demonstrated the growing popularity of learning CFL in Ireland, while at the same time has identified the somewhat laissez-faire attitude to CLT in secondary schools. The discussion in this section presents the findings on current CLT trends and teaching practices in Ireland from the perspectives of both general curriculum design and specific pedagogical recommendations, while also shedding light on CFL learning and teaching elsewhere.

In relation to the curriculum design, two important findings from both the survey results and comparison of third-level CFL modules suggest that: (a) CLT in Ireland is in the early stage of its development compared to the established curricula in the UK and Australia, and (b) at both secondary and tertiary levels, coherence for both curricula of Chinese language is crucial.

In the context of Brexit, Ireland may become an attractive destination for migration, business, trade and tourism as it becomes the only English-speaking country left in the European Union. As a result, this may also further push the multilingualism trend in language teaching. It is therefore vital that the future Leaving Certificate Chinese language curriculum equips students with language skills comparable to those of students from a more established Chinese curriculum, for example, in the UK where Chinese has been developed into a new GCSE examined subject for non-native speakers from the early 2000s, and in Australia where Chinese has been taught since the 1950s (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013; British Association for Chinese Studies, 2003). In the UK, students complete a course starting from the beginner level in the GCSE curriculum, focusing on reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in various contexts, while the A level curriculum allows students to continue to study the language in a broader context as well as incorporating advanced cultural topics such as literature and film (Pearson Education Ltd., 2018a; 2018b). In 2015/2016, Chinese was taught

in 13% of state secondary schools and 46% of independent secondary schools, while in 2015, 3,100 students sat the Chinese language GCSE paper (Education Development Trust, 2016). In the case of Australia, students can learn Chinese from their first year of primary school at the beginner level, however there are also opportunities to learn Chinese as a beginner in later years (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2018). In the Australian curriculum, focus is on understanding and communicating, while the use of English is phased out as the students advance (ibid.). In the year 2015/2016, 172,000 students were learning CFL in Australian schools (Orton, 2017).

In contrast, CLT in Ireland is at the infancy stage with the aim of introducing Chinese as a State-examined subject in 2020 (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a). The existing junior cycle short course, other transition-year courses and third-level CFL courses in Ireland are all lacking coherence in class-time hours, how characters are taught, and the medium of instruction, to name a few. For example, the survey results show that secondary school students were mostly learning Chinese for 40 to 80 minutes per week. Comparing this to countries with a more established Chinese language curriculum, it is seen that the UK plans to allocate eight hours of teaching per week for some 5,000 students in the aforementioned Mandarin Excellence programme (four hours in-class and four hours independent study) (GOV.UK, 2018), whereas the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2013) and Möllering (2016) note that Chinese requires more hours than other commonly-studied European languages when seeking proficiency. While French requires 600 hours of learning, it is recommended that Chinese is allotted 2,220 hours in order to gain proficiency (Möllering, 2016). In this way, and in line with aforementioned UK plans, the proposed curriculum in Ireland must allocate significantly more time to teaching Chinese than what is highlighted in the surveys, which currently stands at approximately 48 hours of teaching over two years (24 weeks of teaching over two years). In addition, the time allocations must be consistent across all schools, so that students have the opportunity to enter third-level Chinese language courses at equivalent levels.

Nevertheless, an early stage of CLT means that there is an opportunity to develop a well thought-out curriculum for Chinese language learning. One of the main challenges found in the current study is how to bridge the Chinese language study in secondary schools with that at the tertiary level. In order to do so, it appears a logical step would be to introduce a dual pathway in the tertiary level. For example, (1) a strand to facilitate school-leavers who have taken Chinese as a Leaving Certificate subject, and (2) a strand for those who are complete beginners and wish to study Chinese at university. For Strand (2), more intense hours will be required in the first year in order to allow all students from both strands to be of the same standard upon reaching year two. This merging of strands will probably be necessary due to a limitation in the number of qualified teaching staff and other various resources in Ireland.

In addition to the curriculum design, the findings also highlight two key pedagogical points that would enable recommendations to be made in relation to the proposed State-examined curriculum. First of all, the short course in Chinese Language and Culture suggests adopting the task-based approach to teaching and learning, while project-based tasks were indicated by the survey results to be the most preferred type of homework. The task-based approach to teaching and learning emphasises the acquisition of language in communication skills, independent learning and focusing on the learning process rather than product (Du, 2012;

Thomas, 2017). The project-based approach to teaching and learning focuses on incorporating a project in the foreign language classroom (Stoller, 2006), which also promotes independence in the learner. Du (2012) proposes to integrate the task-based teaching with the project-based learning in a method called Task-Based PBL. This method of Task-Based PBL appears to be in line with two language teaching approaches called content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and communicative language teaching (CLT) (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Consistent with current studies in language learning pedagogy, the current data demonstrates the shift from grammar-based methods to a more communicative approach to teaching languages in the classroom. Richards (2017) concludes that a teaching method comprising a balance between both the product and process when learning a foreign language is vital for successful acquisition. Considering the questionnaire responses of the current paper in relation to the tasks conducted for homework and those more favourable to participants, the combination of two innovative teaching and learning methods might be one of the future pedagogical developments of the CLT for Irish students and CFL learners in general.

The second important aspect that needs to be clarified for CLT in Ireland is the study of Chinese characters. The number of characters learned at secondary and tertiary level is currently not fixed. For the future formal Chinese language curriculum for secondary schools, the syllabus must be set in a way that all students are learning the same minimum number of characters in order to correspond with the State examinations. As a result, additional intermediate courses at the tertiary level will also need to be developed to cater for the ranging needs of future students as mentioned previously. An established and detailed learning objective for Chinese character acquisition can contribute to bridging the current gap in coherency for the tertiary curriculum, while also establishing coherency in the secondary curriculum from the onset.

Trends in three of the more popular foreign languages in Irish secondary schools (French, German, and Spanish) show an increase in student take-up numbers from 2011-2016 (French from 57.2% to 57.3%, German from 16% to 19.3%, Spanish from 12.4% to 17%) (Eurostat, 2018). The participants of the current study also increasingly favoured these foreign languages over the three years, while Japanese, Italian and Latin were also studied. Therefore, despite a growing interest in Chinese, it will be crucial for future CFL programmes to motivate students to learn Chinese along with well-established and highly popular foreign languages, in order to promote multilingualism as the 10-year strategy plan suggests. The great challenge of learning Chinese characters may easily impact students' progress and motivation. As a result, it is vital that efforts are made to introduce a character-teaching method that will enable learners to successfully acquire characters without interfering with their development of reading, speaking and listening skills. A recent study (Osborne, 2018; Osborne, Zhang & Zhang, 2018) examined four methods of teaching Chinese characters to beginner learners whereby each method may have positive effects on different aspects of the study of Chinese language. For example, it was found that repeatedly writing characters until memorisation has occurred (rote memorisation) and using colour to denote a character's tone (character colour-coding) were potentially beneficial when learning Chinese characters. For future research, it is worthwhile to explore further these methods for learning Chinese characters in an effort to not only cope with the current lack of character-teaching guidelines, but also in a bid to ensure the learning outcomes of beginner CFL learners for the proposed curriculum.

7 Conclusion

The current paper has demonstrated that CLT in Ireland is continuing to grow in popularity. This is evident through the growing number of secondary schools providing some form of Chinese language and culture classes to an increasing number of pupils. In addition to this, seven third-level institutions in Ireland are now offering beginner's Chinese courses, be it as part of a degree programme or as a module. Undoubtedly, the Confucius Institutes of UCD and UCC have played a fundamental role in these two educational advances since 2006 and 2007.

With the consequences of Brexit looming, it is likely that Ireland, being the only English-speaking country that will remain in the European Union, will become a more popular destination for emigrants, tourists and businesses. This in turn has the potential to further push multilingualism in language teaching, particularly in relation to Chinese immigrants, if the numbers continue to rise in the coming years, as is the current trend.

Languages Connect advocates for more students learning foreign languages in schools, and with this, the introduction of Chinese language as a two-year State-examined course. In addition, Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) has specifically mentioned a growing need for individuals with the capacity to communicate in Mandarin Chinese. Yet, students who take this proposed Leaving Certificate course are likely to be behind current global standards of school-leavers who have been learning CFL for a much longer period in a more established curriculum, such as in the UK and Australia. Of course, it is hugely positive that there is a plan underway to introduce CFL as an examined subject in Irish schools. In conducting the current research, some recommendations were made in relation to creating this curriculum; including dedicating more time to Chinese classes than the current trends as seen in the survey results. Countries with an established Chinese language curriculum such as the UK and Australia will indeed assist in informing hours of class per week as well as content to be covered at various stages. Additionally, project-based group work and copying exercises are most well-received among students learning CFL in the current study, and this may be taken into account when developing a future CFL curriculum, along with Task-Based PBL as mentioned in the Discussion. The current third-level module descriptors and junior cycle short course fail to outline in any way how Chinese characters in particular are expected to be learned. It is therefore imperative that a specific mode of character-learning is taken into consideration when designing a Chinese language course, as well as the number of characters to be learned. In order to allow for the most favourable learning outcomes, future research is needed on the topic of teaching methods and medium of instruction, particularly with rote memorisation and character colour-coding. This would allow for insights to be made in relation to CLT and therefore further inform the curriculum design for the future Chinese language curriculum in Ireland.

Some limitations of the research mainly concern the data collection phase. For example, the survey was piloted in 2013-2014 and therefore some data are missing from this year since the questionnaire was adjusted after the pilot study. However, given the trends of the other years, it is unlikely that this has impacted the outcomes. The current study indeed only scrutinised the descriptions of Chinese courses at tertiary level. Future research can focus on the CLT practices in university classrooms, either in the form of a survey similar to the one for secondary schools

in the current study, or using interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the Chinese language curriculum from the perspectives of university teachers and learners.

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