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CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN GERMAN UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND OPTIMISATION APPROACHES

Lei Wang[i]
Adjunct Lecturer,
Centre for Language and Intercultural Competence,
Hof University of Applied Sciences,
Germany

Abstract:
Taking universities of applied sciences in Germany as the research context, this study analyses the core challenges faced by Chinese language courses in terms of setting teaching objectives, structuring textbook content, adopting teaching methods, and ensuring course sustainability, based on the authors' teaching practices and observations. The study finds that, although the existing textbooks are academically rigorous, their career-oriented design does not sufficiently address the professional development needs of local students. Moreover, the use of certain fonts may hinder beginners' cognitive acquisition in learning Chinese character writing. In addition, the administrative requirement of a 'minimum number of students' poses difficulties in maintaining continuity in teaching programmes, which not only disrupts the systematic nature of language learning but also dampens student motivation. To address these issues, the article proposes a multidimensional approach involving the reconstruction of teaching materials, institutional adjustments, and the optimisation of pedagogical details. The aim is to promote the high-quality and sustainable development of Chinese language courses in universities of applied sciences, and to provide practical support for the deeper integration of Chinese and German cultural education.

Keywords: Germany; universities of applied sciences; Chinese language teaching; textbook; sustainability; professionally-oriented education

1. Introduction

The German higher education system is renowned for its distinctive "dual-pillar" structure, comprising 'university of applied sciences' (Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften, abbreviated as HAW, also referred to as Fachhochschule) and traditional 'comprehensive university' (Universität) as its two main pillars. This system embodies

[i] Correspondence: email leiwang.drsc@gmail.com

the German educational philosophy, which emphasises the equal importance of academic research and vocational practice. As of 2024, there are 249 universities of applied sciences within Germany, which is twice the number of comprehensive universities (HRK, 2024). In contrast to comprehensive universities, which emphasise basic research and theoretical construction, universities of applied sciences are practice-oriented and focus on the development of highly adaptable and practically oriented human resources. Therefore, the curricula of universities of applied sciences usually focus closely on the practical needs of industry, covering a wide range of application fields such as engineering, economic management, social work, media design, information technology, and so on. These universities play a key role in the economic and social development of the region, especially in the training of technical and managerial talents needed by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

With the parallel development of globalisation and multi-polarity, intercultural communicative competence has become one of the core components of talent cultivation in modern universities. Language education is not only a means of knowledge transfer, but also an important vehicle for cultural understanding, value recognition, and the development of cooperative abilities (Forsman, 2012). In order to enhance students' international outlook and intercultural communication skills, almost all universities of applied sciences in Germany have established their own language centres (Sprachenzentrum) and offer a wide range of foreign language courses. These programmes include not only 'General English', 'Technical English', and 'German as a Foreign Language' (Deutsch als Fremdsprache, DaF), but also a broad spectrum of other foreign languages such as French, Spanish, Russian, Turkish, and Chinese, and are designed to meet the diversified developmental needs of students. All undergraduate and postgraduate students at the university are free to choose relevant courses according to their personal interests and professional development paths. In addition, these language programmes are also open to the public and provide high-quality language training at relatively low cost, reflecting the University of Applied Sciences' educational philosophy of serving the community.

As the world's second most widely spoken language, the status of the Chinese language in international education is steadily rising, with growing enthusiasm for its study also becoming evident in German universities (Lin, 2013). An increasing number of German students recognise that mastering the Chinese language not only enhances their competitiveness in the global job market but also provides essential linguistic support and cultural capital for participating in Sino-German corporate collaborations, as well as for academic exchanges and research activities in China. Against this backdrop, Chinese language education is receiving unprecedented attention within the language curriculum systems of universities of applied sciences. These universities have introduced beginner, intermediate, and advanced Chinese courses, and have established positions for Chinese language instructors in order to improve teaching quality.

However, with the rapid growth in demand for Chinese language learning in universities of applied sciences, a series of issues have gradually emerged, such as

mismatches between teaching resources and learners' needs, delays in the development of curriculum systems, a shortage of qualified teachers, and a lack of instructional designs that are integrated with specialised courses. These challenges, to some extent, hinder the sustainable development of Chinese language education in universities of applied sciences, and also impose new demands on existing language teaching models.

In previous studies, researchers have usually focused on Chinese language programmes at comprehensive universities and the operational models of Confucius Institutes in Germany. As a field that has long been overlooked by academics, Chinese language education at universities of applied sciences in Germany possesses both unique institutional characteristics and faces particular challenges. Therefore, this article seeks to fill this important but underexplored research gap. Based on the aforementioned background, this article focuses on the practice of Chinese language teaching in universities of applied sciences in Germany, identifying the current major problems through pedagogical observation and textbook analysis, and proposing targeted reforms in relation to teaching content, the curriculum system, and the sustainability of Chinese language courses.

2. Current Practices in the Selection of Chinese Language Textbooks

At present, there is a lack of 'suitable' Chinese learning textbooks specifically designed for local students in universities of applied sciences. The most representative textbook is *The HSK Standard Course*, edited by Jiang Liping and published by Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), which features a clear structure and systematic content. Due to these characteristics, this textbook is particularly well-suited for learners aiming to pass the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), and is therefore widely used in overseas Chinese language teaching. However, a certain discrepancy exists between its pedagogical design—primarily geared towards examination preparation and the cultivation of comprehensive linguistic competence—and the teaching objectives of universities of applied sciences, which are oriented towards practical communication and place emphasis on training for linguistic application in the workplace and the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Additionally, another widely used textbook in today's universities of applied sciences is *Ni Xing: Chinesisch für Anfänger*, published by Germany's Klett-Sprachen Verlag. Compared with traditional HSK-oriented textbooks, this textbook aligns more closely with everyday scenarios and adopts a pragmatic approach, thereby reflecting, to some extent, the "language as a tool" teaching philosophy characteristic of universities of applied sciences. It is indeed an excellent textbook. However, its content organisation does not fully correspond to the learning needs and practical context of local German students. For instance, the first lesson is themed 'What is your name?', followed by a second lesson that repeats the same theme. From the perspective of communicative function, such repetitive structuring may be unnecessary at the initial stage and may even result in wasted resources and reduced learner interest. Particularly in real

communicative contexts, even when native Chinese speakers meet for the first time, it is uncommon to inquire separately about surnames. Therefore, although this form of textbook design adheres to the principle of gradual language input, it may offer limited practical value in real-life usage.

In addition, some of the sentences in this textbook do not correspond to the realities of German students' lives, which makes it difficult to elicit emotional resonance and facilitate language transfer. For example, when teaching the expression 'Where do I live?', *Ni Xing: Chinesisch für Anfänger* provides the example sentence 'I live in a foreign student dormitory'. In practice, the authors are teaching German students who are not international students and who have no experience of living in a dormitory. As a result, students are unable to relate the language they are learning to their own lived experiences, which in turn affects their intrinsic motivation and hinders the development of their ability to use the language effectively. Therefore, current Chinese textbooks present clear limitations in adapting to the actual teaching environment of German universities of applied sciences. There remains a pressing need for greater balance and optimisation among localisation, contextual authenticity, and communicative functionality.

Students at German universities of applied sciences are typically oriented towards future careers in multinational corporations, international markets, or Sino-German bilateral cooperation projects. Within this educational context, the primary motivation for students to learn Chinese is not purely a matter of linguistic interest or cultural exploration, but rather a pragmatic desire to enhance their international competitiveness. These students recognise that mastering the Chinese language will offer them a significant advantage in their future careers, particularly against the backdrop of globalisation and the deepening economic and trade relations between China and Germany. As prominent Chinese companies such as Huawei, Xiaomi, and BYD continue to invest and expand their presence in Europe—especially in Germany—candidates equipped with basic Chinese language skills are more likely to distinguish themselves in the job market and convert their language ability into tangible professional competitiveness.

In these scenarios, Chinese functions not only as a communication tool but also as a means of empowerment, enabling learners to engage more actively in project management, client communication, and even strategic negotiation within cross-cultural contexts, thereby enhancing their influence in the workplace (Du, 2019). However, most of the widely used Chinese language teaching materials on the market fail to fully address these learning needs, lacking systematic guidance on workplace scenarios, relevant terminology, and cross-cultural nuances. Therefore, one of the core challenges in Chinese language teaching within the German-speaking community is the development of a tailor-made textbook that aligns with the motivations of students at universities of applied sciences, supports their career aspirations, and places emphasis on practicality and task-based learning. This involves not only the careful selection and

organisation of textbook content but also a reorientation of the overall teaching philosophy, contextualisation, and learner identity.

In addition, there is a detail that is often overlooked in actual teaching practice but has a significant impact on the learning outcomes of beginners—namely, the font used for Chinese characters in textbooks. As a logographic writing system, the learning of Chinese characters involves not only the recognition of sounds and meanings, but also relies heavily on the identification and reproduction of character structures. This is particularly true for foreign learners who do not come from writing traditions involving characters; for them, the initial stages of learning Chinese characters are more akin to a process of visual recognition and imitation. Consequently, the choice of font becomes one of the key factors affecting learning effectiveness.

For instance, the widely used *The HSK Standard Course* in Chinese language programmes at German universities of applied sciences is printed in the Song font. While the Song font offers clarity and consistency in print layout, it differs considerably from actual handwriting conventions in the way strokes are rendered. Take, for example, the character ‘这’ (meaning ‘this’) and ‘洗’ (meaning ‘wash’) in Song font, the strokes are elongated and sharply angled, which is different from the rounded strokes of the character ‘这’ and ‘洗’ in italics font. This discrepancy often confuses beginners and can lead to the formation of inaccurate structural representations of characters in their minds, thereby affecting both their handwriting accuracy and long-term retention. In teaching practice, when textbooks or the character models provided by teachers align more closely with the real-life conventions of Chinese character writing, students experience significantly fewer difficulties in imitating and mastering stroke order. Regular script characters are particularly well-suited for beginners to copy and analyse, as their clearly defined stroke beginnings and endings, along with their balanced structures, facilitate accurate observation and reproduction.

In addition, the use of standardised stroke order diagrams and stroke decomposition exercises can further support learners in constructing a systematic understanding of Chinese character structure. From the perspectives of language acquisition and cognitive psychology, the selection of fonts in textbooks is therefore not merely a matter of visual aesthetics or typographic convenience. Rather, it plays a crucial role in supporting the learner’s cognitive processes and writing development.

Ideal textbooks for elementary Chinese learners should employ regular or pedagogical fonts that are structurally clear, easy to imitate, and standardised in stroke order. Such choices can effectively reduce cognitive load, enhance learning efficiency, and improve learners’ overall competence in Chinese character writing.

3. Practical Requirements for Chinese Language Textbooks in the Context of Applied Sciences Universities

Building on the aforementioned observations, this article advocates the development of a practical Chinese language textbook tailored specifically for universities of applied

sciences. The content of such a textbook should prioritise communicative functionality, align with students' future career trajectories, and incorporate linguistic materials that reflect the real-life contexts and learning objectives of local learners. Particular emphasis should be placed on the foundational skills of pronunciation, intonation, and Chinese character writing, while also ensuring curricular coherence and accessibility throughout the programme structure.

In a language learning environment oriented towards professional development, ideal Chinese teaching materials should embody the following key characteristics to optimise teaching effectiveness and address students' actual needs.

Firstly, contextual design is an essential component in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (Dell, 1972). Clear learning objectives and a strong career orientation should form the foundation for textbook development. Teaching materials should be structured around real-world professional scenarios that students are likely to encounter in the future, such as job interviews, company introductions, project presentations, email correspondence, telephone communication, and cross-cultural business etiquette. These scenarios should be aligned with corresponding language function modules. For instance, beyond basic daily-life topics, the curriculum can include modules such as "Participating in interviews with Chinese companies," "Working in Sino-German joint ventures," "Attending German-Chinese technology exhibitions," "Engaging in video conferences," and "Visiting Chinese clients." Such modules provide students with opportunities for language input and output within authentic professional contexts, thereby improving their communicative competence. This kind of goal-oriented content design allows students to connect their language learning directly to their future professional development, significantly enhancing both the relevance and practical value of their studies.

Secondly, the content should be both practical and progressive. Teaching materials should begin with "usable" language—high-frequency vocabulary and functional expressions that learners can immediately apply in real-life contexts. At the same time, materials should reflect specific scenarios and adhere to the principles of task-based language teaching, gradually guiding students from mastering basic communicative phrases to completing specific language tasks. These may include tasks such as "Introducing yourself in Chinese," "Making simple business greetings," or "Presenting your company or professional background."

Thirdly, the curriculum should incorporate thematic vocabulary tailored to students' vocational and academic backgrounds—such as engineering, management, or information technology—to foster domain-specific language competence. This approach not only enhances the practicality of the teaching materials but also strengthens students' ability to apply Chinese effectively in professional contexts. Moreover, the teaching methods employed in the textbooks need to be communicative and participatory. Ideal materials should support diverse instructional formats, including role-playing, group dialogues, project collaboration, and simulated workplace tasks, all of which promote classroom interaction and increase students' engagement (Zhang, 2002). This is

particularly crucial in universities of applied sciences, where practical skills development is a core focus. Integrating teaching materials with internships and cooperation projects with enterprises can substantially boost the real-world applicability and value of language learning.

Fourthly, unlike traditional textbooks that primarily focus on language acquisition and general Chinese culture, textbooks tailored for students at German universities of applied sciences should deliberately integrate distinctive cultural content relevant to their context. For instance, the materials should embed comparative analyses of Chinese and German cultural practices within the language texts, covering topics such as workplace communication etiquette, business negotiation styles, perceptions of time, hierarchical structures, dining manners, blessings, and taboos. Such culturally nuanced content can enhance students' cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural awareness, thereby facilitating more effective language transfer and identity transformation.

Fifthly, careful attention should be paid to the visual design of the teaching materials, including the selection of appropriate fonts and layout formats, to create an optimal learning experience for students. The presentation of Chinese characters in the textbooks should align with the learners' cognitive and writing habits. Most German students have yet to develop a solid cognitive framework for Chinese characters, and even those at the B1 level often struggle with character writing. Therefore, the textbook should predominantly use handwritten (italic) fonts, especially in sections such as 'Vocabulary Lists' and 'Chinese Character Exercises'. These sections should feature standardised fonts with clear stroke order and structure that are easy to imitate, minimising the discrepancy between the stroke proportions of printed fonts (e.g., Song font) and actual handwriting. To further support learning, stroke order diagrams and structural analyses should be included at appropriate points in the textbook, along with ample writing space to help students internalise the logic of Chinese character construction and reduce frustration.

Finally, the ideal textbooks should be evaluable and extendable. Each unit should be equipped with clear learning objectives, stage-by-stage assessment tasks and revision modules, so that teachers and students can test their learning results in a timely manner. At the same time, the textbook can be accompanied by digital resources (e.g., videos, audio, online exercises, etc.) and online extension tasks, providing students with space for self-study and repeated practice after class, thereby enhancing the frequency and efficiency of language input and output.

To sum up, the ideal Chinese teaching materials should be based on students' motivation, future development needs and actual contexts, and embody the comprehensive concepts of 'vocational orientation, communicative function, cultural comparison, task-driven, and multiple evaluation'. Only in this way can the teaching goal of 'language serving career' be truly realised in the unique teaching ecology of universities of applied sciences.

4. Ensuring Sustainability in Chinese Language Instruction at Applied Sciences Universities

Another issue that requires urgent attention is the sustainability of Chinese language programmes. At my university of applied sciences, for instance, there are currently three levels of Chinese language courses: Chinese 1, Chinese 2, and Chinese 3. Students who complete all three typically reach the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and are eligible to obtain the UniCert® Certificate of Proficiency in Chinese Language, issued by the Language Centre. This programme offers students a systematic language learning pathway, which theoretically equips them with practical language skills to support future international exchanges, internship applications, or employment with Chinese companies following graduation.

However, the continuation of these courses faces administrative obstacles in practice. According to the current course management regulations of the university, any foreign language course with fewer than five enrolments is automatically cancelled in order to optimise the allocation of teaching resources and control personnel costs. While this rule may be administratively justifiable, it has a significant impact on the coherence of the programme and the developmental potential of learners in foreign language education—particularly in the case of non-mainstream, less commonly taught languages such as Chinese.

For example, the Chinese 2 course scheduled for the summer term of 2024 was cancelled due to low enrolment, with only four students registered, despite the fact that all of them had been active and highly motivated learners in Chinese 1. This is not an isolated incident but a structural issue that has persisted over recent years. As a consequence of the inability to guarantee the smooth progression of the full course sequence, the time and enthusiasm invested by many students at the beginner level cannot be sustained into the intermediate stage, resulting in disrupted learning and a loss of motivation. This pattern—characterised by strong initial interest, declining engagement in the middle, and a breakdown at the final stage—is not only detrimental to the stability of talent cultivation but also negatively impacts the reputation and attractiveness of the Chinese language programme itself.

From the perspectives of teaching system integrity and educational equity, it is essential to re-evaluate the applicability of the 'minimum number of students' rule in the context of small language programmes. For instance, the university could consider establishing a 'key language support mechanism' and implement a 'minimum enrolment guarantee' for languages deemed significant to strategic cooperation initiatives—such as the Sino-German Dual Language Project or the East Asia Internship Programme.

In addition, relevant faculties could be encouraged to share part of the operating costs of the programmes in order to maintain the coherence and long-term viability of these language programmes. Specifically, Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) programmes could be integrated into the university's overall internationalisation strategy and professional development objectives, so that they not only serve Chinese

language learners, but also provide linguistic and cultural support to other degree programmes (e.g. international business, engineering management, or intercultural communication), thus enhancing the systematic nature and necessity of the programmes. In terms of funding allocation, a joint budget or resource-sharing arrangement could be established to enable cross-faculty collaboration.

At the same time, innovations in teaching modes would also help to increase the flexibility and reach of the programmes. For example, a blended teaching framework could be implemented by combining two nearby course levels (e.g., beginner and intermediate) or by integrating online materials with in-person instruction, allowing for more efficient use of academic personnel and lower per-capita expenses. This model not only tackles the issue of resource waste associated with small class sizes, but it also supports students' different learning needs and provides more robust support for the program's long-term development.

5. Conclusion

Within the practice-oriented higher education system of German universities of applied sciences, the provision of Chinese language courses not only addresses students' practical needs in enhancing their international competitiveness but also reflects the university's strategic commitment to promoting internationalisation and linguistic diversity. However, Chinese language teaching continues to face multiple challenges in practice. On the one hand, existing teaching materials often fail to align with the educational backgrounds and career aspirations of students at universities of applied sciences, leading to a disconnect between the content of instruction and learners' motivation. On the other hand, the curriculum is constrained by administrative enrolment thresholds, which compromise the continuity and long-term sustainability of teaching and learning. Therefore, to enhance the overall quality of Chinese language teaching in German universities of applied sciences, improvements should be pursued in three key areas. Firstly, in terms of teaching material development, more practical, localised, and modular resources should be created to address the actual needs of students and align with their prospective career paths. Secondly, at the institutional level, a flexible support mechanism should be established to ensure the continuity of Chinese language courses, thereby safeguarding the coherence and depth of students' learning trajectories. Thirdly, the intuitive and standardised nature of Chinese character acquisition should be reinforced within the design of teaching and learning, with particular attention paid to the visual and handwriting components of instructional materials, so as to lower the entry threshold for beginners. Collectively, these measures will contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and sustainable environment for Chinese language education.

In conclusion, this article contends that the synergistic development of language teaching and talent cultivation—and the advancement of Sino-German educational cooperation to a higher level—can only be realised by enhancing the quality of Chinese language teaching through the localisation of teaching materials, increased flexibility of

the teaching system, and the optimisation of the learning experience for beginners. From a long-term perspective, the development of Chinese language programmes in German universities of applied sciences should not merely be treated as a language teaching endeavour, but rather as a strategic component of Sino-German educational and cultural exchange. Only through concurrent reforms and innovations at the conceptual, institutional, and practical levels can Chinese language education take root and flourish within the German higher education system, thereby fulfilling its potential as a cultural bridge and contributing to its broader intercultural value.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Lei Wang is a university lecturer specialising in Chinese language teaching. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Nanjing University of Economics and Finance, a Master's degree in Chinese Language and Literature from Yangzhou University, and a Doctoral degree from the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences. Since 2007, she has been actively engaged in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. She is currently affiliated with Hof University of Applied Sciences in Germany, where she serves as an adjunct lecturer for Chinese language courses. Her research interests lie in vocational Chinese language instruction and the teaching of cross-cultural business etiquette.

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