

Revisiting Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Competence from the Perspective of Human Identity

Liu Yumei^{1,a,*}, Liu Qiaochu^{1,b}, He Dingxiang^{2,c}

¹*School of Foreign Languages, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, China*

²*Zhanjiang No. 2 Middle School, Zhanjiang, China*

^a1045944776@qq.com, ^b1041752530@qq.com, ^chedxyy568@163.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: *Teacher competence is the foundation of teachers' professional development, the beacon of student competence improvement, and the guarantee of teaching quality. Teachers are human beings first, and then teachers. From the identity of teachers as social, professional, and educative beings, this article aims to discuss the role and significance of teachers' competences of empathy, loving life, interdisciplinary knowledge, recognizing textual themes, assessing and improving teaching, educating people with values and thinking critically on culture, which can analyze the essence of teachers' competence and decipher the new connotation of foreign language teachers' professional competence.*

Keywords: *Human Identity, Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Competence, Teachers' Professional Development*

1. Introduction

Teachers lead education. The quality of teachers determines the quality of education and the temperature of education. The dimensions of education determine the dimensions of teacher competence, and the perception of education's nature determines the teaching attitude of teachers. According to the European Commission (Education and Training 2020 Strategy, 2011), teachers' core competence should include subject knowledge, educational skills, a spirit of reflection, research, innovation, cooperation, and self-directed learning.^[1] In 2016, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (*21st Century Knowledge and Skills in Educator Preparation*) argued that pre-service teachers should also have knowledge and skills such as advanced awareness of 21st-century teaching and learning, especially technological skills, knowledge of students' development, and multiple methods to assess students' performance and learning condition.^[1] While Western scholars have been focusing on teachers' content knowledge, professional skills, self-development, and other dimensions of competence, China has been consistently promoting education in the aspects of morals, personality, and culture. The Confucian ideal that "all people can be Yao and Shun" and Zhang Hengqu's saying that "to ordain conscience for Heaven and Earth; to secure life and fortune for the people; to continue lost teachings for past sages; to establish peace for future generations", all reflect the importance of educators being virtuous, knowledgeable, and loving the country and the people, as required in the Confucian ideology of education—"to demonstrate illustrious virtues", "to renovate the people" and "to rest in the highest excellence". On the basis of Chinese tradition, President Xi Jinping has, using the concept of the "teacher with faith, virtue, knowledge and kindness", illustrated the dimensions of contemporary teacher competence. As for the competence of foreign language teachers, Chinese scholars have argued that students' competence, as defined in the *Curriculum Standards*¹ and the *Curriculum Requirements*², is also what teachers need to have, and that language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability therefore together constitute the dimensions of teacher competence. However, where do these qualities come from, and what are the new dimensions of foreign language teachers' competence, in the context of the theme-based teaching paradigm, are questions that remain to be answered.

¹ *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education*, promulgated by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, sets out the educational objectives, educational content, and basic requirements for teaching, which reflects the will of the country and provides a high degree of guidance for China's basic education.

² *College English Curriculum Requirements* is the main basis for the development of college English syllabus, the construction of college English courses, and the implementation of college English course teaching and course evaluation in all general higher education institutions.

Whether it is the humanist spirit advocated by the Western Enlightenment or the traditional Chinese philosophy of “harmony” and “love”, all of them put people in the space and time of society and the world to fully consider the civilizational attributes of a “human being”. Teacher competence, if interpreted apart from human attributes, will lack the rational cognition to put it into practice. As members of the ordinary world, foreign language teachers have multiple identities and need to possess the universal qualities of being “human”. A foreign language teacher is first and foremost a person in society who needs the knowledge, ability, and emotion to live in a network of relationships and emotional connections with self, with others, with society, and with the world. A foreign language teacher is a professional who, like any other professional, has the basic human desire to survive and thrive. A foreign language teacher cannot be separated from the crowd of educators. They are one of the educational crowd of a nation or a country, with a mission to cultivate people who meet the needs of society and are devoted to family and country. The triple identity of the foreign language teacher influences and fulfills each other.

2. As Social Beings

The social nature is the primary attribute of man. People are always in relationships with themselves and the external world, and are in the interpersonal network of complex emotional exchanges. People also need to seek a home in the interpersonal network, gain recognition and realize their self-worth. People live everywhere in all kinds of communities, geo-, blood-, spiritual-, identity-, economic-, etc. The complexity of product manufacturing activities in society leads to the complexity of the foundations of community construction and the difficulty of living with the world. Ferdinand Tönnies (2001) argues that “All kinds of social co-existence that are familiar, comfortable and exclusive are to be understood as belonging to *Gemeinschaft*.” [2], and that such a life of the spiritual community is stabilized and made permanent by “memory” and “the unconscious power of mind”, and thus transcends the limits of time and space. Therefore, emotional relation is the key to the social life of a person. It is by understanding oneself, understanding others, and embracing the outside world that one can make oneself understood and accepted, integrate into society, and live in harmony with the world, as well as obtain self-analysis and self-reconciliation from the angle of multiple external references when one is in an emotional dilemma. As a result, a noble cultivation of character, an open vision of life, a peaceful attitude toward life, and pure emotions in life should be the most important life colors for teachers. Therefore, from the social attributes of human beings, the ability to empathize and the ability to love life are the basic competences of teachers.

2.1. Competence of Empathy

In a foreign language class, to help students become social beings who live in harmony with themselves and others, teachers themselves must first become models of emotional richness, compatibility, and freedom. Emotions are complex. When the participants in an exchange need to empathize with each other, they are bound to fail to agree on emotions and values. This is what leads to cultural sore points. The “sore points” are also the “hot spots”—the key issues in life that need to be addressed, and the focus of teaching. On the other hand, the discomfort and frustration brought by difference is a reflection of the social nature of human beings, and a driving force for society to move forward. Teachers need to be competent to guide students to face and learn to deal with negative emotions such as anxiety, worry, and pain, and to find ways and means to live and integrate themselves in an unfamiliar and alienating environment. This undoubtedly requires teachers to be able to firmly establish a people-oriented teaching philosophy, using the text as a bridge and the theme as a vein, to enter students’ hearts and minds, create a teaching atmosphere of understanding, trust and tolerance, and thus form a teaching community in which students, teachers and the text are a triad. The teacher is the power source in the community that drives the three subjects to get closer to each other, understand each other and inspire each other, and is the key element to achieving mutual recognition and common growth in multiple dimensions such as spirit, culture and thinking. Empathy is the basis for teachers to build a teaching community. The teachers’ ability to guide, analyze and explore with real-life orientation is the prerequisite and motivation for students to be rooted in the outside world and to be able to soar freely in their thinking sky. Together, teachers and students gradually acquire the wisdom of life and living in the teaching–learning interaction.

2.2. Competence of Loving Life

In the ever-changing times, if teachers want to extend students’ ability of loving life, they need to

persistently enter the hearts and minds of generations of students, empathize with their emotions, guide them out of their spiritual dilemmas, meet their needs for growth, and help them become people who are sincere, committed, and full of enthusiasm for life. A positive attitude toward life comes from constant observation, examination, appreciation, and learning of life and living, which infuses the teaching profession with emotion, inputs new content into education, and discovers the value and meaning of education. John Dewey (1897) said, “the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass.”^[3] Education for individuals cannot be separated from the consideration of the needs and requirements of society, which needs flesh-and-blood people to participate in social production activities. Any form of education lies in developing one’s interests, hobbies, abilities, and character on the one hand, and in matching one’s interests, hobbies, abilities, and character with the needs of society on the other. Constantly gaining self-growth and social acceptance is the expression of the value of education and the source of motivation for individual participation in education. Teachers’ coming out of life and then returning to life to view the value of life and the needs of society is a recipe for maintaining personal development, enhancing self-worth, and maintaining ongoing educational concern and enthusiasm.

Competence as a social being is a crucial element of the classroom and the goal of education, aiming to solve the problem of “what to teach” in foreign language education. As social beings, people need to learn from life throughout their lives, to learn the knowledge and skills to survive, and to enhance their practical competence and emotions towards living. The identity of English teachers as social beings involves the dimensions of general competences of emotions, attitudes, and values that deal with self and self, and self and others, as well as the knowledge, attitudes, emotions, strategies, and abilities that are oriented towards and integrated into life. These are exactly what English teachers, after text learning and fully assessing students’ cognitive abilities, guide students to discover, explore, and compare in class and motivate them to practice, reflect, summarize, and re-practice outside of class. Teachers need to constantly reflect on their own emotional world and perceive the essence of life in the practice of extensive social interactions; they need to firm up their passion for life and care for others in their continuous thinking and reflecting on the external world.

3. As Professional Beings

As members of the professional group of foreign language education, teachers need to have solid professional subject knowledge and practical skills, as well as a sense of responsibility and commitment to their work, just as practitioners in all walks of life. In the modern educational environment, foreign language teachers also need to be able to make full use of network technology and resources to build a diversified teaching environment, enrich teaching resources, personalize teaching, and improve teaching efficiency. If the above is the general professional competences that contemporary teachers should have, then with the issue of the *Curriculum Standards*, gradually clarifying the basic principles of the curriculum program of “strengthening curriculum integration and focusing on correlation”^[4] and “changing the way of education and highlighting practice”^[4], and the curriculum principles of “selecting and organizing course content with the theme as the guide”^[4] and “focusing on teaching–learning–assessment integration”^[4], the identity of teachers as professional beings has been given new dimensions of competence: awareness and practical ability to integrate interdisciplinary knowledge, literary ability to refine themes from texts, and the ability to integrate assessment into teaching and learning.

3.1. Competence of Interdisciplinary Knowledge

Language teaching is both instrumental and humanistic, and the interdisciplinary scope of language teachers’ knowledge includes not only a rich knowledge of literature, history, and philosophy, but also a comprehensive understanding of all subjects before and after the current academic period. A rich knowledge of the humanities, which brings a broad perspective, is a prerequisite and foundation for perceiving issues and developing a keen sense of critical thinking and ability. By reading a great deal of classic Chinese and foreign literature and experiencing the common emotional concerns and different humanistic reflections in different cultural forms, teachers are able to stand at the height of human life perceptions and face the dilemmas and awkwardness of themselves and their students, becoming their students’ mentors and friends, and helping them to continuously grow into people who become capable of happiness and kindness to the world by self-education. In addition, it is important to understand the history of China and the West and to have a sense of historical responsibility in order to think deeply about contemporary society and to develop a forward-looking vision, and thus to appreciate the emotions

of the times, to accurately grasp the content of teaching, and to give students convincing guidance for their lives. If teachers do not have a holistic view of the history of Chinese and foreign civilizations, especially modern history, the cultivation of students' intercultural competence cannot be achieved, because a truly meaningful context of intercultural communication cannot be constructed in a culturally monolithic class. Moreover, philosophy is a science about science. Without a certain level of philosophical knowledge, teachers cannot grasp the dimension and the essence of issues, which leads to a one-way teaching dilemma. Apart from that, there is a growing consensus on the "general teacher" approach to teacher competence in basic education. A "general teacher" means a teacher who has at least the basic knowledge of the subject matter and of how to use it in the current and previous academic period of the students. Without the basic knowledge competence of a general teacher, interdisciplinary teaching in the foreign language classroom is difficult to achieve, and teachers are unable to create authentic contexts in their teaching and to answer students' questions from multiple perspectives. Only a foreign language teacher with the quality of a "general teacher" can help students build an open and dynamic network of subject knowledge in and out of the classroom.

The times are dynamic, and the development of civilization and culture under the influence of Internet technology is changing rapidly. The growing vision and thoughts of contemporary students living on the Internet are undoubtedly far beyond all the times in the past. The times we live in are full of uncertainties, so teachers need to have the awareness of lifelong learning, as if "study as though you could never catch up"^[5], and never get tired of learning. If teachers themselves do not have a sense of shame like Confucius expressed his worry for "virtue not sufficiently practiced, learning not sufficiently digested, to hear what is right and not be able to do it, to have shortcomings and not be able to remedy them"^[5], how can they stand upright on the stage to cultivate students' learning awareness and ability? Education always begins with teachers and manifests itself in students; teachers and students grow together. Therefore, teachers need to think after reading, study after teaching, and grow after studying.

3.2. Competence of Recognizing Textual Themes

Theme-led and text-supported foreign language teaching mean, first of all, that the classroom should not stop at the surface construction of linguistic knowledge such as lexis, syntax, pronunciation, and discourse, while ignoring the deeper construction beyond the linguistic knowledge such as diction, rhetoric, narrative techniques, and structures that contain thematic connotations, cultural meanings, depth of thought, and humanistic values. To be able to analyze the thematic vein from the text's connotation and explore the thematic value, solid language knowledge, language aesthetics, and cultural interpretation of the theme are essential. Thus, the competence to recognize the theme of a text is highly correlated with a rich knowledge of literature, history and philosophy, and the ability to reflect on life.

Theme-led classroom teaching requires teachers to have flexible text restructuring skills. A thousand students have a thousand different opinions on a topic that is relevant to their lives. To effectively organize a high-quality classroom teaching, teachers need to be able to grasp both the content of the text and the fleeting reactions of students in class, and go beyond the text to engage in spiritual dialogues with students at any time. They should be able to walk between the text and students' responses, randomly capture keywords, sentences, and ideas presented by students, and then guide students to read the text repeatedly and carefully, and finally complete the combing and interpretation of the texts' themes. Following students' cognitive rules, respecting their emotional needs, and empathizing with students' spiritual world are the basic teaching concepts. By carefully observing students' behaviors presenting their inner knowledge outwardly, teachers grasp students' existing knowledge system in order to constantly give new information to the original knowledge world for stimulation, and add power sources, inspiration and direction to the reconstruction of this knowledge system. To be able to grasp the established teaching objectives in a theme-led classroom teaching, to uphold the existing teaching philosophy, and to carry out classroom teaching in a certain teaching model with ease, teachers must have strong text restructuring skills. The purpose of text restructuring is not only to return to the theme, but also to further promote students' thinking. The extent to which text restructuring can be achieved is indeed limited by teaching experience, but a good grasp of the text's themes, an interdisciplinary understanding of the relevant humanities, and the ability to read them, can compensate to a great extent.

The teachers' competence of recognizing the theme of a text determines the extent to which the foreign language teaching, led by themes and supported by texts, can explore the rhetorical language, narrative style and opinion expressions hidden in the text. To tell Chinese stories well, to make them reach a wider audience and inspire more people to gain a proper understanding of Chinese stories, it is undoubtedly important to express them with appropriate linguistic and cultural aesthetics. Therefore, the cultivation of language skills in foreign language education goes far beyond the accumulation of language

knowledge and the cultivation of pragmatic competence; it also requires the cultivation of aesthetic skills, the recognition of thematic cultural differences, and the cultivation of crossing disciplines.

3.3. Competence of Assessing and Improving Teaching

All Assessment is an integral part of any curriculum. Integrated yet independent of each other, assessment, teaching, and learning is a trinity in teaching and learning.^[6] According to Stufflebeam's CIPP evaluation model (2017), "evaluation's most important purpose is not to prove but to improve".^[6] Formative assessment around the learning aspects of students' absorption, interpretation, comparison, critique, reflection, and application of subject knowledge can objectively evaluate the current state of students' knowledge and abilities and provide a reliable basis for the revision of teaching programs. Diagnostic assessment of students' growth in emotions, attitudes and values helps students conduct self-assessment, which can reveal the extent to which themed learning has been achieved in terms of knowledge accumulation, language aesthetics, cultural awareness and thinking quality, reflect on teaching deficiencies, and can reveal students' learning expectations and adjust important teaching points and teaching methods. Teachers are able to objectively analyze assessment data, and in accordance with teaching effectiveness and goal attainment, adjust their teaching promptly, which is a guarantee for improving teaching quality.

To be able to teach cross-cultural themes, foreign language teachers need to have rich basic knowledge of Chinese and foreign literature, history and philosophy in order to clarify the goal of "cross" in teaching, and to grow their own "cross" ability. The ability to recognize textual themes determines the concretization of teaching contents, the effectiveness of classroom organization, and the realization of foreign language teaching values. The teachers' ability to organize, guide, analyze, diagnose, and adjust the assessment of culture-themed teaching provides support, around students' needs, for the formation of a spiral of teaching process in which different parts are interlocking, complementary and laying a groundwork for each other. The competence of foreign language teachers as professional beings requires the ability to answer and address the question of "how to teach" in foreign language education.

4. As Educative Beings

According to Bertrand Russell (2009), "Almost all education has a political motive."^[7] Education has its political attributes and is full of national sentiment. Therefore, education always aims at national development, prosperity, and cultivation of citizenship. If education aims to promote the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind, it as well and necessarily incorporates cross-cultural communication, international perspective, and global citizenship into its goals and contents. Any form of education serves national development and construction, and meets the need of social stability and prosperity, national self-confidence, and cultural inheritance and promotion. The unique value of foreign language education lies in empowering students to learn the essence of other cultures, advanced humanistic concepts, and scientific technology from abroad, while promoting China's fine culture, building cultural confidence and national self-confidence, and facilitating Sino-foreign communication. To become qualified members of the crowd of educators, foreign language teachers should have a strong sense of devotion to family and country, well interpret the national education orientation, and thus educate people with values; they should have a relatively competent storytelling skill to reveal Chinese culture and the ability to compare and trace the origin of Chinese and foreign cultures, as well as a critical thinking on culture.

4.1. Competence of Educating People with Values

Language teaching is essentially cultural input, and culture itself is a reflection of value orientation. Therefore, language teaching is not a meaningful educational act if it is separated from value education. To integrate value nurturing into foreign language teaching, teachers themselves need to firstly have a strong sense of family and country, an international perspective, and a concern for the development of the country and the dilemmas it faces; secondly, they must be able to implicitly incorporate contemporary Chinese values into the teaching content and teaching sessions in order to achieve the desired teaching effect. Moreover, helping students to master the multiple methods of spreading Chinese values is the way to truly achieve the purpose of value education. As educators, foreign language teachers need to master not only the culture of major foreign civilization types, but also the excellent culture of ancient and modern China, and more importantly, they need to be able to explain Chinese contemporary values in depth and detail from the textbook to real life, such as industries and social hotspots, in order to truly

impress students and gradually avoid Chinese affairs and civilization being “reshaped” and “remolded”. Therefore, educators need to have a macroscopic cultural blueprint and the ability to collect, sort out and interpret first-hand information from living reality and the surrounding environment, to vividly and persuasively tell and present Chinese values. A teacher with profound competence in value education takes the qualities of social being as the foundation, accumulation, and interpretation of cultural knowledge as the connotation, devotion to profession and family as the orientation, and teaching skills and cognitive theories as the tools.

4.2. Competence of Thinking Critically on Culture

To have the competence of educating people with values, the awareness of critical thinking on culture and the ability of analytical thinking on culture is the key. The formation of critical thinking and analytical ability builds on the knowledge of universal civilization, taking an objective and dialectical attitude as a prerequisite, and pluralistic thinking as a way. Therefore, it is able to decipher the code of contemporary Chinese culture, compares and crosses cultural differences, and forms a new civilizational cognitive system as its content and goal. Teachers’ awareness of cultural critical thinking is the guarantee of the warmth and thickness of the classroom, the presentation of moral education, the basis for the cultivation of thinking quality, the source of developing a broader, wiser, more compatible attitude to life and the creative awareness of life. It is the prerequisite for the cultivation of national consciousness and family sentiment. Teachers who lack cultural awareness and knowledge cannot penetrate the connotation of the text around the theme, and will find it difficult to explore the aesthetic value of the text and view its historic significance. As a result, they inevitably lack humanistic concerns and academic charms, failing to meet the requirements of the times for foreign language teachers. A class that lacks cultural content is uninteresting, in which teachers and students are reduced to the sounding board of knowledge, lacking in aesthetics and sentiment. If theme-led text reading and text restructuring are based on linguistic competence, they will eventually lead to the realization of cultural awareness, critical thinking and value education at the mental level. Meanwhile, the concepts of cultural awareness, critical thinking and value education are the strong support and guidance of textual reading and text restructuring, otherwise, they are just castles in the air.

Solving the problem of cultivating people, in other words, the problem of “teaching for whom”, is the social function of education. The cultivation of values and cultural critical thinking is the ultimate goal of education, which integrate personal and social orientations, and is also the dimension of education that needs more attention in foreign language education than in other disciplines.

5. Conclusions

Teachers’ identities as professional beings, educative beings, and social beings are unified and inseparable in the teaching environment, and they influence and accomplish each other. The development of competence as professional beings is limited by the teachers’ political sensitivity as educative beings and emotional persistence as social beings; the sentiment as educative beings is deeply influenced by the ideal pursuit as professional beings and the character cultivation as social beings; the cultivation as social beings is influenced by the experience as professional beings and the motivational needs as educative beings. Teachers’ acute sensitivity to educational guidance in policies and the pursuit of sincere feelings as social beings naturally determine the pure persistence of the profession as professional beings. A social being who has a deep understanding of life emotions, as a teacher, must have a noble character and a pure pursuit of education. An educative being with profound skills in teaching is bound to be always concerned about the anxiety of society, the hardships of people, the destiny of the nation and advanced teaching philosophy, and courageous in teaching practice. Educators should be able to sense the urgency of the country and the needs of the nation, so as to equip the people being educated with direction, ability, and wholesome personalities.

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