Language Learning as Investment or Consumption? A Case Study of Chinese University Students’ Beliefs about the Learning of Languages Other than English

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Abstract: This study draws on the notions of investment and consumption to interpret beliefs about learning languages other than English (LOTEs) among learners in Chinese universities. By interviewing 23 Chinese university students learning French or Spanish in a master’s program, we found that most participants questioned the usefulness of LOTEs for their professional career and viewed learning LOTEs as part of leisure and consumption rather than investment. Only a small number of participants related their language skill development to career aspirations and were motivated to continue learning LOTEs after the end of their LOTE classes. To further explain the different language beliefs about LOTE learning, we examined the identities of these LOTE learners. The analysis identified four patterns of ‘imagined identity’, indicating that the difficulty experienced by individual learners in anticipating the usefulness of LOTEs in their ‘imagined identity’ in the future, especially in their professional career, led to their belief about LOTEs as consumption and leisure rather than investment. This paper concludes with some implications for language policy planners in sustaining multilingual learning in Chinese higher education.

Keywords: language learning; investment; consumption; languages other than English (LOTE)

1. Introduction

Defined as one’s understandings or propositions about the world that they perceive to be true [1], the notion of belief is used in studies in various fields including the field of second or foreign language learning where language learning beliefs profoundly mediate language learning practices at multiple levels in a given context [2]. At the macro-level, the political and ideological beliefs of the state underpin its efforts to plan and manage languages within its control [3]. At the meso-level, the language learning beliefs held by institutions such as universities directly influence the ways in which languages are used and taught within these institutions. At the micro-level, individual learners’ language learning beliefs can influence the language learning process, and their engagement with learning in the classroom may be influenced by their beliefs about languages and language learning [4,5].

As one of the most important components of language policy [6], language learning beliefs have attracted research attention in language education research, but the majority of recent research has focused on English as an international language [7–10]. Insufficient attention has been paid to the investigation of beliefs regarding learning languages other than English (LOTEs). This neglect of LOTE education is related to the long-term domination of English education in tertiary institutions in most educational contexts [11,12]. Research has argued that the expansion of English has inevitably narrowed the space for the learning and teaching of LOTEs [13–16], and thus undermines the maintenance of minority languages [17].
However, in contrast to the increasingly monolingual English education in many contexts [18], mainland China is embarking on a multilingual journey to enrich their people’s linguistic resources by learning more foreign languages [19]. After 30 years of expansion into the English education industry in conjunction with the marginalization of LOTEs, the Chinese government has recently become much more active in investing in non-English foreign language education [19] because of the launch of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in 2013. The initiative emphasizes cooperation in infrastructure, construction, railways and highways, and other domains, and involves 64 non-Anglophone countries such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Turkey, and Poland along the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, collectively known as ‘One Belt and One Road’, connecting China westward to Europe and Africa through Central Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Since the new developmental initiative requires linking with these countries, who speak more than 60 languages, the Chinese government has become increasingly aware of the importance of having a LOTE-speaking workforce, and thus has started to urge universities to offer or expand degree programs and courses in LOTEs [20]. In 2015, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a political document aimed at implementing the plan to strengthen the education of non-English foreign languages. By the end of 2016, 24 undergraduate programs teaching European LOTEs had been approved by the MOE, and the total number of LOTE degree programs had reached 114 [21]. By 2019, 47 additional LOTE degree programs had been approved [21].

This shifting foreign language education planning context in Chinese higher education reflects beliefs about LOTE education at the macro-(governmental) level. By expanding LOTE education, the country expects to develop people with LOTE abilities who will be required to play crucial roles in deepening mutual understanding to facilitate economic and trade cooperation. In this dynamic context, it will be valuable to investigate Chinese university learners’ beliefs about LOTE learning in response to the multilingual turn at the macro level, since individual learners play a critical role in language education [22]. In this light, in order to address the research gap in LOTE education as described above, this study intends to gain insight into the language beliefs of LOTE learners in relation to LOTE learning and education at a Chinese university by means of the notions of investment [23] and consumption [24], which will be explained below.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Language Learning as Investment and a Theory of Identity

This study notes that language competency has been seen as the capacity for increasing individual economic returns as well as a national capacity for a nation’s economic competitiveness in the light of neoliberalism [7,25–27]. The instrumental view of language coincides with the sociological construct of investment developed by Norton, who argues that learners invest in second language learning because of the belief that they will obtain a return in the form of symbolic and material resources and an increase in their cultural capital [23]. Unlike the construction of motivation that has been widely examined in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), which ‘conceives of the language learners as having a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical ‘personality” [28] (p. 110), the notion of investment regards the language learners as possessing a complex identity that is variable across time and space. The learner’s investment in the target language is viewed as decided by his or her act of constructing and contesting an identity [29]. In other words, investment in target languages also means an investment in the learner’s identity.

In recent years, although there has been a rise in research on LOTE learning in the field of SLA, the majority of these studies are interested in the learners’ motivation [30–32], rather than their identity. In fact, Norton’s conceptualization of investment and identity has been increasingly adopted to understand English learning in various second language and foreign language contexts [33,34]. However, there is still a paucity of research that explores LOTE acquisition and learning from this perspective. Under the influence of global English, beliefs about LOTE learning are necessarily different
from those about English education [35]. Therefore, it would be of great value to investigate beliefs about learning LOTEs with reference to Norton’s conceptualization of investment and identity.

2.2. Language Learning as Leisure and Consumption

In contrast to the concern about language learning as a form of investment, Kubota [24] focuses on an investigation of a new conceptualization of language learning as consumption, which suggests that learners engagement in the activity can be described as a kind of service consumption in order to seek enjoyment’ [24]. Situated in eikaiwa (English conversation), non-formal educational institutions in Japan, Kubota’s study revealed that many participants see English learning as a leisure activity rather than an intellectual and educational activity [24]. Unlike language learning related to the purposes of developing careers or upward socioeconomic mobility, the motivation of these English learners is not related to socioeconomic inclusion, but rather closely linked to the their aspiration of socializing with peers and foreign tutors and to identify with an imagined community, a space not readily accessible in the learners’ mundane activities [24]. From this perspective, language learning seems to be more related to the notion of consumption than investment. Although Kubota did not introduce the construct of identity in her study, her perspective involves the idea of being of part of an imagined community [24], suggesting the critical role of imagined identity in language learning as consumption.

Among the studies in the field of SLA, only a small amount of research has investigated language learning from the leisure perspective, with the consequence that LOTE learning is even more under-examined from this viewpoint. Previous studies of LOTE learning motivation [36] demonstrate the relationship between learners’ cultural interests and language learning. Even for students learning LOTEs as majors, the LOTE ideal self seems to be related to travel plans, not to career plans [35]. In this light, an investigation of language beliefs in relation to LOTE learning fits well with the perspective of language learning as leisure and consumption. Moreover, as above-mentioned, Kubota’s discussion of English learners implicates the construct of identity within an imagined community, and identity formation in an imagined community may also influence beliefs about language learning as consumption. Therefore, our discussion of the interplay between identity and beliefs about language learning as leisure/consumption will complete the discussion provided by previous studies, which have been exclusively interested in beliefs about language learning as investment and identity.

For these reasons, our study draws on the notions of investment, consumption, and identity to fill research gaps by examining language learners in a Chinese university. The main questions that we address are:

1. What beliefs toward LOTE learning are held by individual learners at university level in China?
2. How are their beliefs explained by the LOTE learners’ imagined identities?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Site

This study aims to investigate language beliefs about LOTEs held by individual learners in Chinese higher education in the shifting context of higher-level language planning and policies. To address the aforementioned research questions, we selected a research site at a prestigious university in a supersized city in China, offering a three-year master’s program involving LOTE courses. The present program was launched in 2015 with the purpose of cultivating financial, commercial, and legal professionals who will be expected to play a leading role in global, political, and economic governance. Thus, the program curriculum is composed of three types of course including foreign languages, international affairs, and subject courses depending on the students’ choice of track (i.e., finance, business, or law). In three years, the candidates are expected to acquire professional knowledge of international affairs and gain expertise in finance, law, or business, respectively.

The students also learn English and another foreign language for one year to enhance their competence to work on the global stage. In terms of these language courses, in their first year,
all students are required to learn a third language (French or Spanish) and English in addition to their subject courses. Four French or Spanish sessions are offered per week. In total, 128 h of lessons are thus scheduled in the course planning for the first year of the program, but no specific language learning outcome is specified in the program document. It should be noted that the compulsory LOTE education in the program is an unprecedented initiative at the postgraduate level in this university. Prior to the inception of this program, LOTE courses were exclusively provided to graduate students majoring in English; none of the other master’s programs involved LOTE education.

In addition to their language credits, most students will have the chance to study subject courses related to their own track in a partnering master’s program at one of five overseas universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Singapore, and take part in internships at international organizations (IOs) to gain professional experience onsite in their second year. For example, some of them will work in organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank, where Spanish is the dominant medium of communication, while other internships only need English-speaking professionals. In their third year, they return to the focal university to finish their subject courses and thesis before graduation. The program design is summarized in Figure 1.

![Program design](image_url)

**Figure 1.** Program design.

The participants for this study were recruited on a voluntary basis in March and April 2018, and all came from the same program. At that time, the program had enrolled three cohorts totaling 98 students, from whom 23 participants with different grades, specialty tracks, and genders were chosen (see Figure 2). We selected only students in the first and third years of the program because the second-year students were studying abroad at the time of the data collection. All students in the third year had chosen French as their second foreign language, since only French courses were offered to that cohort in 2015 due to a lack of LOTE teachers. Spanish was added as an alternative option in 2016. The following table summarizes the profile of the participants including information about their language choice and tracks. It is also worth mentioning that the students had all studied English since secondary school (roughly for 10 years) and had to reach an IELTs (International English Language Testing System) score 6.5 or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) of 95 or better, in order to be enrolled in the program.

| First year | Third year |
|------------|------------|
| Name | Gender | Language | Track | Name | Gender | Language | Track |
| P10 | M | French | Business | P14 | M | French | Business |
| P15 | M | French | Finance | P16 | M | French | Business |
| P6 | M | French | Finance | P1 | M | French | Business |
| P4 | M | French | Finance | P7 | F | French | Business |
| P12 | F | French | Finance | P11 | F | French | Business |
| P23 | F | French | Business | P13 | F | French | Business |
| P22 | F | French | Law | P20 | F | French | Business |
| P3 | F | French | Law | P5 | M | French | Business |
| P21 | F | Spanish | Law |           |          |          |          |
| P18 | M | Spanish | Law |           |          |          |          |
| P19 | F | Spanish | Finance |           |          |          |          |
| P9 | F | Spanish | Finance |           |          |          |          |
| P2 | F | Spanish | Business |           |          |          |          |
| P17 | F | Spanish | Finance |           |          |          |          |
| P8 | F | Spanish | Finance |           |          |          |          |

![Figure 2. Profiles of the participants.](image_url)
3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data, composed of semi-structured interviews with the language learners, were collected from April to June 2018. The interviewees were asked to talk about their experience of learning languages, the significance of foreign language learning to them, and their future professional aspirations. Each interview lasted around half an hour and was conducted in Mandarin Chinese. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The extracts quoted in this paper were translated by the first author and double-checked by the two other authors, who are advanced-level speakers of English.

Adopting a thematic approach, we conducted the data analysis according to the following steps. First, after scanning the transcriptions of the interviews, we searched for sentences containing terms related to languages: English, French, Spanish, foreign language, small language, and so on. The term ‘small language’ (xiao yuzhong) is often used to refer to foreign languages other than English in China. Second, we identified and coded sentences describing the value or status assigned to languages and language learning by the interviewees, and sentences describing personal future aspirations. The data on language value or status, which reflect the LOTE learners’ language beliefs [37], were identified either syntactically by sentence patterns such as language is, mastering foreign language will/may, or semantically by context explaining the usefulness or lack of utility of certain languages. The data relating to the imagined future identities of the learners [38] was mainly gathered from the interviewees’ responses to the question concerning their future aspirations. Third, through an inductive method [39] we identified five patterns of beliefs about LOTE learning according to the learning objectives (see Figure 3), and four patterns of identities according to linguistic identities and imagined situations where individuals might use LOTEs (see below). Finally, informed by our conceptual framework, we categorized the patterns of beliefs into two main groups of beliefs: LOTE learning as an investment, and LOTE learning as leisure and consumption. The two groups of beliefs were then connected to the patterns of identities. By examining their relationships, as shown in Figure 4, we may provide responses to the second question above-mentioned.

Figure 3. Individual learners’ beliefs about language other than English (LOTE) learning.

Figure 4. Language beliefs and imagined identities.
4. Results

This section first presents the beliefs about LOTE learning reflected in our interviews with 23 LOTE learners. We then outline the identities, particularly the imagined identities of individual learners, which underlie the different language beliefs.

4.1. Individual Learners’ Beliefs about Language Other Than English (LOTE) Learning

The results of this study revealed that the majority (16 out of 23) of LOTE learners exclusively considered LOTE learning as leisure and consumption, while a small number (four out of 23) exclusively viewed language learning as an investment. The remaining participants (three out of 23) saw language learning as a form of consumption as well as a form of investment. The following picture summarizes the language beliefs of our learners by detailing five objectives of LOTE learning as expressed by the participants.

4.1.1. Language Learning as Investment

Among the seven participants who considered LOTE learning as an investment activity, who included four learners who exclusively considered LOTE learning as an investment and three learners who held this view as well as a belief of LOTE learning as consumption, LOTE learning meant more job opportunities, especially in particular sectors. This view of LOTE learning corresponds to the instrumental view of the usefulness of English skills in achieving utilitarian goals such as individual economic returns [24]. However, the job opportunities that LOTE learning brings are expected to be limited to particular sectors, and they may be assured only on the condition that one has already mastered English. Two sub-categories of objectives about language learning were found.

LOTE Learning as Developing Necessary Skills for Future Workplaces

Two participants invested in LOTE learning to develop the necessary skills to obtain internships or job opportunities in particular sectors. P22 illustrates in detail the importance of LOTE competency for job or internship opportunities in IOs:

(1) In the short term, we may have an internship in an IO. French is the language of an IO. I think there will be some documents or daily communication in French. In the long run, a good command of French is essential if you want to work in an IO (P22).

Comparing other LOTEs with English, this participant demonstrates her instrumental view toward LOTEs. She continued:

(2) I think that English is a commonly used language; we learned English for travel or for future jobs. As for French, for me, I learned it mainly for professional purposes, because a command of French is necessary for an employee of an IO. Learning a LOTE is charged with more instrumental purposes than learning English (P22).

In her opinion, French is likely to play a role only in her professional career, whereas English could be useful in both professional and recreational areas. This opinion led to her exclusively instrumental view about LOTEs. For this student, because English is a global language, mastering ‘global English’ [40] is enough for her to be able to discover other countries or cultures, so is not necessary to learn another foreign language. This observation in the context of Chinese higher education aligns with the argument found across other societies, namely that the dominance of English could impact on the motivation to learn other languages in negative ways [41,42]. It is also related to the particular motivation for learning LOTEs found by Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie [43], who argue that unlike the default-like nature of the universal desire to master global English, a high level of LOTE proficiency is normally associated with very specific and personalized reasons on the part of the learner.

Another participant, P23, plans to work for a Chinese company in the future, ideally either for Huawei Enterprise or Zhongxing Corporation (two global leaders in telecommunications and
information technology), which both operate many businesses in African countries. P23 believes that working for one of those companies would require competency in the French language:

(3) Some of my desirable workplaces are Huawei Enterprise or ZTE, (I would like to participate) in the process of financial management or business management. I can better exploit my ability in French. Now I want to continue to learn French, because if I work for these companies, I probably will go to Africa or Europe to work on some (financial management) projects there (P23).

This extract reveals her belief that learning a LOTE may play a vital role in her professional career in the future. The interviewee believes that her investment in French learning will not only provide her with the opportunity to work in these companies but will also give her access to the economic benefits of working for one of these companies.

A third participant, P20, whose major was English at the undergraduate level, also saw a command of a LOTE as a necessary additional competence because of the competitive advantage that a LOTE will offer.

(4) Actually, I think that the competition is getting more and more intense now. There are too many good English speakers. If you do not learn a third language, your competitive advantage is not so obvious. As we are students of the School of Foreign Studies, our English abilities should be more professional than others. But in fact, the difference in English skills between us and others is not so obvious in workplaces. So, I think it is necessary to learn a third language. (P20)

For this interviewee, the global status of English diminished her competitive advantage in the hunt for a job. As a result, the interviewee expressed a much stronger motivation for third language learning. She said that even if LOTE courses were not offered to her, she would take this kind of course by herself. This argument seems to correspond to an assumption in previous studies that ‘having skills in additional languages may offer a competitive edge in a global job market where English skills have become commonplace, and where monolingual and even bilingual English speakers may lose out to multilingual competitors’ [44,45] (p. 469).

LOTE Learning as Developing an Optional Skill or ‘a Plus’ in Future Workplaces

Unlike the three aforementioned participants who considered LOTE skills to be necessary in future workplaces, four other participants saw LOTEs as optional, providing icing on the cake. Comparing the significance of English and LOTEs in professional settings, they argued that English is a basic and necessary skill that everyone needs to acquire, while LOTEs are additional skills that can play a decorative role. They used a Chinese idiom, ‘jinshang tian hua’ (equivalent to the English idiom icing on the cake), to describe the role of LOTEs, meaning adding brilliance to one’s present splendor. P19 explains the difference between English and LOTEs as follows:

(5) From the perspective of career development, English is a language that must be mastered. A second foreign language is ‘jinshang tian hua’; using this language will help to expand choices of occupation (P19).

Three other participants mentioned the importance of LOTEs for internships or job opportunities in IOs or foreign companies. Apart from the benefits to their professional careers, one of them, P21, talked about her plan to immigrate to the United States, and she considered it useful to master Spanish because the language is widely used in that country.

In summary, LOTE learning was viewed as an investment by these participants. For them, although LOTEs may not be as important as English, an investment in LOTE learning may bring a return in employment terms such as more choices and the possibility of working or pursue an internship at an IO, or in terms of socioeconomic mobility.

4.1.2. Language Learning as Leisure and Consumption

The majority (19 out of 23) of the participants held a belief about LOTE learning as a leisure activity. Among these, apart from the three participants who considered learning LOTEs to be an investment as described above, the remaining 16 participants did not demonstrate any ambition or intellectual
endeavor [24] in LOTE learning. They exclusively classified their learning of LOTEs as a personal hobby. Their beliefs mean that their act of learning is close to that of a leisure and consumption activity, rather than an investment. Apart from P15 and P7, who claimed their LOTE learning was a hobby activity without presenting the objective of learning, the remaining 17 participants talked about their learning objectives, in which three sub-categories may be identified.

LOTE Learning as Experiencing the Discovery of Something New and Interesting

One of the participants mentioned that their learning objective for LOTEs was to experience something new and interesting. Seven interviewees clearly mentioned their pleasure in learning in terms of discovering new and interesting things. For example, when talking about French learning, P1 expressed his excitement to have discovered something completely new to him. P3 claimed that only in her LOTE class could she learn something interesting, in contrast to the serious, boring knowledge delivered in her other subject classes. P4, the participant who pointed out the uselessness of LOTEs in the future, mentioned the pleasure that his French class gave him:

(6) Personally, I am pessimistic (about French’s usefulness), it may not be used in the future. However, language learning is quite interesting, you may notice French in the little things of life. For example, when you see a French football star’s name, after learning French, you may notice the difference in the Chinese translations of English and French names (P4).

LOTE Learning to Have an Instrument for Socializing

Ten interviewees mentioned LOTEs as instruments of socialization. As a consequence, they expected to experience pleasure or a feeling of achievement from socializing with people who spoke the LOTEs they had learned. They believed that it would be easier to make friends in non-English-speaking foreign countries if one could speak the language spoken in that country. This reason was given by one interviewee, P18, who noted that speaking to a foreigner in his native language would undoubtedly improve the quality of cross-cultural communication:

(7) For us, who are professional in these languages, when we go out and meet foreign people, if we can communicate with him in his native language, he will feel very comfortable, and he can communicate better in his own language (P18).

LOTE Learning as Making a ‘Positive Impression’ when Socializing with Chinese Peers

Two participants, P19 and P6, saw the ability to speak LOTEs as a personalized ability, and as a result, LOTE learning helped them to create a positive impression when they socialized with Chinese peers or friends. Both of these participants discussed the impressive effect that LOTE learning would give because of global English. Taking P19 as an example, she illustrated the positive value of LOTEs in social settings, not only in a foreign language speaking environment, but also in the Chinese environment. She commented that:

(8) From a social point of view, English will not attract additional attention and recognition from others, but if you have a bit of ability with LOTEs, you will receive surprise and praise from your foreign friends or Chinese friends, which will help you to open up the situation in social settings to make a positive impression (P19).

For these two interviewees, LOTEs are ‘differentiating assets’ that may increase one’s personal value in socialization. Their desire to communicate in LOTEs is related to the personal dimension, which is similar to the case of the English learner Yasuo in Kubota’s study, who saw English learning as an act of building connections among people and attaining emotional satisfaction [24]. This view of LOTEs as ‘differentiating assets’ echoes previous findings [46] describing one of the beliefs about LOTE learning as self-distinction.

To summarize, we have identified two types of language beliefs, LOTE learning as investment and as consumption, and distinguished five objectives for learning LOTEs. Two of these could be
regarded as instrumental goals, while three may be viewed as leisure activities. To explain the different beliefs, the following section will discuss the LOTE learners’ imagined identities.

4.2. Individual Learners’ Identities Underlying Their Language Beliefs

This section reports on the LOTE learners’ identities, especially their ‘imagined identities’ related to their language beliefs. We identified three types of imagined professional identities that were closely related to linguistic identities including bilingual identity, multilingual identity, and plurilingual identity, all of which are related to workplaces.

In terms of imagined social identities, we noted plurilingual identity in informal occasions. The term ‘plurilingual’ is often confused with another term, multilingual. Unlike multilingual ability, simply defined as the knowledge of multiple languages [47], the term ‘plurilingualism’ emphasizes the interconnectivity of language competences developed by the individual as well as the importance of accepting various levels of mastery of the language learned [48]. In our study, we defined a person with a multilingual identity as someone who separately possessed distinct knowledge and high-level competences in multiple languages. In contrast, people with a plurilingual identity are not necessarily fluent in multiple languages, but they can switch between different languages in daily communication using their linguistic repertoire of more than one language. The ability to take advantage of past learning experience and knowledge of multiple languages to attain the objective of communication is called ‘plurilingual competence’.

In our study, we distinguished multilingual identity from plurilingual identity according to the level of mastery of the LOTE that these learners desire to attain. We assigned a multilingual identity to those who claimed their ambition was to acquire a language competency in the LOTE as good as their competency in English, and assigned a plurilingual identity to those who did not care about their learning outcome, or who only expected to attain a low level of language competency. We will discuss in detail the interplay between the identity and language beliefs of LOTE learners in Section 5.

4.2.1. Imagined Professional Identity

Bilingual Identity (Exclusively L2 English User)

All 23 participants mentioned the importance of English to their professional career, that is, English ability was seen as a necessary skill and a representation of their professional ability. Sixteen participants described their imagined professional identities without the use of LOTEs, anticipating their future professional identities exclusively as L2 English users. Interestingly, these 16 participants were the same ones who exclusively considered LOTE learning as a leisure and consumption activity rather than as an investment.

Examining their future professional aspirations, we noted that with the exception of three of the 16 participants who mentioned the possibility of joining IOs in the future, none of the others demonstrated any ambition or strong intention to work in IOs in the near future, despite the fact that the program was designed to equip the participants for doing exactly this. Among this group, nine participants felt discouraged about their chances of joining an IO, emphasizing the near impossibility of obtaining a job in an IO in the near future. For example, when asked about his intention to work in an IO, P5 stated:

(9) I thought about that (going to an IO), but it is very difficult... They invited some teachers to share their experiences. It seems that IOs need more talents who are very professional in certain domains, for instance, economists, or somebody else in a field they don’t need fresh graduates (P5).

The rest of the 16 participants did not discount the possibility of working in an IO, but their responses revealed their lack of confidence or ambition in relation to obtaining a job in an IO. For example, P4 said that he would not reject a job in an IO if he had the opportunity. P14 claimed to be an applicant for jobs in IOs free of ambition (Foxi), which means that he was not motivated to make particular efforts to succeed in this area.
The difficulties of obtaining jobs in IOs prevented the participants from imagining themselves in the future as an employee of an IO where LOTEs are often used, which may have discouraged them from LOTE learning because of its perceived lack of utility.

By exploring their actual language repertoires, we observed that many of the participants did not think that LOTEs would be useful in their imagined future professional identities because of their low level of ability in LOTEs. For instance, P1 felt discouraged about applying for jobs in IOs because of his poor French. He claimed to have changed his career decision after examining his language repertoire. He said:

(10) The language spoken in IOs is French, so I know that French is very important, but it is my weakness. I have only learned French for one year, so I can’t use it as flexibly as possible, as fluently as my English. I did not follow up the opportunity to join IOs, because I know there is a (linguistic) hurdle here (P1).

Similarly, P2, a Spanish learner, did not see her LOTE learning as obligatory because she thought that since her Spanish level was lower than level B (intermediate level according to the Common European Framework of Reference), it would not be sufficient for use in IOs. P12 and P13 also believed that LOTEs were only useful if their level in the language was as good as their level in English. Their ability in LOTEs after one year of study was not sufficient to play a role in their future professional careers. From this perspective, we can see that a low proficiency in LOTEs mediates imagined identities, resulting in an inability to connect LOTEs with future careers.

In summary, all of the participants who exclusively considered LOTE learning to be a leisure and consumption activity reported their imagined future professional identity as an L2 English user, without any reliance on their LOTE ability. Their failure to anticipate the possibility of working in IOs, and their lack of LOTE ability, led to the absence of LOTEs in their imagined professional identities.

Multilingual Identity in a Workplace Where LOTEs are Necessary

The seven participants who regarded LOTE learning as an investment foresaw the usefulness of LOTEs in their future workplaces. Among them, five participants demonstrated a multilingual imagined identity in their future professional career, while two described a plurilingual imagined identity.

Those who expressed their desire to be multilingual employees in their future careers described LOTE learning plans such as learn one more language, master LOTEs, and continue to learn (LOTEs). These signify that these learners expect to acquire an additional language competence apart from English. P22 (see extract (1)) expressed her desire to do an internship in an IO in the near future, and to be an employee of an IO in the long term. When asked about the LOTE ability level that she expected to attain, she responded “as good as (my) English”. For this participant, multilingual competency is required for employees in IOs.

P21 expressed her plan to immigrate to the United States where Spanish is widely spoken, and she also wished to do an internship in an IO. She declared that her decision to continue to invest in Spanish learning was because she was planning for future socioeconomic mobility, which would require the ability to speak Spanish. P23 and P17 also expressed the importance of LOTEs in their desired future workplaces, Huawei and a foreign company, respectively. For them, ‘mastering LOTEs’ was necessary to succeed in these workplaces.

Another participant, P20, was one of only two students in her cohort who obtained the opportunity to participate in an internship program in an IO in the second year of the master’s program. As a fresh graduate, she had already been recruited by an exporting bank in Beijing. Although the job position did not require any ability in LOTEs, she was still anxious about her current bilingual identity and expressed a desire to be multilingual in the future, in order to respond to the competitive job market (see extract (4)). For this participant, acquiring multilingual competency constituted an entry ticket to the competitive job market. Although she had majored in English, she believed that her professional value would decrease in the job market because of the increasing importance of global
English. She worried about her future professional value and had decided to increase her value by learning one more language.

Plurilingual Identity in a Workplace Where Plurilingual Ability is Seen as ‘Icing on the Cake’

P19 and P18 expressed similar opinions about learning LOTEs and English. Both considered English to be necessary, even to work in a French company: as P19 said, English is a language that it is obligatory to master. Therefore, for them, LOTEs play the role of decoration, or icing on the cake. A basic knowledge of these languages helps to expand professional choices or find jobs or internships in IOs. For these two participants, mastering LOTEs did not seem to be necessary for their future professional aspirations and they invested in LOTE learning to build a plurilingual identity that would increase their chances of getting a desirable job.

4.2.2. Imagined Social Identity

Eleven learners mentioned the use of LOTEs in non-official situations such as travel, socialization, and informal communication. Except for one participant, who expressed his desire to master French before travelling to France, all the other participants described their imagined social identities as plurilingual.

Plurilingual Identity in Informal Situations

These ten participants anticipated the usefulness of LOTEs in informal occasions, although they did not show any ambition to master LOTEs, so that they could use the languages in such situations. Some of them considered LOTEs to be languages for tourism. For example, comparing the objective of learning of LOTEs with the objective of learning English, P11 stated:

(11) The objective of English learning is for my job, for my business, for my career, but French is learned for informal occasions such as travel purposes. Currently, I can say that I am learning it for my interest (P11).

This participant did not mention the level of French that she expected to obtain but described her travelling experience in Bordeaux while she had been studying in the Netherlands for a short period as an undergraduate student. When asked about the reasons for learning French, she stated:

(12) The country is so romantic. The place I have been to, that is, Bordeaux is a very beautiful place. I think I have capacity in the future, I want to spend my retired life there. French will be the language of my retired life (P11).

Others also mentioned LOTEs as an instrument of socialization. They thought that it was easier to make friends in foreign countries other than English-speaking countries, if one could speak the language of that country. This was shown above in extract (7), explained by P18.

Interestingly, in extract (8), P19 also illustrates the positive value of LOTEs in social settings, not only in a foreign language-speaking environment, but also in the Chinese environment. For this interviewee, as in professional settings, LOTEs can be the differentiating assets, with which one may build one’s personal brand during socialization.

In summary, nearly half of the participants did not show any ambition to acquire a mastery of LOTEs to achieve communication in informal situations; they were satisfied with their plurilingual competence in their imagined identities.

5. Discussion

By investigating LOTE learners’ beliefs in the context of LOTE education in China, our study first suggests that the majority of LOTE learners in our context regard language learning as leisure and consumption rather than investment. Compared with previous studies with a focus on English language learners, we observed that LOTE learners did not take an instrumental view of languages. Unlike English learning, in which Chinese learners invest significant efforts to increase their symbolic and material resources and to join imagined communities (e.g., [32,33]), the LOTE learners in our
study did not expect practical or economic benefits from language learning. Rather, they viewed LOTE learning as a leisure activity from which they may gain emotional fulfillment, satisfaction, or pleasure from classes, or communication with others in the target languages, as in the case of English learning in Kubota’s study [24].

Second, the results of this study revealed the imagined identities of these learners. Four different identities were found including bilingual identity (L2 English user), multilingual or plurilingual identities in future workplaces, and plurilingual identities in informal occasions. Our research provides a multi-dimensional classification concerning the linguistic identities of learners; we not only distinguish professional identity from socio identity, but also define linguistic identities according to the level of ability in LOTEs that learners expect to obtain (particularly differentiating multilingual identity from plurilingual identity).

Third, by examining beliefs as well as imagined identities, we found an interrelationship between identities and language beliefs. As the following figure demonstrates, learners who anticipate a bilingual identity (as a L2 English user) or a plurilingual identity in informal situations in the future view LOTE learning as leisure and consumption. In contrast, those who imagine themselves as multilingual/plurilingual employees in their future workplaces consider LOTE learning as an investment. We further observed that the presence or absence of themselves as LOTE users in their imagined future identities affects the learners’ language beliefs toward LOTEs. The absence of LOTE ability in an imagined future identity in the workplace constrains LOTE learners from considering LOTE learning as an investment. Anticipating plurilingual or multilingual identities in future professional careers may enhance the learners’ instrumental view of language learning, and thus motivate their investment in language learning.

Drawing on the notions of investment and consumption, our results not only confirm Norton’s research, which suggests that a learner’s investment in a language can be affected by his/her imagined identity and aspirational goals [49], but also extend the model of investment [23] by adding another perspective in relation to language learning beliefs: leisure. We argue that a learner’s identity, especially their imagined identity, interacts with their belief about LOTE learning as an investment as well as with their belief about language learning as consumption.

Finally, our study also showed that some LOTE learners do not recognize the usefulness of LOTEs in their imagined identities in their future professional career. We feel that this is caused by the program design at the meso-level including unrealistic program objectives and LOTE course planning. First, as the document presenting the program shows, the program was launched to cultivate talents who expected to work in IOs. However, in reality, jobs in IOs demand professional experience rather than a master’s degree. This gap orients the learners to abandon their original dream, thereby leading to an absence of LOTE use in their imagined future workplaces. Second, the limited LOTE courses offered by the program led to a low level of LOTE achievement, which is far below the requirements for languages used in IOs or other workplaces. By examining their linguistic repertoires, many learners are unable to anticipate the usefulness of LOTEs to their professional career because of their limited language ability. These findings may also have constructive implications for language policy planning at macro- and meso-levels in similar contexts (see below).

6. Conclusions

Drawing on notions of investment and consumption, this study examined the language beliefs of LOTEs held by individual learners in Chinese higher education in the shifting context of language planning and policies. We found that most participants question the usefulness of LOTEs for their professional careers, and view learning LOTEs as leisure and consumption. We do not intend to question this kind of view, however, and we regret that this view does not correspond to governmental and institutional beliefs about LOTE learning, who generally view and promote LOTE learning as an investment [50]. Even though our results do not necessarily reflect this, we do not intend any negative influence on the expansion of LOTE education.
As discussed above, the program design at the meso-level has affected some students’ imagined identities, which in turn has influenced their language beliefs. To address the two problems raised in the Discussion section above, we suggest that the macro- (governmental) and meso- (institutional) levels of language management should play a bigger role in improving multilingual education. Language learning planning proposed by the government and institutions such as universities directly influences the ways in which languages are used and taught within these institutions [51]. First, we suggest that in order to respond to the absence of LOTEs in the learners’ imagined professional identities, at the macro-level, the government should establish an employment platform to publicize available positions and give detailed requirements such as languages. At the meso-level, it will be necessary for institutions to communicate these detailed demands to their students. This information may trigger learners to imagine their identities as LOTE users in their future workplaces and orient them toward investing in LOTE learning [22].

Second, to address the gap between the learning outcomes of the program and the requirements for language ability in the workplace, the language learning program needs to be better planned. In our case, one year (128 h) of LOTE learning was far from sufficient for a job that requires a significant ability in a LOTE. A long-term language program with high-level learning outcomes may help these learners be able to use LOTEs in their future workplaces and prevent them from giving up on LOTE learning.

To conclude, we hope that the findings of our study will draw the attention of macro-level and meso-level language policy makers to LOTE education. Our findings reveal that a small number of language learners’ learning beliefs are not reflected in the program design, but rather are the result of individual characteristics, indicating that a micro-level investigation of individual cases will be helpful to enrich our understanding of LOTE learners. Thus, an in-depth investigation of multilayered influences on language beliefs will provide a more comprehensive picture of LOTE education in this specific context.

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