

# A Q methodology comparative analysis of teaching competencies for non-native speaking teachers of Chinese and Korean

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## Abstract

Despite the demand for education in Asian languages like Chinese and Korean, the teaching competencies required of non-native teachers of these languages remain underexplored. This comparative study uses Q methodology to investigate the subjective viewpoints of 39 Chinese and 35 Korean language teaching professionals regarding key teaching competencies for non-native teachers. Participants sorted the same set of 42 statements, enabling a systematic comparison across groups. A first-order factor analysis identified three perspectives among Chinese teachers and four among Korean teachers. A second-order factor analysis was then conducted to explore differences and commonalities across the two cohorts of teachers, revealing two macro-factors: the importance of near-native language proficiency (Macro-Factor 1) and the value of self-reflection and continuous professional development (Macro-Factor 2). The second order factor analysis also demonstrated the existence of peculiar perspectives among the Korean teacher cohort. By applying Q methodology to compare educational contexts, this study uncovers both shared and context-specific understandings of non-native teacher competencies. The results support the development of a dynamic framework of teacher competencies by presenting competencies as context-dependent. The findings provide practical insights for the development of context-sensitive teacher education programs that address the distinct professional needs of non-native Chinese and Korean language educators.

**Keywords:** teacher competencies, Q methodology, second-order factor analysis, non-native speaking teachers, Korean language teaching, Chinese language teaching

## 1. Introduction

Research about training non-native teachers has been so far mainly focused on English language teaching (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024), which, we argue, provides only a limited and biased understanding of the intricate dynamics beyond being a non-native teacher of Asian

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languages. A better understanding of this group of non-native teachers is critical, for example, in light of the youngest generations' language learning preferences trending towards Asian languages, compared to previous generations more focused on European languages (Lusin et al., 2023). Regarding the Chinese and Korean language teaching, a consideration of the teaching competencies required of non-native teachers cannot be postponed further, as Chinese language learners are present worldwide (Gil, 2021), and Korean language learners are growing supported by the global interest in the Korean pop culture (Fraschini & Kiaer, 2024). In this paper, following Richard (2010) and Tsui (2005), we understand language teacher competencies as localised, and as the sum of the expertise, practices, knowledge, and skills that teachers need to be successful professionals.

Our contribution presents the results of a comparative analysis of the main competencies for non-native teachers of Chinese and Korean as additional language, and considers whether different policies and pedagogical contexts are reflected in the subjective importance attached to certain non-native teacher competencies. To this end, the decision to compare the Chinese and the Korean language cases is meaningful. In the early 2000s, both China and Korea promoted policies to support their language on the global stage (Hu & Guo, 2025; Kim, 2019). This was followed, shortly after, by the recognition of the strategic importance of non-native professionals, and by a consequent interest in training non-native teachers. However, in many contexts, for example in Anglophone teaching settings, both languages are still predominantly taught by native speakers (see, for example, Scrimgeour et al., 2024; Wang & Chik, 2022). Furthermore, unlike English, both languages are supported by an official narrative that positions them within a specific region and culture. Therefore, by comparing the Chinese and the Korean case, we aim not just to address two Asian languages with respect to non-native teacher competencies, but also to explore the differences existing between two Asian educational contexts.

We conducted this study with Q methodology, a data gathering and analysis technique already used to investigate language teachers' subjective perspectives (Bonar et al., 2024; Fraschini & Park, 2021, 2022; Morea & Fisher, 2025; Park & Fraschini, 2025; Slaughter et al., 2024; Thumvichit, 2023; Yuan & Lo Bianco, 2022). Furthermore, Q methodology has already been effectively used in language teaching and learning research to compare different populations of participants (Caruso & Fraschini, 2024). Overall, this paper is innovative because of the scant research existing on the competencies of teachers of Asian languages, and because of the absence of comparative research in the field of language teacher training

adopting Q methodology. Indeed, other researchers have recently advocated for the need to fill these gaps (Thumvichit, 2024).

Results bear the potential to inform positive policy development in relation to language teacher training by providing cross-language understanding. Furthermore, by approaching the topic of teacher competencies from the subjective perspective of the teachers themselves, this study has the potential to provide a bottom-up contribution to teacher professional development programs, educational policy suggestions, and teacher evaluation practices.

In the following sections, we will first present existing frameworks of language teacher competencies and discuss the relevance of non-native language teachers, before illustrating the Chinese and Korean language teacher training contexts. Then, we will report the results of our research and draw practical considerations for policy development and teacher training.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Language teacher competencies**

As we pointed out in the introduction, teaching competencies can be understood as the skills, expertise, practices, knowledge, and beliefs that teachers need to be successful educators. Understanding what comprises teaching competencies is fundamental to crafting, among others, teacher training programs that actively support future teachers in becoming successful professionals. However, defining teacher competencies is not an easy task, because what constitutes good teaching, and therefore a good teacher, is shaped by local practices, customs, and beliefs (Tsui, 2009). In other words, teaching competencies are fluid and change across educational contexts.

In the field of language education, what have been stressed as necessary teaching competencies have shifted together with the introduction of subsequent pedagogical approaches. Early models emphasised linguistic and pedagogical knowledge as the core components of effective teaching (Thomas, 1987). Tsui (2005) observed that teacher expertise, as framed in the research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, was essentially understood as a state reached after years of practice, instead of a process. Hence, the development of teacher expertise was mainly seen as filling the gap between novice and experienced teachers. In approximately the same years, the rise of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) brought a focus on interaction, learner agency, and contextual relevance. In line with this shift, Richards (2010) outlined a framework where teachers are expected to be both reflective practitioners

and active facilitators of learning. More recently, Haukås and Mercer (2022) have drawn attention to teacher personality and interpersonal-social skills as central domains of language teacher competencies. In a comparative study of language and non-language subject teachers, Haukås et al. (2022) identified context-sensitive pedagogical knowledge, interdisciplinary flexibility, and adaptability to institutional hierarchies and cultural norms as key competencies. Their findings underscore the increasing importance of emotional intelligence, empathy, and relational skills in today's diverse and dynamic classrooms.

Current understanding of teacher competencies is heavily influenced by discussions predominantly conducted in an environment focused on English and European languages. As we have mentioned above, teacher competencies are fluid and localised; therefore, we decided to depart from an Anglo-centric and Euro-centric vision of teacher competencies and use as a starting point of our research tool the framework developed by Lee and Kim (2022). This framework, developed with a focus on non-native professionals, is grounded in scholarship and expertise of teaching an Asian language in an Asian context. Lee and Kim's (2022) framework is built around four dimensions, defined as 1) the ability to construct an identity as a non-native teacher and to pursue professional development, 2) knowledge about language and culture and the use of this knowledge for teaching, 3) ability to develop knowledge and skills in teaching the target language, and 4) ability to interact and communicate in the classroom and the institutional environment.

## **2.2. Non-native speaking teachers**

Traditionally, the native speaker has been regarded as the ideal benchmark for language teachers, shaping dominant conceptions of professionalism in the field (Selvi et al., 2024). Holliday (2005) critiqued the native teacher benchmark, partly because of the fuzziness of the concept of 'native speaker' and partly because he recognised that native speakers have historically been constructed as representatives of a Western cultural paradigm, from which dominant linguistic norms and pedagogical models have emerged. This dichotomous framing of 'Western' versus 'non-Western' places non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) in a constant position of comparison and often portrays their professional identity as deficient or incomplete.

Researchers increasingly challenged this deficit view (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024; Selvi, 2025; Selvi et al., 2024). Selvi et al. (2024) argued for a reconceptualisation of professionalism in language teaching, recognising NNESTs' competencies beyond linguistic proficiency alone and highlighting the importance of intercultural competence, pedagogical

expertise, learner strategy instruction, and the ability to model successful language learning journeys. From this perspective, NNESTs are valued for their ability to bridge cultures, anticipate learner difficulties, foster empathy, and embody multilingual identities that resonate with global language learners.

Most studies on non-native language teachers have focused predominantly on the English language context, where discussions of professionalism, competence, and legitimacy are deeply intertwined with the global dominance of English (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024). Less attention has been given to non-native teachers of other languages, even though they may face more complex challenges compared to their English teaching colleagues. In fact, non-native teachers of Asian languages must not only demonstrate high language proficiency but also meet expectations shaped by Western models, which may not fully align with the cultural and pedagogical traditions of the languages they teach (Yuan & Lo Bianco, 2022).

Quite often, research focused on non-native teachers of Asian languages has taken a comparative approach that tends to draw conclusions by comparing native vs non-native teachers. Such an approach is visible, for example, in the field of Japanese language teaching (Hobbs et al., 2009; Sakurai, 2012), in the field of Korean language teaching (Kang & Lee, 2008; Frascini, 2010), and in the field of Chinese language teaching (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Even when such a comparison is conducted with the good intention of foregrounding non-native teachers' strengths, it nevertheless risks providing the ground for more biases and dangerous categorisations. For such reasons, we advocate for the need to understand perspectives on competencies of non-native teachers of Chinese and Korean on their own terms. To this end, Q methodology is extremely useful because it is a self-referential research technique. Participants in this study have been asked to demonstrate their opinion of non-native teacher competencies with reference to themselves, their experience, and their beliefs, and not in reference to native teachers.

Non-native teachers of Chinese and Korean, and of Asian languages in general, must develop competencies that extend beyond language proficiency to include deep cultural knowledge, pedagogical adaptability across educational paradigms, and the ability to mediate between the cultural norms of the target language and the methodological expectations of local learners. As global language education continues to diversify, there is a growing need to broaden the research lens and more fully recognise the multifaceted professional competencies of non-native teachers across a wider range of languages.

### 3. Background

#### 3.1. Teacher education and non-native teachers in the Chinese language education context

The development of Chinese language education is closely intertwined with China's Reform and Opening-Up policy, which marked the country's engagement with the global community (Hu & Guo, 2025). In the early 2000s the promotion of overseas Chinese language learning became a coordinated and large-scale national initiative. A major turning point occurred in 2005 with the establishment of the Office of Chinese Language Council International, known as *Hanban*, which was later restructured and renamed the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC). As the body overseeing the global Confucius Institute network, *Hanban* played a pivotal role in shaping curriculum frameworks and teacher training programs. In 2007, *Hanban* introduced the Standards for Teachers of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages, which laid the foundation for the CTCSOL (Certificate for Teachers of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages), a standardised international credential currently administered by CLEC. The Standards were first updated in 2012, and in 2022 a new version was released by the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching, a professional teacher association representing the field. Developed by scholars and experts in Chinese language education, the Standards represent a collective effort to codify teacher competencies on an international scale. They set out a comprehensive framework that encompasses linguistic knowledge, pedagogical skills, and cultural literacy, and in their most recent iteration, intercultural communicative competence, technology integration, and student-centred pedagogy. Nevertheless, while the Standards represent an ambitious and comprehensive policy blueprint, their actual impact on the realities of international Chinese education remains largely unknown (Ding, 2024).

The field of Chinese language teachers has traditionally been dominated by native teachers and a longstanding emphasis on proficiency-based standards (Orton, 2016). For non-native Chinese teachers, attaining a professional certification such as CTCSOL requires submission of a Level 6 score on the HSK (Test of Proficiency in Chinese), which is considered equivalent to C2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Reflecting this, most of the existing research on non-native Chinese teachers is focused on how they manage perceived linguistic deficiencies in comparison to their native-speaking counterparts (Liu & Wang, 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2018).

A shift is now occurring, and non-native Chinese teachers are increasingly recognised as critical contributors to the expansion of Chinese language education, particularly in the

Global South. In the Chinese academic discourse, these teachers are not commonly labelled as ‘non-native’ but rather described as *bentu* (local), emphasising their contextual embeddedness and local relevance, rather than linguistic limitations (Wu, 2016). In Wang and Mason’s (2023) study, a non-native Chinese teacher in New Zealand was found to have feelings of fear and vulnerability due to her linguistic weakness. Nevertheless, her empathetic teaching style was viewed by students as more effective than that of her native-speaking peers. This highlights that non-native Chinese teachers bring unique pedagogical strengths and may have distinct professional needs that deserve more focused attention in both research and teacher education practice.

### **3.2. Teacher education and non-native teachers in the Korean language education context**

After the 2000s, factors such as the commercial relevance of the Republic of Korea and the global influence of its popular culture contributed to growing and diversifying the population of Korean language learners. At around the same time, the increasing number of training programs and university degree courses in Teaching Korean as a Foreign Language triggered the need to regulate the profession. The occasion came with the *Framework Act of the Korean Language* of 2005, a piece of legislation that introduced, among others, the national certification of teaching Korean as a foreign language. In the early years, the requirements to obtain the teacher certification did not differentiate between native and non-native speakers. However, following an amendment introduced in 2010, the criteria to obtain the certification now require non-Korean nationals to submit a TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean) score of level 6, the highest level. The *Framework Act* contributed to boosting Korean language teacher training: Kim (2015) shows that between 2005 and 2015, the number of Korean universities offering a graduate degree in teaching Korean as a foreign language passed from 14 to 103. The certification framework was heavily influenced by policy reports of the early 2000s, such as for example the report prepared by Paik for the then Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Paik, 2001), reflecting a static and content knowledge-focused understanding of teacher competencies. As such, the framework has been criticised for being too close to Korean L1 language education (see Kim, 2006) and for being excessively rigid (see Cho, 2012).

Overall, in the field of Korean language education, the needs of non-native Korean teachers have been taken into scant consideration, in research and training terms, for a long time. If research on non-native Korean teachers’ identity and perceptions dates back to the early 2010s (Fraschini, 2010; 2012), research into their teaching competencies began flourishing only recently (Kim, 2023; Kim et al., 2025; Lee & Kim, 2022; Lee et al., 2020). In

training terms, an attempt to address the unique needs of non-native Korean teachers within the framework established by the *Framework Act* is represented by the *K-Teacher program*, an asynchronous online teacher training program introduced in 2024 by the National Institute of Korean Language (NIKL, n.d.) and aimed at overseas teachers. At the same time, efforts to set up programs to train local Korean language teachers are visible in some overseas contexts (Fraschini, 2024; Huong, 2025).

A common challenge faced by initiatives such as the *K-teacher program* is to address the specific needs of non-native teachers. The program syllabi and requirements may not present many differences from programs designed to include both native and non-native teachers. This insufficient consideration for non-native teacher competencies becomes the rationale for the need for research-based reflections on whether non-native teachers need to develop specific competencies and, in this case, what these competencies are.

#### **4. Research questions**

This study explores how teaching competencies for non-native language teachers are understood across two educational contexts. Our aim is to investigate perspectives within each group and to compare them. Hence, we are guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are Chinese language teachers' subjective perspectives on the core competencies required of non-native Chinese language teachers?

RQ2. What are Korean language teachers' subjective perspectives on the core competencies required of non-native Korean language teachers?

RQ3. In what ways do Chinese and Korean language teachers' perspectives align or differ regarding the competencies expected of non-native teachers, and what insights can be drawn from this cross-contextual comparison?

#### **5. Methodology and procedure**

##### **5.1. Q methodology and second-order factor analysis**

Q methodology provides a framework for data gathering and analysis to investigate people's subjectivity. Although there may be differences in how researchers understand the term 'subjectivity' in Q methodology (Lundberg et al., 2023), nevertheless William Stephenson, the father of Q methodology, understood it as "merely what one can converse about, to others, or to oneself" (Stephenson, 1968, p. 501). In other words, subjectivity is the communication of a personal point of view. Such a personal point of view is expressed by people through their behaviour, which is shaped by present and past personal experiences, as well as by the surrounding environment. Behaviour, which for Stephenson (1953) includes also thoughts and personality, and therefore subjectivity, is then observable through the act of conducting a Q sort (Brown, 1980; Stephenson, 2014). Since people's behaviour is shaped by personal experiences and the surrounding environment, subjectivity as expressed through a Q sort is said to be self-referential (Stephenson, 1993).

In applied linguistics, Q methodology has been used to investigate topics such as cognition, emotion, motivation, and language policies (Fraschini et al., 2024). Earlier applications to language research were limited to observing the opinions and subjectivities of a group of participants, but more recently Q methodology has also been used to conduct in-group and across-group comparisons. Among studies providing in-group comparisons, there are longitudinal studies of the same group of participants conducting the same sort twice at two different points in time (Fukuda, 2024; Morea, 2024). For non-longitudinal across-group comparisons, the simplest procedure collates the sorts of participants belonging to different groups and observes whether any factor is characterised by the participants of one of the two groups only (Fraschini & Lundberg, 2024).

However, Watts and Stenner (2012) and Ramlo (2025) suggested that comparisons in Q methodology research can also be conducted through a second-order factor analysis. Arnau (1998) noted that second-order factor analysis is generally used to achieve a broader level of generalisation or to provide a different perspective on the data; therefore, using this technique with the main purpose of conducting a comparison is a characteristic of Q methodology. Furthermore, while traditional second-order factor analysis allows the first-order factors to be correlated by employing oblique factor rotation techniques, Q methodology employs orthogonal factor rotation techniques on the first-order factors also when performing a second-order factor analysis. Q methodology studies have adopted a second-order factor analysis to compare different groups of participants (Coke & Brown, 1976; Rhoad & Kinsey, 2008), different conditions of instruction (Dennis, 1991; Wong et al., 2004), or bilingual Q samples (Brown & Feist, 1992). To our knowledge, the only Q methodology study adopting a second-

order factor analysis in the field of applied linguistics has been conducted by Caruso and Frascini (2024), who compared two groups of language students.

As we have seen, China and Korea have developed their teacher training requirements on the grounds of their understanding of non-native teachers and framed them in different educational contexts. These different contexts may have influenced what teachers perceive to be the main competencies for non-native teachers, leading to the emergence of a perspective about non-native teacher competencies unique to either the Chinese or the Korean language education environment. This assumption constitutes the rationale for employing a second-order factor analysis approach to compare the two cohorts, together with the fact that the data for the Korean teacher cohort had been previously collected and reported separately (Kim et al., 2025).

## 5.2. P set and Q sample

The participants of this study are a group of Korean language teachers and a group of Chinese language teachers. Both groups include native and non-native professionals, as well as teachers with different degrees of experience. The two groups are also mixed in terms of whether the teachers have received their teaching degree respectively from a Korean or a Chinese university, or from an institution in another country. The background details of the two cohorts of teachers are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. P set.

		Korean language teachers	Chinese language teachers
Country of degree (teacher training)	In Korea/China	31	30
	Overseas	4	9
Teaching experience (years)	< 1 year	1	2
	1–5 years	19	14
	6–10 years	7	10
	> 10 years	8	13
Employment status (institution type)	Not currently working	4	7
	University	24	22
	Secondary school	1	5
	Private institution	4	2
	Other	2	3
Self-rated Korean/Chinese proficiency	Native speaker	15	17
	Advanced/Near native	19	13
	Intermediate	1	9

Participants were recruited, in both cases, among graduates from degree programs offered by Korean and Chinese universities, respectively, in teaching Korean or Chinese as a foreign language, and among the researchers' personal network. Participating non-native teachers of Korean came from a variety of backgrounds, namely China, Japan, Cambodia, India, Myanmar, Türkiye, and Vietnam. Non-native teachers of Chinese were also from several different backgrounds, including Cameroon, Hungary, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The Q set used to collect data among both teacher cohorts is an adaptation of the final framework produced by Lee and Kim's (2022) Delphi study, which delivered 44 teacher competencies. As already discussed in Kim et al. (2025), two statements of the original framework were discarded because they were deemed too vague and unsuited for inclusion in a Q methodology study. The remaining 42 statements of the Q set are representative of the four domains of non-native language teacher competencies discussed in section 2.1. The full list of statements translated into English is available in the supplementary materials.

### 5.3. Data collection and analysis

The data for this study were collected at two different times, but following the same protocol approved by the Human Ethics Research Office of the University of Melbourne. The sorts of both the Chinese and the Korean teachers were collected through the application Q Sort Collection App v.1.0.2 (Fraschini et al., 2022). The Chinese teachers' sorts were collected in person, while, because of logistical limitations, the Korean teachers' sorts were collected remotely.

Through the online application, teachers were asked to sort the 42 statements about non-native teacher competencies depending on whether they agreed, disagreed, or were neutral about their content. Then, participants were asked to sort the same statements on a grid from a continuum from most agree to the right (+5) to most disagree to the left (-5). Table 2 shows the number of statements participants could sort under each value of the column of the grid. After sorting the statements, participants were prompted by the application to comment on the statements they placed at the two extremes of the grid.

Table 2. Sorting grid.

Value	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
N. of statements	1	2	4	5	6	6	6	5	4	2	1

The sorts collected from the teachers were analysed with KADE (Banasick, 2019) v1.2.1 (Korean cohort) and v1.3.1 (Chinese cohort). As previously reported by Kim et al. (2025), for the Korean teachers' cohort, we extracted four factors using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), which were then subjected to Varimax rotation. For the Chinese teachers' cohort, we identified three factors using the same extraction and rotation techniques. For both cohorts, we flagged significant sorts by considering first a loading of 0.40 ( $p < .01$ ), progressively increased to include as many participants as possible by decreasing the number of confounded sorts. The factor arrays and the factor loadings of the two cohorts are available in the supplementary materials. The seven factors obtained from the first-order analysis were then subjected to a new PCA using Jasp (Jasp Team, 2025).

The factor summaries in section 6 provide a description of the salient characteristics of the point of view expressed by each factor. These are based on the statements that, within the same teacher cohort, have been ranked higher (or lower) than others within the same factor, and statements ranked higher (or lower) in a factor compared to the ranking of the same statement in other factors. The descriptions have been informed by insights provided by the post-sort comments collected through the online application, and by post-sort interviews. In the case of the Korean teacher cohort, four separate interviews were conducted with the most representative participants of each factor (for details, see Kim et al., 2025). More interviews with the participants of the Korean teacher cohort, along with an in-depth interview analysis, are available in Kim (2024). In the case of the Chinese teacher cohort, a short post-sort interview was conducted with each participant. The different modality of the post-sort interviews between the two cohorts is due to the aforementioned logistical constraints. Overall, the interviews contributed to further strengthening the factor descriptions summarised in the next section by deepening the understanding of the study participants.

## **6. Results**

### **6.1. First-order factor analysis**

#### **6.1.1. Non-native Chinese teachers**

##### *Chinese teacher Factor 1*

For the professionals loading on Factor 1, the most essential competence that a non-native Chinese language teacher should possess is advanced fluency in the language. Additionally, these teachers stress the importance of linguistic accuracy, including adherence to grammar and syntax norms, as well as the ability to demonstrate a near-native command of Chinese in an appropriate and natural manner. From a content knowledge perspective, participants stress that non-native teachers should have an advanced understanding of linguistic knowledge, such as overt knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. This knowledge forms the foundation for effective instruction, allowing teachers to explain complex linguistic concepts and support students in their learning process. Beyond these aspects, an emotional connection to both teaching and the Chinese language is also seen as fundamental for a non-native Chinese teacher. Such an emotional aspect includes, for example, passion for the profession and a genuine appreciation for the language itself. Compared to others, this factor places less emphasis on non-teaching related competencies such as administrative duties or maintaining an active presence in non-teaching roles.

#### *Chinese teacher Factor 2*

The teachers associated with factor 2 emphasise that the core competency for non-native Chinese teachers lies in self-reflection and continuous professional development and that teachers need to constantly evaluate and cultivate their teaching expertise to enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. These teachers believe that a significant competency for non-native Chinese professionals is the ability to maximise their unique advantage of understanding students from the students' perspective and to develop skills that include the ability to adjust their teaching strategies and the level of Chinese language used in class to suit the dynamics of the classroom context. Additionally, non-native Chinese teachers should be skilled in analysing students' characteristics, motivations, and learning goals and incorporate intercultural comparisons between Chinese and the students' native culture. Unlike Factor 1, this perspective views advanced Chinese language proficiency as a competency of secondary importance for non-native teachers. In other words, near-native fluency and contextually appropriate language use are considered less relevant for a teacher than pedagogical expertise.

#### *Chinese teacher Factor 3*

Factor 3 highlights the ability to develop a deep emotional and professional dedication as the foundation of a non-native Chinese teacher. At its core, a deep love for the Chinese language

is seen as a driving force to refine their linguistic proficiency and teaching skills. Moreover, this viewpoint emphasises that a strong commitment to the teaching profession itself is also essential. Beyond passion, a solid ethical foundation and a sense of professional responsibility are also regarded as important. Non-native Chinese teachers are expected to uphold high standards of integrity and remain accountable for their students' learning. They also need to develop a mindset of continuous self-improvement and understand that lifelong learning extends beyond improving Chinese language proficiency and involves ongoing pedagogical improvement, critical reflection on teaching practice, and a commitment to professional growth. Compared to others, this factor downplays the significance of theoretical knowledge of second language acquisition and the ability to adhere strictly to curricular frameworks. Also, non-teaching responsibilities, such as administrative duties and institutional engagement, are regarded as the least relevant to building teacher competence.

### **6.1.2. Non-native Korean teachers**

#### *Korean teacher Factor 1*

This perspective stresses the importance of being flexible in pedagogical approaches and of having sufficient proficiency in the Korean language. Pedagogical flexibility means understanding that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to language teaching and that non-native teachers need to be able to adapt their teaching strategies and teaching style to the linguistic and sociocultural environment of their institution, and to learners' characteristics and needs. Furthermore, this factor stresses the need to understand that pedagogical knowledge is important to meet the requirements of the teaching environment and to allow the teacher to face unexpected circumstances in the classroom. The professionals associated with this factor also believe that non-native teachers should possess an advanced language, ideally a near-native level, and a deep understanding of the Korean phonetic system, which indicates good pronunciation. This factor considers less important some affective aspects such as the need to love the Korean language or the teaching profession.

#### *Korean teacher Factor 2*

The teachers associated with this factor stressed as the main competencies needed for non-native Korean teachers the commitment to the teaching profession and to continuing professional development. For this factor, non-native teachers must engage in self-analysis, reflecting on their teaching to develop their expertise. These professionals also believe that

non-native teachers should maximise the advantage provided by their non-native background to understand learners' challenges and to provide students with more focused counselling, thanks to their experience of learning Korean as an additional language. The perspective of this factor stresses the necessity of a strong ethic, commitment, enthusiasm and passion towards the teaching profession. Participants associated with this factor think non-native Korean teachers need to have a high degree of content knowledge related to Korean linguistics, applied linguistics, and comparative linguistics. However, this does not include them being fluent in Korean. Additionally, the professionals associated with this factor are neutral about the need to have a high degree of Korean language proficiency.

### *Korean teachers Factor 3*

For this factor, the most important competence that should characterise a non-native Korean teacher is the love for the Korean language. Teachers associated with this factor believe that loving the Korean language pushes non-native teachers towards improving their teaching and growing as a teacher. This factor reminds us that non-native teachers are life-long language learners, and as such, they need to continue working on their language knowledge and proficiency. Hence, participants associated with this factor also believe that non-native teachers must be fluent in the Korean language and need to put effort into maintaining their fluency. Additionally, this factor places more importance on intercultural awareness than others. As all language teachers, non-native professionals need an enhanced intercultural awareness and deep understanding of the Korean language. Ultimately, an accentuated cross-cultural understanding enables non-native Korean teachers to function as bridges between the students and the Korean culture. A last characteristic of the perspective foregrounded in this factor is that the ability to conduct counselling activities and to mediate to overcome attritions with students is less relevant compared to other competencies.

### *Korean teachers Factor 4*

For factor 4, the most important competencies for a non-native Korean teacher are a love for the Korean language and a love for the teaching profession. Similarly, for Factor 3, Factor 4 notes that it is the love for the teaching profession that pushes non-native teachers to grow as educators, along with a sense of responsibility. While other factors stress the importance of content and linguistic knowledge or the possession of a high level of Korean language fluency, this factor does not think the same, and it is also neutral regarding the need to possess advanced Korean language proficiency. Instead, Factor 4 believes that non-native Korean teachers need

the ability to develop educational material and to use technological tools in their classrooms. A further difference with other factors is the little relevance this factor associates with taking advantage of the non-native speaker as a bi-lingual and bi-cultural teacher; therefore, to possess competencies such as the ability to use two languages in the classroom or to make cross-cultural comparisons.

## 6.2. Second-order factor analysis

The second-order factor analysis delivered the two macro-factors illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Second-order factor analysis, component loadings.

	Macro-factor 1	Macro-factor 2
Chinese teachers F1	<b>*0.898</b>	0.121
Korean teachers F3	<b>*0.801</b>	0.243
Chinese teachers F3	<b>*0.751</b>	0.113
Korean teachers F4	0.560	0.364
Korean teachers F1	0.459	0.605
Chinese teachers F2	0.170	<b>*0.763</b>
Korean teachers F2	0.086	<b>*0.855</b>

The purpose of the comparison is to produce a clearer view of whether there are groups of teachers among the two cohorts with a distinctive point of view about non-native teacher competencies.

Macro-factor 1 includes Chinese teachers' F1 and F3, and Korean teachers' F3, and it is characterised by competencies such as the need to be a fluent speaker of the target language, the development of the awareness of being a lifelong language learner, and the need to love the target language. The presence of a perspective such as Macro-factor 1 is common across the Korean language teaching and Chinese language teaching contexts.

Macro-factor 2 includes Chinese teachers' F2 and Korean teachers' F2 and stresses the importance of self-reflection about teaching practices, along with developing the ability to engage in continuing professional development. Macro-factor 2 also highlights non-native teachers' ability to maximise the advantages of being a non-native teacher. In contrast to macro-factor 1, macro-factor 2 considers fluency and proficiency in the target language as competencies of secondary importance compared to pedagogical skills.

Table 2 shows that Korean teachers' F1 and F4 are not clearly associated with any macro-factor. These two factors provide two peculiar perspectives of the Korean language teaching context that are not observable among Chinese language teachers. Although Korean

teachers' F1 stresses the importance of an advanced, if not near-native, language proficiency, its peculiarity lies in considering flexibility as one of the most important competencies. Such flexibility consists of the ability to adapt teaching material, teaching approaches, and language used to the specific context and learners' needs. In other words, in an environment where there is not a one-size-fits-all approach, Korean teachers' F1 stresses the ability to be adaptable to different teaching situations. Korean teachers' F4, on the other hand, stresses teacher responsibility along with the need to love the teaching profession, accompanied by the ability to develop appropriate teaching resources. In particular, teacher responsibility, understood as the ability to attend to common teacher duties, is a strong characteristic of this factor, a unique perspective existing among Korean teachers.

## **7. Discussion**

### *Chinese teachers*

Among Chinese language teachers, three different perspectives emerged. Factors 1 and 3 emphasise advanced language proficiency and linguistic accuracy, reflecting traditional frameworks that equate teaching competence with native-speaker norms (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). F1 positions the teacher primarily as a transmitter of language content and grammatical rules (Ding, 2024). F3 highlights an affective and ethical dimension, reflecting traditional Confucian views of teachers as moral role models, responsible for both instruction and character formation (Yuan & Lo Bianco, 2022). F2 reframes professional competence around growth and adaptability (Richards, 2010), valuing teacherhood as evolving competence (Selvi, 2025), consistent with student-centred pedagogical models influenced by Western educational paradigms (Holliday, 2005).

Although these three perspectives diverge in their emphasis, they all converge in downplaying non-instructional competencies, such as administrative duties and institutional engagement. This shared devaluation of broader institutional competencies raises critical questions about how professional roles are defined and constrained for non-native Chinese language teachers (Orton, 2016; Wang & Mason, 2023). It may reflect structural limitations in their access to leadership and a strategic narrowing of focus toward classroom performance as a compensatory response to perceived status hierarchies within the profession (Selvi et al., 2024).

### *Korean teachers*

Korean language teachers held four distinct perspectives on what constitutes core professional competencies for non-native teachers. F1 and F3 reflect the enduring influence of native-speakerism, where speakerhood is viewed as a key marker of legitimacy (Holliday, 2005). F1, however, balances this with an emphasis on pedagogical flexibility and the ability to adapt instruction to learners and context, which aligns with a broader educational discourse on responsive and context-sensitive teaching (Haukås et al., 2022). This suggests a hybrid view that values both linguistic authenticity and instructional adaptability. In comparison, F3 places greater weight on speaker identity, portraying love for the Korean language as the defining quality of a competent teacher. Korean teachers' F2 highlights professional commitment and continuous development, reflecting a vision of teaching grounded in high standards, self-improvement, and ethical responsibility (Yuan & Lo Bianco, 2022). F4 gives particular attention to the affective dimension of competence, emphasising love for the profession, a strong sense of responsibility, the ability to develop teaching resources, and strong interpersonal relationships. This perspective aligns with the growing recognition of emotional intelligence, empathy, and relational skills deemed essential by Haukås and Mercer (2022).

### *Comparative insights*

As highlighted in Macro-factor 1, both cohorts of teachers include perspectives reflecting the discourse surrounding the teacher certification criteria of the respective country, stressing the need for non-native professionals to possess a very high, if not near-native, language proficiency. In the Korean case, this perspective is aligned with the current requirements of the teaching certification, which stresses language proficiency and content knowledge, along with the requirement of demonstrating the highest level of language proficiency through a standardised test. Also, in the Chinese case, a similar alignment of this perspective to the main discourse is visible, considering the requirement of submitting proof of passing level 6 of the HSK test.

The strong emphasis on near-native language proficiency underscores the enduring influence of native speakerism in defining professional competencies. A critical view of native-speakerism, as visible in English language teaching (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024; Selvi et al., 2024), is still missing from Chinese and Korean language education. This may be attributed to the fact that, unlike English as a global lingua franca, Chinese and Korean have yet to develop comparable narratives that legitimise diverse speaker identities and challenge the native-

speaker standard due to the presence of policies strongly supporting a national standard language (see Frascini & Park, 2024; Grey, 2025).

As highlighted in Macro-factor 2, both cohorts of teachers also stress self-reflection and continuing professional development to maximise the advantages of non-native teachers. Macro-factor 2 sees teacher competency as a developmental process, more than a fixed state (Tsui, 2005). This is a perspective not reflected in the Korean teacher certification framework if not through the practicum component; however, such capabilities are addressed in the revised 2022 version of the Standards for International Chinese Language Teachers. Macro-factor 2 also recognises the importance of possessing pedagogical skills over linguistic competence, with pedagogical skills being relevant in the framework of both countries. The stress on self-reflection and continuous professional development marks a shift from linguistic attainment toward pedagogical capability growth. While this perspective aligns with broader contemporary educational trends (Haukås et al., 2022), it also reveals underlying tensions in how non-native teachers are positioned. The emphasis on ongoing development may implicitly reinforce deficit discourses, suggesting that non-native teachers are inherently incomplete and must continually improve to attain legitimacy. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that the focus is shifting toward pedagogical expertise rather than native-like fluency, signalling a move away from a speaker-based to a pedagogy-driven model of professionalism in language education (Selvi, 2025).

With the teaching certification being strictly centralised and regulated in the case of both languages, the perspective existing among Korean teachers stressing the ability to be flexible and adaptable depending on the learning environment stands aside. While the amended Chinese certification requirements stress the need to adopt a learner-centred approach, a perspective reflecting the need to possess this skill did not clearly emerge among the Chinese teacher cohort. We can only hypothesise that, considering the relatively recent introduction of the amendment, it may take time before teachers become fully aware of it. We also acknowledge that the unique perspectives emerging from the Korean cohort, stressing respectively flexibility and responsibility as an educator, are not easily encapsulated into a teacher certification framework, but reflect multiple subjective experiences of Korean language teachers, a mirror of the study participants' subjective beliefs.

The results show subtle differences in beliefs among the teachers of the two cohorts. Considering that such differences exist between teachers of two Asian languages, the overgeneralisation of Western frameworks solely based on English language teaching is not applicable to other contexts. Therefore, we call for more consideration of language and context-

specific knowledge in language teacher training. This consideration foregrounds the need of establishing teacher training programs in local overseas contexts, a pressing task for both the Chinese (Wang & Chik, 2022) and the Korean language (Fraschini, 2024) contexts.

The results of this paper foreground the need to develop an understanding of teacher competencies that embed local knowledge and practices. The outcome of our comparison points towards the necessity to contextualise teacher expertise within clear pedagogical and policy contexts, and to recognise that what is considered relevant and necessary in a pedagogical context may not be relevant and necessary in another. While this has already been acknowledged more than a decade ago by scholars such as Tsui (2005, 2009) and Richards (2010), nevertheless the certification frameworks adopted in the case of the languages considered in this paper still take a one-size-fits-all approach to teacher competencies, hence ignoring the importance of contextualised expertise.

Such a consideration has important repercussions in policy terms. In fact, the results call for policymakers dealing with language education to take all possible perspectives into consideration in future amendments to the respective teacher certification frameworks. For policymakers, acknowledging the fluidity of teacher competencies can represent a real challenge in practical administrative terms; nevertheless, it is a challenge that needs to be addressed since, for example, in the field of Korean language teaching, voices calling for flexible frameworks have already been present for more than a decade (Cho, 2012). The fluidity of teacher competencies can be addressed in practical terms by developing a modular certification framework, where the weight of each module varies depending on the context of the certification applicant.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study offers valuable insights into the teaching competencies perceived as core for non-native Chinese and Korean teachers. Among Chinese teachers, competencies were framed largely through traditional lenses, emphasising linguistic accuracy, moral responsibility, and ethical commitment. Korean teachers expressed a broader and more diverse range of perspectives, including also stressing pedagogical adaptability and emotional intelligence. Compared to the more established field of English language teaching, training for teachers of Asian languages must address these nuanced, context-specific needs, developing curricula that balance linguistic mastery with pedagogical flexibility and reflective practice.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of Q methodology as a comparative tool across national and linguistic boundaries. Through the first-order factor analysis, the results showed perspectives, at the individual level, cutting across theoretical categories. The use of second-order factor analysis, then, allowed for the identification of patterns that transcend individual perspectives, revealing two overarching orientations: one prioritising near-native proficiency, the other privileging self-reflection and professional development. This approach highlights the potential of Q methodology to capture both diversity and convergence in cross-cultural educational research.

We acknowledge some limitations. Although the same Q sample was used across cohorts, the translation of the statements may have introduced subtle shifts in meaning, particularly for pedagogical concepts accepted in Korean and Chinese language teaching but grounded in Western traditions. Additionally, future studies would benefit from incorporating the views of other stakeholders, including policymakers and students, and by exploring teacher competencies in a greater variety of language teaching contexts. Nevertheless, we believe this study highlights the importance of moving beyond Eurocentric models of teacher competencies and of reflecting the complex realities of teachers working in Asian language education contexts.

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