

Exploring Graduate Teaching Assistants' Beliefs and Practices in Chinese as a Foreign Language Tutoring Program

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Abstract—The current qualitative study researches graduate Teaching Assistants' (TAs') beliefs and teaching practices towards Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) tutoring sessions and examines the possible factors that shape and influence their beliefs about teaching and tutoring. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with three experienced graduate TAs in a CFL program at a higher education institution in the U.S. Findings revealed that TAs viewed tutoring with four major functions: review/practice of course content, remedial work, test preparation, and individualized instruction. To achieve effectiveness with these functions, they identified three types of methods for tutoring: great emphasis on explicit and implicit instruction of grammar and vocabulary, adoption of error feedback in tutoring writing, and recognition and attempted implementation of task-based teaching. Four factors have been identified to impact TAs' beliefs: TA training, curriculum guidelines, students' feedback, and preconceived beliefs. By exploring the TAs' beliefs, the program administrators would know more about the gaps in their curriculum objectives and actual teaching practices, thus can better train TAs in the future, which is also beneficial to the language learners. This professional and practical motivation is the goal of the current study.

Index Terms—second language instruction, individual tutorials, teachers' beliefs, graduate teaching assistants

I. INTRODUCTION

Researchers of language teaching have gained a great interest in teachers' beliefs in recent years. According to Kagan (1990), teachers' belief is defined as “pre- or in-service teachers' self-reflections, beliefs and knowledge about teaching, students, and content” (p. 421). Borg (1999) described the term as “the beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions, and attitudes that teachers hold on all aspects of their work” (p. 95). The study of second and foreign language teachers' beliefs has emerged since the mid-1990s.

Previous studies have shown that teachers' beliefs have played an important role in teaching and learning. Zheng (2009) pointed out that teachers' beliefs are critical indicators of understanding teachers' thought processes in making decisions about teaching, teaching methods they adopt, and learning to teach. In addition, Li (2013) argued that teachers' beliefs could have a greater impact on teachers' teaching practices than their knowledge of the subject. Therefore, researching L2 teachers' beliefs is of great significance in comprehending their planning process, goals in teaching and teaching methods.

In many FL programs at higher education institutions, Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) often serve as sole instructors at all levels under full-time faculty members' supervision. Although their instruction is usually assigned by their supervisors, TAs have spaces to act independently in some teaching practices, such as the tutoring sessions, making them the frontline for most in-class and outside-of-class instructions. However, this group is often overlooked in research about beliefs.

The current study researches three graduate TAs' beliefs towards a Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) tutoring program situated in an undergraduate CFL program at a large U.S. university where graduate TAs take most of the language teaching responsibilities. Through interviews with the TAs, the study aims to gain insight into TAs' beliefs about the effectiveness of their teaching practices and teaching methods they adopt and examine the possible factors shaping and influencing the TAs' beliefs in the tutoring sessions.

By looking at the TAs' beliefs, the program administrators would know more about the gaps in the curriculum objectives and actual teaching practices, thus can better train TAs in the future, which is beneficial to the language learners too. Also, since TAs could be considered as a subset of the profession of FL teachers, the findings and implications could be applied to FL programs in general.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Teachers' Beliefs in FL Teaching

Teachers' beliefs play an essential role in education research since beliefs are considered and proven as the “best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives” (Pajares, 1992, p. 307). Previous studies have

approached the issue of teachers' beliefs from different perspectives. They have covered topics about content, instruction, students, and learning in different contexts about different subjects, such as mathematics, science, social science, and language education (Fives & Gill, 2014).

In the field of FL teaching, teachers' belief is also a well-researched topic. Among a wide range of issues that have been examined, researchers paid much attention to teachers' beliefs in certain teaching methods in the classroom through quantitative and quantitative studies. Allen (2002) investigated a large-scale quantitative study through questionnaires on teachers' beliefs about the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (SFL) in the US, aiming to examine the teachers' familiarity with the Standards and the consistency between teachers' beliefs and the Standards. The results of this study suggested that teachers' beliefs and familiarity with the Standards could affect their implementation of the model for standards-based FL instruction and could impact the development of students' language proficiency. In terms of examples of qualitative research, Zheng and Borg (2014) examined teachers' beliefs about task-based language teaching (TBLT). The study was conducted with three Chinese secondary school teachers of English using observations and semi-structured interviews. Results of the study suggested that different teachers hold different beliefs towards innovative curricula (TBLT, in this case), and to better implement this kind of curriculum, instructional materials, and teacher preparation were important factors in shaping teachers' beliefs.

While extensive studies are conducted in the ESL/EFL context or commonly taught languages, such as Spanish or French, teachers' beliefs in the contexts of less commonly taught languages have gained attention, too, with the development of education in these languages over the past few decades. For example, Saydee (2016) researched 25 teachers of eight less commonly taught languages through interviews and questionnaires. The study focused on the teachers' and students' beliefs about effective teaching methods and the factors that shape their beliefs. Findings suggest that teachers of different languages share similar beliefs on the "best methods" of teaching, and factors that influence their beliefs are in common as well, although certain teachers believe that the languages they teach are different from others which require specific teaching methods, such as Chinese and Persian. To be more specific with Chinese teachers, Hu and Tian (2012) investigated the belief issue from both teachers' and students' perspectives. The participants completed questionnaires about the learning strategies of CFL. Results revealed that teachers and students reported similar learning strategies but had different beliefs regarding the effectiveness of these strategies.

Besides various beliefs in teaching methods, previous studies revealed homogeneity among the teachers regarding factors that influence their beliefs. As Gilakjani and Sabouri (2017) summarized in their review of ESL teachers' beliefs, four major factors have been identified in shaping teachers' beliefs: teachers' experience as language learners, experience from teaching, teachers' personality, and education-based or research-based principles. Studies in other languages, such as Saydee (2016), have identified similar factors that influence teachers' beliefs about effective and ineffective teaching methods, although the participants emphasized that the less commonly taught languages may require different teaching methods from commonly taught languages.

As discussed above, teachers' beliefs have different sources, and studies have shown that beliefs may change over time. Borg (2011) researched the impact of teacher education programs on in-service English language teachers' beliefs through a longitudinal study. Findings suggested that teacher education programs greatly impacted teachers' beliefs about language teaching and learning. Teachers also experienced changes in their prior beliefs during the study. In addition to in-service teachers, pre-service teachers are also researched: Yuan and Lee (2014) investigated the process of belief change among three pre-service EFL teachers during the teaching practicum at a university in China. The findings showed that pre-service teachers' beliefs experienced different processes of change during the practicum. The socio-cultural factors contributed to these changes, such as their identity as new members at the school, or interactions with their mentors. The study also suggested that an open and supportive environment is needed for positive change in teachers' beliefs.

To summarize the brief review of the studies on FL teacher's beliefs, findings from these studies have shown that multiple factors can influence teachers' beliefs, but they may change along their teaching paths.

B. TAs' Beliefs in FL Teaching

The 2007 MLA report indicated that in doctoral-granting FL departments in the U.S., graduate TAs teach 57.4% of first-year language courses (MLA, 2007), so it is a natural need to understand TAs' beliefs that influence and orient how they teach. Several studies on TAs' beliefs were conducted similarly to those on teachers' beliefs. For example, Fox (1993) surveyed 147 first-year graduate French TAs about their beliefs in communicative teaching. Results showed that TAs' beliefs are highly influenced by their experience as language learners. Although research on TAs' beliefs looked at similar features in FL teaching, such as teaching methods (Fox, 1993), FL learners (Potowski, 2002), and theoretical knowledge (Rankin & Becker, 2006), some studies revealed additional sources of TAs' beliefs from teachers'. For example, Mills and Allen (2007) found that TAs' most important sources were TAs' training, observations of others' teaching, and informal discussions with their mentors and other TAs about teaching.

Allen and Negueruela-Azarola (2010) published an extensive review on the professional development of future professors of foreign languages, tracing research from 1987 to 2008. In this review, they pointed out that the focus of the empirical studies has primarily laid on the relationships between graduate students' beliefs and their FL teaching. Therefore, the authors indicated that rather than only addressing the training perspective, future research should pay more attention to FL graduate students' needs as teachers and researchers from a professional development perspective.

C. Tutors' Beliefs in FL Tutoring

Second and FL tutoring is a well-accepted practice at many institutions, but little has been done to investigate the what, how, and why of these tutoring sessions. Research on tutors' beliefs mostly focuses on writing center tutorials for L2 writers. The majority of these studies researched the tutors' feedback and the tutees' writing process during and after the tutorials (Williams, 2004). Williams and Severino (2004) reviewed studies on the differences between tutorials with L1 and L2 writers, and tutors' decision-making. The review pointed out that "one unfortunately not addressed at all in this issue and on which there is almost no research, is foreign language tutoring" (p. 169). Therefore, the authors proposed several questions calling for further research on FL tutorials.

It has been more than a decade since these questions have been proposed, but there is still a very limited number of studies focusing on FL tutoring. Matthews (2010) is an exceptional case that approached the issue from the students' perspective. The study investigated factors influencing self-efficacy judgments of university students in FL tutoring in Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese. Three discourse elements were identified and considered effective in stimulating a student's motivation: session structures, FL content, and comments with expected motivational impact. This study implies that tutors should be aware that their instructional practices can affect a student's motivation. Thus, they should be strategic about their activities and comments during the tutoring sessions.

An study of the less commonly taught language tutorials is a study by Murphy and colleagues in 2012. It was a small-scale study on tutors' and students' beliefs about tutoring in the UW-Madison Russian Flagship Program. The participants' responses revealed that tutors and students found the tutoring sessions beneficial, although there is sometimes a mismatch between tutors' beliefs and students' expectations. Researchers suggested "the need for greater programmatic support for setting goals for learning" (p. 123); short-term professional training programs or workshops could play a positive role in tutor training.

Tutoring is a generally accepted practice as part of the FL courses across institutions. As Spring (2012) described, the general goal of the tutoring sessions at the institution in the current study is "learners access a body of language materials tailored to their linguistic goals" (p. 143). To fill in the gap about these tutoring sessions, it is important to find out about the TAs' beliefs about the functions and effectiveness of the sessions to assess whether students' linguistic goals can be achieved as expected. Since in the current context of CFL tutoring, it is up to the TAs to decide what to do during the tutoring sessions with students, TAs may hold different beliefs from each other about the tutoring sessions. They may also have different expectations from the students who seek tutoring. These differences could affect students' learning as a result. In terms of how the tutoring is conducted, it is worthwhile to investigate the teaching methods the CFL TAs decide to adopt during tutoring sessions.

In summary, previous studies identified different factors in shaping teachers', TAs' and tutors' beliefs in general. Another issue worth examining is the factors that influence the TAs' beliefs about certain teaching methods and their decisions during tutoring. The results of the current study could reveal the effectiveness of the existing tutoring sessions from the TAs' perspectives and could shed light on the TA training process and curriculum design in CFL programs, which could benefit future language teaching.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- A. What are the TAs' beliefs about the functions and effectiveness of the CFL tutoring sessions?
- B. What are the TAs' beliefs about the teaching methods of the CFL tutoring sessions?
- C. What factors have influenced the TAs' beliefs and their teaching practices?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Institutional Background and Participants

The current study is situated in an undergraduate CFL program at a large US university. The current study focuses on Mandarin Chinese courses that are usually co-taught by two TAs or a TA and a full-time lecturer. The teaching assignments of TAs depend on their teaching experience, evaluations, and qualifications. The tutoring sessions are part of the courses and serve as complementary help to the in-class instruction. They are mandatory sessions between the TAs and the students that meet once a week outside of regular class time. The specific objectives of these sessions are not explicitly clarified in the syllabi. The statement about the tutoring session in the standard program policy is broad as below:

One-on-one language tutorials (5% of final grade): language tutorial is a weekly oral practice session where students will work with instructors to enhance speaking ability. The goal is to help students develop language accuracy, fluency, and communicative competence. Students will meet with an instructor to develop oral conversations based on the newly learned topics. Language tutorials are graded on attendance and participation.

The participants in this study are three Ph.D. students of the Ph.D. program of East Asian Languages and Civilizations (Chinese). They are all native speakers of Mandarin Chinese and have an advanced level of English proficiency. Their research focuses on literature, literary criticism, comparative cultural studies, and Chinese linguistics. Their educational backgrounds are mostly related to their current research. The TAs of the program received a

two-week training before the first semester of teaching from their supervisors, usually full-time lecturers with years of experience in CFL. During the TA training, the TAs were informed about the necessity and general goals of the tutoring sessions, but there were limited instructions on what and how to conduct the individualized tutoring. As a result, TAs determined the content of the tutoring sessions on their own or with their co-teaching TAs. Detailed information about the participants is listed in Table 1:

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE TAs

Participants	Gender	Years of Teaching (at the current institution)	Degree Pursuing	Courses Taught	Current Position
TA1	Female	5	Ph.D. in Chinese literature	CHI 101, 102, 301, Writing modules (Flagship course)	Graduate Teaching Assistant
TA2	Female	5	Ph.D. in Chinese Linguistics	CHI 101, 102, 110, 301	Graduate Teaching Assistant
TA3	Female	4	Ph.D. in Chinese literature	CHI 101, 102, 202, 301, 402	Graduate Teaching Assistant

B. Data Collection Method

The current study focused on the individual's beliefs rather than a general descriptive analysis of a large population. Therefore, a qualitative design is more suitable for understanding teachers' beliefs, as Corbin and Strauss (2008) explained that it "allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables" (p. 12). Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews can elicit the interviewees' beliefs indirectly by providing contexts and questions about their behaviors and ideals where "the respondents can be perceived as the experiential experts on the subject" (Smith & Osborne, 2003, p. 59).

The current study was conducted through semi-structured, 50-60 minute interviews with participants, following a structured protocol (see Appendix B). The interviews were individual and to disclose more personal beliefs and experiences without possible influence from each other. The questions were adapted from Murphy et al. (2012), which focused on tutors' and students' beliefs from a Russian Flagship Program. Since all the TAs were native speakers of Chinese, the interviews were conducted in Chinese to ensure they fully understood the interview questions and to facilitate the expression and communication in their responses.

To answer the first research question about the TAs' beliefs in the functions and effectiveness of the CFL tutoring sessions, the questions focused on their teaching philosophy, objectives, understanding of the students' needs, and their opinions on the tutoring sessions and students who attended the sessions. In terms of the second research question about the TAs' beliefs and possible changes in teaching methods of the CFL tutoring sessions, some questions focused on their current and past procedures and methods and certain events during the tutoring sessions described by the participants, in addition to their ideal methods that they preferred. For the last research question on factors that influence the TAs' beliefs, questions focused on their decision-making process and the instructions they receive along with their teaching. To triangulate the data from oral interviews, other written materials related to the tutoring sessions were collected, such as syllabi, slides, or handouts, to disclose some actual teaching practices of the TAs.

C. Data Analysis

The data analysis method for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a dominant qualitative approach in many academic disciplines. It explores "how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). TAs' responses in the interviews were transcribed, labeled, and categorized in Chinese based on their themes, following the steps of IPA detailed in Smith and Osborne (2003). The detailed steps of the analysis with each interview are as follows:

- (a). Read the transcripts a few times to be familiar with the participants' responses;
- (b). Located and highlighted the interesting and significant opinions, comments, and anecdotes from the transcripts;
- (c). Provided initial notes and labels to the highlighted responses, such as "practice of course content," "remedial work," or "test preparations";
- (d). Categorized these labels into different themes. For example, the labels above fall into the theme of "functions of the tutoring sessions";
- (e). Checked the emergent themes against the original transcripts and transformed the data into narratives;
- (f). Translated the narratives into English when reported in the findings section;
- (g). Returned to the interview transcripts to review and revise the findings, following an iterative process.

V. FINDINGS

A. Research Questions 1: What Are the TAs' Beliefs About the Functions and Effectiveness of the CFL Tutoring Sessions?

To reveal the TAs' beliefs about functions, they were asked to explain the focus of their tutoring sessions, their

understanding of the syllabus, and their goals for conducting the tutorials. The responses from TAs were coded and emerged into the following four themes about functions: review/practice of course content, remedial work, test preparation, and individualized instruction.

(a). *Review/Practice of Course Content*

As described in the course syllabi, “students will meet with an instructor to develop oral conversations based on the newly learned topics,” course content or textbook content is the most seen theme of functions in the one-on-one tutorials. In the TAs’ description of the tutoring sessions, all the TAs in the study emphasized their intentions of supplementing classroom instruction. For instance, one TA explicitly described the function of her sessions as “a review”:

TA 1: It’s a review of their classes, and I can answer their questions, not limited to course content. (I want my students) to use some vocabulary and grammar that they learned in class.

With this common goal in mind, TAs have taken different approaches for the review/practice purpose, as detailed in Research Question 2.

(b). *Remedial Work*

The second theme of functions is also highly related to classroom instruction. Rather than just focusing on the new course/textbook content, TAs all revealed that they aim to assist individual students during the tutorials, targeting their specific learning weaknesses. TAs also emphasized their intentions to meet different students’ needs, which they can hardly accomplish in the classrooms due to class size or time limit, so they saved it to the tutoring sessions:

TA 1: Some students are too nervous to talk in front of their classmates, so when we have one-on-one conversations, they feel more comfortable talking in Chinese. Besides, I can correct their errors and reorganize their speeches so they can try again... In terms of writing, they wish tutors could revise their compositions because they can’t detect errors independently. And I can do that with them too.

(c). *Test Preparation*

When students in the Chinese program reach a higher level of language study, the program encourages students to take some tests administered by authoritative institutions, such as the HSK (*The Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* 汉语水平考试, the Chinese Proficiency Test) or the OPI (The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview). As a result, one TA mentioned a critical element of her tutorials as test preparation:

TA 3: For third-year students, I used an online listening program to practice listening skills with them. It was required by their instructor/my supervisor because the students need to take a speaking/listening test by the end of their third year. For the fourth year, I adopt the method of OPI (oral proficiency interview). They need to take the test too, so I want to prepare them for it, and I believe it is a great way to assess their speaking ability.

(d). *Individualized Instruction*

The TAs all mentioned their desire to help students at more advanced levels. They were concerned that it would “waste our time” to teach the students what they already knew. The TAs were willing to provide these advanced students with resources and tools to facilitate their learning during the tutoring sessions. For instance, one TA described her efforts in making the tutoring go beyond linguistic knowledge in their language courses:

TA 1: For students with higher proficiency, they would like to apply their language knowledge to other fields. For example, right now, my students are taking Chinese linguistics, Chinese literature, and history courses, so sometimes I’ll introduce some new words, idioms, or just some cultural facts based on the course contents.

To summarize the TAs’ beliefs on the functions of tutoring sessions, their responses fell into four themes: review/practice of course content, remedial work, test preparation, and individualized instruction. This finding exposed a tension between the program requirements and the TAs’ perception. As described in the syllabi, the tutoring should serve as an “oral practice session” to enhance students’ speaking ability, focusing on improving accuracy, fluency, and communicative competence. The findings in TAs’ beliefs on functions, however, revealed that the TAs have desires to accomplish more goals than just an oral practice.

Concerning the effectiveness of the tutoring sessions with multiple functions, the TAs were asked about their perceptions of the most and the least helpful aspects for students’ learning of the tutoring and if their focus on one aspect can help the students in other areas (e.g., Does it help students to improve their writing or speaking skills with the emphasis on grammar during the tutoring?).

The TAs in the study were confident with the effectiveness of the tutoring. They all reported some positive effects on their students’ performance, despite what activities they used for different students’ needs. For example, TA2 mainly highlighted the effectiveness of the tutorials in improving students’ speaking skills and her efforts with students with learning difficulties:

TA 2: I see the tutorial as an interactive speaking section, so I aim to improve their communicative competence. It (the role-play activity mentioned in the previous description) can help more with students’ fluency in speaking...Students at risk are probably incapable of carrying on the conversation (the role-play), so basic vocabulary and grammar are the only focus (of the tutorials). In this case, they should be able to do better in class.

Also, the TAs wanted to ensure that they could prepare their students for real-life applications of the Chinese language with more opportunities than classrooms:

TA 1: (For compositions) I want to help them write authentic Chinese essays that they can use for program applications or publish their writing anywhere rather than just for school assignments.

In terms of the effectiveness of improving language skills in other areas, the TAs admitted that they were not sure about the actual effectiveness, because they did not have the chance to assess it, but held a positive belief: they believed that with the improvement in one skill, the students should be able to apply it effectively to other areas and contexts, for example:

TA 3: Tutorials have provided opportunities for students to utilize all their knowledge about the language. Topics should go beyond textbooks and more about real life and the world. I believe it (OPI) is a great way to assess their speaking ability. They can transfer these techniques when they really need to use Chinese in the real world.

In addition to the effectiveness in language ability, one TA touched upon the effectiveness of students' motivation. She believed that if the students could perform the OPI-format interviews with the tutors successfully, they would be more motivated and confident in their future learning:

TA 3: TAs guide the students during the process of OPI so that they not only measure their language ability but also become more motivated, because they would know what they can talk about in Chinese in a more natural setting, even when they leave the program. I can engage their interests and motivate them to learn and participate in this process.

B. Research Question 2: What Are the TAs' Beliefs about the Teaching Methods of CFL Tutoring Sessions?

The TAs in the present study have participated in the tutorials for years with rich experiences with students from different backgrounds and proficiency levels. When they are asked about their teaching methods that have been adopted in their tutorials, one of their common responses is that they all believe there is no perfect teaching method that is appropriate for all students at the same time, so a good teacher should use different methods for students with different needs:

TA 1: Teaching method is tricky to me...the students are different, so there should be different teaching methods too.

In terms of specific teaching methods, TAs' responses fell into three themes according to the courses they teach: great emphasis on explicit and implicit instruction of grammar and vocabulary, adoption of error feedback in tutoring writing, and recognition and attempted implementation of task-based teaching:

(a.) Explicit and Implicit Instruction of Grammar and Vocabulary

TAs all believed that grammar and vocabulary are very important components in the process of learning the Chinese language. They referred to grammar and vocabulary as the "foundation" or "basics" of producing correct Chinese. The objectives are consistent throughout the tutorials from different TAs, although there is a disagreement between their choice of explicit or implicit teaching methods. One reported that she chose a traditional method through drills and pattern practice:

TA 1: According to the lesson plan, I ask the students questions, and they answer with the words and grammatical structures they learned. When they make mistakes, I will correct them, and we try again.

At the same time, another TA explained how she tried to avoid the traditional methods, and her way of creating a more communicative environment for grammar and vocabulary teaching:

TA 2: The basic idea is that I start with words and grammar that they newly learn that week and have some interactive activities. I don't want it (the tutorial) to be too mechanical, so I usually create a proper scenario where we have some performance-based activities. For example, I was a salesman, and the student was a customer, so we could practice vocabulary and grammar about shopping. If I had a pair of students, I would have them take turns completing the role-play. It can help a lot more with students' fluency in speaking.

(b.) Adoption of Error Feedback in Tutoring Writing

TA 1 was in charge of tutoring students from Chinese writing courses, so she was the only one who talked about teaching methods in writing. She mentioned that she provided written and oral corrective feedback to her students' writing and gave direct and indirect feedback along the process. She described the process of tutoring writing with her students as follows:

TA 1: They send me their drafts before the tutorials. I'll read them and give feedback on their writing. I would either correct their errors or mark the sentences or words that I find problematic. During the tutorial, we went through each point that I marked previously. Sometimes I just tell them the right way to write, or sometimes they would explain their original plans or thoughts to me, and we can negotiate about the proper ways to express their ideas.

(c.) Recognition and Attempted Implementation of Task-Based Teaching

As mentioned earlier, TAs believe their tutorials should help students apply their linguistic knowledge and language skills to the "real world." Performance-based teaching through meaningful tasks, consistent with the ACTFL Guidelines,

was valued by two TAs. One example is TA 2's description of her methods of teaching grammar and vocabulary in the last section, and the other example is when TA 3 addressed her concerns and belief about teaching materials:

TA 3: Topics (of the tutorials) should go beyond textbooks and more about real life and the world. I think some of the content in the textbooks and common methods we use now are outdated. Most textbook texts in the fourth year are news reports, so would it be possible to have students interview people, Chinese students, for example, after class? The task-based method is more connected with real life and should be adopted.

C. Research Question 3: What Factors Have Influenced the TAs' Beliefs and Their Teaching Practices?

To answer the third research question, TAs were asked about their decision-making process of developing the goals, content, and teaching methods in the tutoring sessions throughout the interviews. Based on their descriptions and reflections, factors influencing their beliefs can be categorized into TA training, curriculum guidelines, students' feedback, and preconceived beliefs.

(a). TA Training

Findings from the three participants suggest that TA training impacted their beliefs about the tutoring program and their overall teaching methods, especially at the early stage of teaching. According to the TAs' description, modeling plays a vital role in shaping their beliefs in teaching. As described in the last section, the TAs reported designing their primary tutorials based on the sample lesson plans. New TAs who teach lower-level courses also tend to follow what other experienced TAs do from their observations, for not having much experience in teaching at that stage:

TA 1: I remember the first semester when I started to tutor flagship students, I did not have any students at the beginning. Instead, my mentor teacher had me sit in another TA's class (tutorials) for about four weeks, and then I took over some of that TA's students later that semester. I basically just imitated exactly what she did for that entire year.

(b). Curriculum Guidelines

Another factor influencing the TAs' beliefs is their understanding of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the teaching and learning objectives set by the language program. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines describe functional language ability, emphasizing the use of the target language in real-world situations (ACTFL, 2012). As mentioned in the previous section, TAs value real-world application of the language, and as a result, this affects their teaching methods. For instance, TA 3's decision to follow an OPI format in her tutorials is also developed from her understanding of the ACTFL guidelines. The curriculum guidelines provide instructional implications for language skills at different proficiency levels, which help the TA to have a more precise goal in scaffolding the students with their learning and assessment needs.

(c). Students' Feedback

A third common theme among TAs' responses is students' feedback: they all referred to students' written or oral comments on their tutorials or implicit feedback as an essential element in improving the effectiveness of their tutorials. When Tutor 1 explained her methods in tutoring writing, she commented that she adopted this error feedback method because "students like it". TA 3, on the other hand, mentioned that she chose to quit the question-and-answer drill format (from their sample lesson plans) because of students' negative feedback:

TA 3: Sometimes, students are not very interested in the topics in the textbooks, and if we force them to talk about them, it's torture for both of us.

As a result, she chose to use the OPI mode to adapt to the student's interests and abilities.

Unlike in-class instructions, TAs believed that the tutoring sessions are for individual attention, and they should likely draw students' interests at best:

TA 2: TAs have to have individualized methods for each student. Needs analysis is important. For example, some heritage learners are more interested in practicing their writing skills than speaking.

(d). Preconceived Beliefs

The last factor is that preconceived beliefs influence TAs' teaching practice greatly. Due to each TA's background and teaching experience, individual differences could play an important role in their teaching. TA3, for example, mentioned that she developed the current teaching methods based on how she was taught in other languages. She took Japanese and French courses to fulfill the foreign language requirements of her Ph.D. study, and she learned many teaching strategies from her teachers in these classes, like how to communicate with novice learners or the OPI mode from her testing experience in her Japanese. Since TA 2 majors in linguistics, she often referred to terminology or theories that she learned in graduate linguistic courses or readings when she explained her teaching philosophy during the interview.

VI. DISCUSSION

Findings from this study provide preliminary insights into graduate TAs' beliefs about the functions, effectiveness, and teaching methods of the tutoring practice, as well as factors that influence their beliefs.

TAs in the study revealed four major functions of tutoring: review/practice of course content, remedial work, test

preparation, and individualized instruction. The findings revealed some existing issues within the current program and the implications for future teaching. The TAs all mentioned the necessity of clear curriculum guidelines and requirements from the department/program. As TA2 pointed out, she wished the content of the classes and tutorials to be more “predictable” so that TAs and students could know about the learning objectives, assignments, or assessment tools (such as portfolios) in advance. In reflection of their teaching, the TAs find that there is sometimes a mismatch between students’ interests and the current curriculum, so they wish they could have space to work with an individual student during tutorials to meet their learning needs and interests so that “students can be more motivated,” as TA 3 described.

Consequently, there is a calling for needs analysis for students. TAs occasionally refer to their current students as “not my students” since they did not teach the same group of students in the previous lower-level classes. Articulation between classes could be a factor that impacted the effectiveness of their teaching. One TA proposed that teachers can create learning profiles for their students since they enter the program, so when the students move into a higher-level class, their new teachers can quickly get familiar with their characteristics and needs. These findings suggest that TAs are willing to get involved in the curriculum development process, although sometimes they do not have a say.

In terms of teaching methods, TAs mainly identified three types of methods for tutoring: great emphasis on explicit and implicit instruction of grammar and vocabulary, adoption of error feedback in tutoring writing, and recognition and attempted implementation of task-based teaching. This finding is primarily consistent with the literature. Ning (2001), in her review of CFL commercial textbooks, commented that “many in the field still doubt the usefulness of SLA studies to Chinese-language teaching. Overall, the field tends to be conservative” (p. 38). In addition to the teaching materials, researchers in the field have also identified minimal success in the modernization of pedagogical practice in CFL (Chiang, 2010; Orton, 2008). This is evident in Saydee (2016), when Chinese teachers use more traditional methods than teachers of other languages. At the same time, there is a positive change in TAs’ beliefs about more innovative teaching methods, such as task-based or performance-based teaching. They have reported attempted implementation of these approaches in their tutoring to some extent. Unlike the participating Chinese teachers in Saydee (2016), who believed that the Chinese language is different from other languages, therefore, requires different teaching methods, TAs in the current study repeatedly referred to their learning experience of English, French or Japanese, and their reading and research in SLA theories and language education literature when addressing their teaching experiences and beliefs. This could be a good sign that some pre-service CFL teachers are aware of making a change in the field.

Four factors have been identified to impact TAs’ beliefs: TA training, curriculum guidelines, students’ feedback, and preconceived beliefs. This finding is aligned with previous research. Mills and Allen (2007) suggested that TAs’ most important sources were TAs’ training, observations of others’ teaching, and interaction with their mentors. TAs in the current study also talked about how these factors shaped their beliefs, especially at the early teaching stage. Gilakjani and Sabouri (2017) summarized that four major factors shaped teachers’ beliefs: teachers’ experience as language learners, experience from teaching, teachers’ personality, and education-based or research-based principles. In comparison, TAs in the current study did not talk much about their own personalities, but they demonstrated positive and supportive attitudes toward students seeking tutoring.

In addition to what Allen and Negueruela-Azarola (2010) proposed, research on TAs’ beliefs should pay attention to the TAs’ professional development rather than solely teacher training, TAs in the current study touched upon the issue too. For example, TA 3 mentioned that she valued her tutoring experience a lot because she wished to be a certified OPI tester in the future, and she could use this experience as a practice before applying for the certification. TAs briefly discussed their plans as teachers, researchers, or administrators of the CFL field “when they get their own positions.” These statements have shown their commitment to a larger professional community, and the potential benefits to their professional development by implementing appropriate professional or academic training programs or workshops in their current graduate program.

This study has some limitations in terms of the design. First, the study is a small-scale study with three TAs with different backgrounds and profiles. The interviews did not require them to connect their backgrounds with their beliefs in teaching Chinese, although they sometimes refer to their past learning experiences as a source to validate their decisions in the tutoring process. Future studies could have a more in-depth investigation of the connections between the TAs with different backgrounds and their beliefs, for example, if TAs with a literature background share different beliefs in language teaching from TAs with a linguistic background. In addition, the majority of data were from the participating TAs about their recent tutoring experience, who was in charge of three different language courses from three language levels. Since TA1 and TA 3 were teaching upper-level courses, they shared their beliefs in teaching students with more advanced language proficiency, but whether language levels affect the tutors’ beliefs remains unknown. Future research can compare TAs’ beliefs across language levels to examine whether it is an influential factor. At last, as Allen and Negueruela-Azarola (2010) suggested, research on teachers’ beliefs should aim to fulfill long-term needs, so more studies should be done to derive some findings based on a comparison of the interview data across semesters.

VII. CONCLUSION

Tutoring is perceived to be effective in improving students’ language learning. It is closely connected to the Chinese

curriculum and provides richer opportunities for students to practice the target language with more individual attention from the TAs in a less stressful environment than in-class instructions. The present study only researched TAs' beliefs on tutoring sessions. However, for further exploration of the effectiveness of tutoring, students' perceptions of seeking tutoring should be researched to triangulate the problem.

The current study about TAs' beliefs about the tutoring program is situated only in one specific CFL program, and different language programs at other universities may have different requirements and instructions. Findings from this study provide preliminary insights into TAs' beliefs of tutoring in the CFL Program. At the same time, it should be relevant for in-class instruction in some way. Overall, these findings suggest positive effects of theoretical instructions in related fields, TA training, and a supportive environment from administrations, which could provide implications of program development and graduate TA training in general.

APPENDIX A INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR TAs

1. Please describe your Chinese tutoring sessions in your own words. What is the focus of your tutoring? What do you do during tutoring sessions?
2. Are they (your tutoring sessions) different from your understanding of the tutoring sessions in the syllabi?
3. What aspects of tutoring do you find to be the most helpful, and the least helpful for students' learning?
4. To what extent do you feel that tutoring focused on one aspect (e.g., grammar) helps students in other areas (e.g., writing or speaking)?
5. How did you decide to follow the current procedures and methods in your tutoring? Did you receive any instructions when you started to teach?
6. If you could change one thing (e.g., lesson plans, materials, or schedules) in your future tutoring sessions, what would it be? Why?
7. Is there anything you would like to know before starting to teach? Why do you believe something is missing?

Optional follow-up questions: Could you tell me a little more about that? Could you give an example?

APPENDIX B IRB APPROVAL LETTER



EXEMPTION GRANTED

Mark James
 English
 480/965-2731
 Mark.A.James@asu.edu

Dear Mark James:

On 2/12/2019 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Exploring Graduate Teaching Assistants' beliefs and practices in Chinese as Foreign language tutoring program
Investigator:	Mark James
IRB ID:	STUDY00007745
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consent_updated, Category: Consent Form; • RECRUITMENT SCRIPT_Yifan Guo.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Protocol_updated, Category: IRB Protocol; • CITI reports, Category: Other (to reflect anything not captured above); • Interview Questions, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (1) Educational settings, (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 2/12/2019.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

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