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Current Status and Optimisation Paths of Chinese Language Teaching in Malaysian Kindergartens under a Multicultural Context

多元文化背景下马来西亚幼儿园华文教学 的现状与优化路径

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Abstract: As a multi-ethnic nation, Malaysia preserves a diverse landscape of indigenous languages and vernacular school systems. Driven by globalisation, there is a growing demand for early childhood language learning, leading many private kindergartens to offer a trilingual curriculum featuring Malay, English, and Chinese. While popular, this trilingual setting requires teachers to manage classrooms where children possess highly varied levels of language proficiency. The unique nature of the Chinese language with its complex tones and the intricate relationship between its written form, sound, and meaning further increases the difficulty of instruction. Using the method of literature analysis, this study examines the current state of Chinese language teaching in Malaysian kindergartens through three lenses: teacher qualifications, curriculum, and teaching practices. By evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of existing practices, the research offers practical recommendations for improvement. The goal of this study is to provide a clear roadmap for the sustainable development of early childhood Chinese education in Malaysia. Ultimately, this ensures that teaching practices adapt to modern

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needs while supporting the preservation of the Chinese language and the prosperity of a multicultural society.

Keywords: Chinese Language Teaching, Kindergartens, Multicultural Education, Teacher Professionalism, Pedagogical Innovation

摘要：马来西亚作为多元族群的国家，各族群拥有自己的语言与源流学校。随着国际化趋势，许多父母希望孩子从小开始学习不同语言。大部分私立幼儿园因提供马来语、英语、华语，三语学习而备受家长欢迎。这使得在私立学校幼儿园的班级中，教师需面对语言能力差异性大的情境。此外，华文具备声调复杂性与形、音、义的特色，进一步提升了教师的教学挑战。本研究旨在通过文献分析法，从师资、课程与教学三个层面了解幼儿园华文教学的现状。针对现状，分析其优势与不足，并进一步提出可改进之建议。研究结果希望为马来西亚幼儿园华文教学的可持续发展提供实际可操作的参考依据，确保它能更好地适应时代需求，为华文传承与多元文化繁荣贡献力量。

关键词：华文教学，幼儿园，多元文化教育，教师专业素养，教学革新

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural country, primarily composed of Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The Chinese community is the second-largest ethnic group. While Chinese settlers arrived as early as the 15th century, mass migration began in the 19th century. During this time, private schools (*Sishu* 私塾) were established to provide education for Chinese children. Following China's educational reforms, these schools evolved into modern institutions. Despite various policy changes and legal restrictions over the years, Chinese education in Malaysia now has a 200-year history. Today, Malaysia is recognised as one of the most successful countries in maintaining Chinese education outside of China.

With the rise of China, the demand for learning the Chinese language has grown significantly. A key trend is the increasing number of non-Chinese students in Chinese Primary Schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina, SJKC), rising from 3.05% in 1989 to 19.75% in 2020 (Dong Zong, 2025). Parents choose

these schools not only for their discipline and learning environment but also to give their children a competitive edge by learning Chinese (Tan et al., 2017; Julia Tan et al., 2021). Interestingly, many Chinese children now show weaker Chinese proficiency compared to their English skills. This shift is driven by parents prioritising English as a global lingua franca, coupled with children's frequent exposure to English-language media and digital games. As a result, teachers must navigate classrooms with increasingly diverse linguistic backgrounds. This diversity presents a significant challenge: balancing instruction for both native and second-language learners, while determining the appropriate role for second-language teaching methodologies (Yap & Yap, 2022). Such dynamics are now prevalent in both primary and kindergarten settings.

As the *Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025)* ends, the new blueprint (2026-2035) was introduced earlier this year (KPM, 2026). Alongside this, the Ministry of Education (MOE) launched the National Preschool Curriculum 2026 (Kurikulum Prasekolah 2026, KP2026). Shifting toward a competency-based approach, the new curriculum aims to foster well-rounded personalities and equip children with the essential skills to adapt to future global challenges. The “2027 School Curriculum Framework” introduces seven core competencies: Personal Development, Communication, Responsibility, Digital Skills, Diverse Literacy, Thinking Skills, and Lifelong Learning (KPM, 2025). Within this framework, the kindergarten level specifically prioritises the cultivation of social communication skills and character building as fundamental pillars for early development. While the curriculum continues to include Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil, it now places a heightened emphasis on cultivating a genuine interest in reading. Furthermore, private kindergartens retain the autonomy to determine their medium of instruction. Ultimately, kindergarten language learning has evolved beyond basic literacy; it now serves as the vital starting point for diverse literacy and lifelong learning.

Although private kindergartens account for only 36% of the kindergartens in Malaysia, they maintain higher enrolment rates than their government-run coun-

terparts (World Bank Malaysia, 2023). While most private institutions utilise English or Chinese as the primary medium of instruction, they are legally required to provide Malay and English language classes. Additionally, many centres offer Chinese instruction to meet parental expectations and prepare children for transition into Chinese Primary Schools. This emphasis on multilingualism has resulted in increasingly diverse classroom demographics (Kamaruddin et al., 2017; Siah et al., 2018). However, because language classes are typically not streamed by proficiency, teachers must navigate classrooms with vastly different linguistic abilities. Given that the new curriculum aims to foster a respect for diversity, these multicultural settings serve as an ideal starting point; yet the effectiveness of this approach depends heavily on how teachers adapt their pedagogy. Furthermore, the Chinese language presents unique challenges compared to English or Malay, particularly due to its four tones and the complex relationship between a character's form, sound, and meaning. As the primary facilitators of early learning, the professional quality of kindergarten teachers directly shapes a child's attitude and academic outcomes. Despite this importance, research on Malaysian kindergarten instruction, specifically regarding the Chinese language remains scarce. Consequently, this study employs a literature analysis method to explore the current state of Chinese language teaching in Malaysian kindergartens, guided by the following questions:

1. What is the current professional background of Chinese language teachers in kindergartens?
2. What are the current teaching practices of Chinese language teachers in kindergartens?
3. What are the strengths and challenges of Chinese language teaching in kindergartens?
4. Based on the current situation, how can Chinese language teaching in kindergartens be optimised?

2. Theoretical and Research Foundations of Chinese Language Teaching in Malaysian Kindergartens within a Multicultural Context

2.1 Malaysia's Kindergarten Curriculum and Chinese Language Teaching

Curriculum serves as the essential blueprint for education, guiding teachers in their instructional design and directly impacting student learning outcomes. Consequently, the analysis of curriculum design and implementation is a core dimension for evaluating the quality of preschool education. Before the official rollout of the KP2026, the legal standard was the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan, KSPK, NPSC) 2017 Revised Edition. This curriculum was structured into six learning strands: Communication, Spirituality, Attitudes and Values, Humanities, Science and Technology, Personal Competence, and Physical Development and Aesthetic. Its primary goal was to develop balanced individuals equipped with innovation, critical and creative thinking. Regarding instruction, the curriculum strongly advocated for a student-centred approach, encouraging teachers to use strategies such as play-based learning, thematic teaching, and project-based learning to stimulate children's higher order thinking skills and 21st-century skills.

While NPSC (revised 2017) provided a systematic framework for holistic development, its actual effectiveness in the classroom remains a major focus of academic concern. Existing research often examines how teachers perceive, accept, and practice the curriculum, with most studies using surveys and interviews to collect data from both public and private kindergarten teachers. However, these findings show a significant gap between theory and practice. Studies using questionnaires, such as those by Phang et al. (2021), Masnan et al. (2021), and Salim & Mohamed (2023), suggest that teachers generally agree with student-centred education and play-based learning, claiming to implement these ideas effectively. In contrast, research based on interviews or direct observations paints a different picture. Some teachers still rely on traditional teacher-led methods, focusing on rote memorisation and repetitive drills to meet parents' expectations

(Chee et al., 2015; Tee & Nor, 2018). Furthermore, classroom learning often depends heavily on textbooks and workbooks, with teachers reporting a lack of time for hands-on activities due to the pressure of completing the syllabus. Some teachers even admitted to writing lesson plans according to NPSC requirements while actually teaching based on their own judgment of children abilities (Abdullah et al., 2017). Others highlighted a lack of resources and difficulty in ensuring standardised assessment of a child's true performance (Abdul Rahman & Wan Mohamad Noor, 2018).

In conclusion, there is a sharp contrast between teachers' reported attitudes and their actual classroom practices. While surveys suggest positive results, deeper investigation reveals that many teachers have not fully mastered the curriculum or implemented it effectively. Several factors may explain this gap, including uneven development across different kindergartens, the influence of social desirability bias in survey responses, and practical barriers to implementing modern teaching methods. This situation suggests that some kindergartens lack the necessary support to keep pace with curriculum changes, leaving their teaching practices outdated. As social and economic demands progress, traditional, teacher-centered methods are increasingly insufficient for developing the competencies children require for the future. Consequently, the ongoing evolution of the curriculum - from NPSC (revised 2017) to the KP2026 - is essential. These updates ensure that early childhood education remains holistic, student-centred, and capable of fostering diverse skills in every child.

2.2 Chinese Language Teaching for Young Children in a Multicultural Context

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic nation where the government allows ethnic groups to preserve their own languages and cultures, leading to the establishment of different types of primary school systems. However, due to social changes, parents' decisions when choosing kindergartens have shifted from traditional ethnic identity toward a pursuit of educational quality. Key considerations now include English-speaking environments, curriculum design, and campus safety (Dahari & Ya, 2011; Kamaruddin & Razalli, 2017). This trend has led to increased ethnic

diversity in kindergarten enrolments. Because of the diverse mother-tongue backgrounds of these children, classroom instruction faces the challenge of linguistic heterogeneity. This is particularly evident in Chinese language classes, where children show significant differences in vocabulary, grammatical sensitivity, and language sense. Consequently, instructional approaches must transition away from a traditional “one-size-fits-all” model toward culturally responsive pedagogy and differentiated instruction, both of which prioritise addressing individual learning profiles.

Culturally relevant pedagogy integrates students’ cultural backgrounds and learning characteristics into instructional design. This approach aims to help students sustain their own cultural identity while simultaneously enhancing academic achievement and fostering cultural critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In practice, educators should employ diverse instructional forms to establish strong connections between instructional content and students’ cultural experiences (Chou, 2010). Through a comprehensive literature review, Khalfaoui et al. (2021) identified key strategies for constructing inclusive multicultural classrooms. These include providing supportive teaching, utilising culturally responsive materials, establishing positive teacher-student and parent-teacher collaborations, strengthening teachers’ emotional support capacities, implementing small-group cooperative learning, and creating opportunities for peer dialogue. However, the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching does not happen naturally; the key lies in the teacher’s own multicultural literacy (Gay, 2000). Specifically, a teacher’s professional knowledge allows them to perceive cultural differences sensitively and act as a cultural mediator, helping students bridge cognitive gaps and eliminate bias (Wang et al., 2020). Ultimately, multicultural literacy is built upon a triad of competencies: a deep understanding of student culture, professional pedagogical knowledge, and their capacity for continuous self-reflection (Gay, 2000). Within a multicultural setting, professional knowledge determines sensitivity to differences, cultural understanding guides

the selection of materials, and self-reflection serves as the engine for improving instructional practices.

Differentiated instruction is a pedagogical strategy widely used by educators in multicultural settings (Partami et al., 2019; Demirci-Ünal & Öztürk, 2025). By respecting individual differences in learning styles, cognitive abilities, interests, and pace, this approach seeks to fulfill the objective of teaching according to aptitude. It serves as an effective strategy for managing heterogeneous student populations (Puzio et al., 2020; Lavrijsen et al., 2021). Numerous studies show that differentiated instruction effectively improves students' language abilities (Subandiyah et al., 2025), especially in second and foreign language teaching (Ojong, 2023). Tomlinson's (2001) theoretical framework suggests that educators can implement differentiation across four dimensions: content, process, product, and learning environment. In terms of content, educators can design tiered curriculum materials based on language ability, such as providing visual scaffolding to support vocabulary acquisition. In the process, educators can provide appropriate linguistic support and develop children's understanding and expression through cooperative learning and multi-modal inquiry. For the product, assessment methods should be diversified, allowing students to demonstrate their mastery through various formats tailored to their strengths. Regarding the learning environment, educators can design spaces that support both individualised learning and small-group collaboration while ensuring teaching materials are inclusive and easily accessible (Celik, 2019).

In summary, differentiated instruction transcends mere technique; it represents a vital path toward achieving equity in language education. In a multicultural setting, the depth and effectiveness of this approach are fundamentally determined by a teacher's multicultural literacy. A teacher's keen cultural awareness enables them to provide personalised language scaffolding within each student's zone of proximal development across the four aforementioned dimensions. This targeted support allows students to gradually internalise vocabulary and grammatical structures within their specific range of comprehension. By aligning instruction

with the student's current capacity, education facilitates a steady progression - from the initial construction of a linguistic foundation to the ultimate attainment of academic success.

2.3 Characteristics of Early Childhood Chinese Language Teaching

Language acquisition encompasses the four core skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, reading proficiency serves as the foundation for learners to actively and independently acquire knowledge and information. Unlike listening and speaking skills, which can be acquired through natural environments and daily communication, the mastery of reading and writing requires systematic educational intervention. Furthermore, reading is not a monolithic skill but rather an integration of complex cognitive processes, involving phonological awareness, tone awareness, pinyin ability, morphological awareness, visual processing, and vocabulary knowledge (Hulme et al., 2019). Because these elements are highly interconnected, effective instruction must address the multifaceted nature of linguistic development rather than treating their reading as a singular task.

In the context of Chinese language learning, both native speakers and second-language learners face significant challenges in mastering reading and writing. As a logographic writing system, every Chinese character independently carries form (orthography), sound (phonology), and meaning (semantics). The structure of Chinese characters is highly hierarchical: strokes form components, and components further combine to form radicals or characters. Research indicates that understanding the structural logic of Chinese characters not only aids in writing but also effectively enhances character recognition skills (Yin & McBride-Chang, 2015). Due to the complexity of Chinese orthography, the development of literacy - specifically reading and writing - frequently becomes the primary focus of the Chinese language instruction.

Existing research on Chinese language teaching focuses heavily on literacy acquisition, exploring cognitive development processes and instructional intervention strategies. In contrast, research on listening and speaking instruction are

relatively scarce and primarily focuses on second-language learners. This imbalance exists largely because oral language development in native speakers is often hidden within daily conversations or classroom discussions, leading teachers to design fewer targeted training activities for these areas. Regarding cognitive development, studies have found that children as young as four demonstrate an awareness of character structures and component positioning (Yin & McBride-Chang, 2015), beginning to internalise character-construction rules by age five (Zhao & Li, 2014). Dai (1999) proposed that children's acquisition of characters follows a cognitive sequence: moving from whole to part, outline to interior, top to bottom, left to right, and from familiar to unfamiliar. However, in the early stages of literacy, children often demonstrate a tendency to recognise visual configurations without fully grasping their underlying meaning (Zhu, 2010). From a psychological processing perspective, Ko (1999) argued that effective reading requires the integration of literacy skills - such as visual recognition, semantic extraction, and metacognition - with textual knowledge, including character-construction, vocabulary, and genre. This multi-layered process highlights the complexity of transitioning from simple visual recognition to meaningful reading comprehension.

To address the challenges of Chinese character acquisition, researchers have conducted extensive research on effective teaching strategies. Chang (2002) demonstrated that by establishing situational contexts and providing teacher guidance, children can actively verify and construct their writing abilities. Furthermore, research by Wu and Huang (2004) indicates that the difficulty of character acquisition varies according to character-formation principles - such as pictographs, simple ideographs, compound ideographs, and phono-semantic compounds. Consequently, literacy instruction must move beyond a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Teachers require a foundation in basic philology to design differentiated instructional plans tailored to these structural principles. Additionally, Cheng (2015) identified that mastering fine orthographic details as a primary obstacle and demonstrated that integrating Multiple Intelligences into second-

language instruction can help children focus on the connection between form, sound, and meaning through multi-sensory activities. Ho (2022) further suggested that combining “mapping” methods with games can significantly enhance literacy performance.

Considering these findings, because Chinese characters integrate form, sound, and meaning into a single unit, developing reading and writing skills involves multi-dimensional cognitive processing and presents a high level of difficulty. While literacy instruction remains the primary focus of Chinese language teaching, the deep integration of character characteristics and cultural connotations through activity-based and situational methods is essential. By adopting these approaches, teachers can stimulate intrinsic motivation, thereby increase children interest while simultaneously enhance literacy efficiency and overall language proficiency.

3. Situational Analysis of Chinese Language Teaching in Malaysian Kindergartens within a Multicultural Context

This research uses the literature analysis method to examine the professional background and teaching practices of Chinese language teachers in Malaysian kindergartens. Based on these findings, the study then identifies the strengths and challenges currently facing Chinese language teaching in the kindergarten sector.

3.1 Professional Background of Kindergarten Chinese Teachers

The teaching workforce in Malaysian kindergartens has long struggled with the challenge of substandard professional qualifications. Although the *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025* explicitly mandates that kindergarten teachers must possess at least a Diploma in Early Childhood Education, a gap remains between policy implementation and reality. Data from the World Bank Malaysia (2023) reveals that 73% of teachers in private kindergartens remain unqualified, highlighting a significant lag in policy enforcement. This situation is not merely a lack of academic credentials but a chain reaction caused by the low attractiveness of the profession. Studies by Ngadni & Sammy (2025) and Balkrishnan et al.

(2025) identify that low pay, extended working hours, heavy workloads, and high emotional labour constitute the structural pressures of the early childhood education industry. Beyond instruction, teachers manage hygiene, safety, and intensive parent communication, such as constantly updating digital learning portfolios. This responsibility overflow leads to severe burnout and coupled with an inadequate substitute teacher system, further deprives teachers of essential preparation time.

At the level of professional development, private kindergarten teachers lack institutionalised support, forced to rely on school management or personal initiative. Research indicates that many private kindergartens operators hold a conservative stance toward subsidising teacher training. The core conflict lies in the mismatch between high training costs and high staff turnover (Muhamad Ridza et al., 2024). Driven by market logic, many centres tend to hire high school graduates with lower salary expectations rather than trained teachers with professional diplomas. This reflects a dual consideration: first, the salary premium of professional teachers exceeds the capacity of low-tuition business models; and second, management frequently questions whether formal qualifications directly translate into superior classroom performance or long-term career commitment (Abdul Aziz et al., 2021; Muhamad Ridza et al., 2024). Furthermore, public perception of the preschool industry is still limited to childcare labour rather than professional education. This social bias toward the profession's status further restricts the room for professional advancement.

These circumstances reflect the overall professional state of Malaysian kindergarten teachers. Specifically, in the field of Chinese language teaching, the professional background of teachers is characterised by experience compensation, uneven academic qualifications, and a lack of systematic training. Case studies in Northern Malaysia (Lee, 2022; Ooi, 2024) reveal that while Chinese teachers often fall short of official qualification standards, they frequently possess extensive teaching seniority. This creates a unique model where pedagogical experience is used to bridge the gap left by a lack of theoretical grounding. Consequently, many Chinese teachers are in a state of isolation. Data from Seah (2019) indicates a heavy

reliance on localised, internal school training, as external private training programs have become unsustainable. Without access to robust educational theory, teachers often resort to experiential intuition when facing complex instructional challenges. This reliance on intuition hinders the transition from subjective, experience-based teaching to a scientific pedagogy supported by professional knowledge.

Overall, the construction of professional identity among Malaysian kindergarten teachers is shaped by the intersection of institutional constraints, market dynamics, and varied professional backgrounds. This ongoing struggle between professional ideals and occupational realities directly restricts and dictates the pedagogical choices made in the classroom.

3.2 Current Practice of Chinese Language Teaching in Kindergartens

While Chinese language classes are common in Malaysian kindergartens, academic attention toward this field remains relatively scarce. Existing literature primarily comprises textbook analyses (Binti Mohd Noor, 2016; Ng, 2016a), the application of instructional strategies (Chen, 2010; Mao, 2014; Ng, 2016b; E, 2024), school-based case studies (Ooi, 2024; Lee, 2022), and regional surveys (Seah, 2019). Utilising these sources, this research evaluates current practices across three core dimensions: curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

In terms of curriculum, preschool education in Malaysia is governed by the NPSC. The NPSC aims to stimulate interest in Chinese and develop fundamental linguistic competencies, such as verbal expression, reading habits, and proper writing mechanics (including grip, posture, and stroke order). Notably, the framework discourages formal Pinyin instruction at this stage. However, while the NPSC establishes learning standards, it lacks specific content syllabi, vocabulary lists, or standardised teaching resources. This creates a vacuum that allows schools significant autonomy in curriculum design. Research by Seah (2019) suggests that most teachers prioritise basic skill acquisition over integration of cultural dimensions. Furthermore, the resulting reliance on commercial or self-compiled materials often compromises professional rigor. Many commercial textbooks lack a scientific approach to vocabulary recurrence and utilise repetitive

formats (Ng, 2016a; Chung, 2022). These materials often demonstrate a literacy bias, over-emphasising character recognition at the expense of literary appreciation and emotional development (Chung, 2022). Additionally, many resources assume native-level proficiency, failing to accommodate the increasing population of non-Chinese and second-language learners (Binti Mohd Noor, 2016).

Regarding instruction, the NPSC advocates for student-centred, diverse pedagogies to address varying abilities of learners. It encourages engaging activities that link character forms to real-world objects. In practice, however, classrooms often remain characterised by traditional teacher-led paradigms. Oral instruction typically involves rote imitation of nursery rhymes, stories, or videos. Literacy instruction relies heavily on flashcards and choral reading, while writing often descends into mechanised drills - teachers recite stroke orders while children engage in repetitive copying (Seah, 2019; Lee, 2022; Ooi, 2024). Although strategies such as picture-books sharing, drama, and gamification are proven to enhance learning (Mao, 2014; Ng, 2016b; E, 2024), they are rarely integrated into the regular curriculum. Furthermore, despite the rising number of non-Chinese students, teachers often continue to use traditional one-way output models without adapting their methods to different linguistic backgrounds (Seah, 2019).

In the area of assessment, the NPSC promotes a formative approach that uses observation and portfolios to capture a child's learning journey rather than just the final output. However, existing research rarely focuses on assessment methods in kindergartens. Based on instructional observations, many kindergartens treat completed worksheets as the primary indicator of success, and some even retain formal summative exams. This result-oriented focus contradicts the authentic assessment advocated by the national policy. As a result, it not only fails to reflect a child's true cognitive journey but also creates unnecessary learning pressure.

Taken together, current Chinese language teaching in kindergartens is defined by a traditional, exam-oriented, and de-contextualised approach. This phenomenon results from several overlapping factors. First, pragmatic parental expectations often equate language mastery solely with reading and writing, forcing schools to

sacrifice oral fluency and cultural instruction in favour of visible written results. Second, to ensure readiness for Chinese Primary Schools, kindergartens often adopt a primary-style curriculum - shifting elementary syllabi downward through mechanised drills to gain a competitive advantage (Seah, 2019). Finally, a significant pedagogical path dependency exists; lacking specialised professional training, teachers often fall back on their own past experiences as students. This reliance on inefficient repetition obscures the unique logographic nature of Chinese characters and risks fostering a negative attitude toward the language.

3.3 Strengths and Challenges of Kindergarten Chinese Language Teaching

Based on the synthesis of existing literature, this study further analyses the inherent strengths and the significant challenges facing Chinese language teaching in Malaysian kindergartens. The analysis reveals that the existing system possesses three core strengths:

1. Flexibility of the Curricular Framework: The MOE's NPSC provides a versatile framework of educational philosophies, strategic suggestions, and learning standards without mandating a rigid, unified syllabus. This decentralised design grants kindergartens significant autonomy in constructing content, selecting instructional strategies, and developing assessment tools. Such flexibility allows educators the creative space to explore localised, contextualised, and differentiated instruction specifically tailored to their students' needs.

2. Positive Receptivity toward Modern Pedagogical Philosophies: Research indicates that kindergarten teachers generally possess a baseline understanding and an open acceptance of the student-centred and play-based learning approaches advocated by the NPSC. Most teachers recognise that language acquisition extends beyond mechanical skill mastery to include the stimulation of intrinsic motivation. This positive mindset provides a critical psychological foundation for shifting from knowledge transmission to active construction.

3. Natural Cross-Cultural and Multilingual Environment: A cornerstone of the *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025* and the forthcoming 2027 framework is the development of citizens with multilingual proficiency and global

perspectives. The multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic composition of kindergarten classrooms naturally simulates a miniature multicultural society. These unique sociolinguistic conditions provide an ideal laboratory for Chinese language teaching to transcend basic functional learning, moving instead toward the cultivation of diverse literacy and intercultural values.

While the aforementioned strengths provide a foundation for growth, several practical bottlenecks limit their effectiveness. These challenges are categorised into five primary areas:

1. **Lack of Professional Qualifications and Unbalanced Occupational Ecosystem:** Despite significant classroom experience, the widespread lack of formal academics among teachers hinders the consistent improvement of instructional quality. Due to social biases against the preschool profession and intense market competition, private kindergarten teachers often endure a cycle of high workloads, low pay, and inadequate training. This structural imbalance directly restricts the professional capital needed for innovation and self-improvement.

2. **Skill-Oriented Teaching Goals and Loss of Motivation:** Driven by the rigid need for kindergarten-to-primary transition and parents' pragmatic focus on literacy, Chinese language goals are often narrowed down to basic skill acquisition. This de-contextualised approach strips the language of its literary depth and aesthetic beauty, transforming language learning into mechanical symbol drills. Consequently, it becomes difficult for children to develop internal motivation necessary for lifelong learning.

3. **Fragmented Resources and Textbook Dependency:** The thematic and inquiry-based methods emphasised by the NPSC require teachers to possess the capacity for curriculum development. However, in reality, there is a heavy reliance on commercial textbooks and workbooks. Since many of these materials lack a foundation in early childhood pedagogy, they often lack a scientific or developmental structure. This creates a disconnect between the teaching content and the holistic, integrated learning concepts promoted by the national framework.

4. Inertia of Traditional Paradigms and Path Dependency: Under the pressure of academic success, teachers frequently exhibit a strong path dependency, reverting to traditional methods that are easier to control and quantify. While this factory-style instruction may yield rapid results in character recognition, it lacks the engagement of real-world language application. This results in a stagnant learning environment where natural language flow is lost.

5. One-Dimensional and Lagging Assessment Methods: Current assessment systems lean disproportionately toward summative evaluation, defining a child's proficiency through written scores or workbook output. This narrow model ignores the practical application of language, the stages of a child's cognitive development, and the diversity of intelligence. Ultimately, it fails to serve as assessment for learning—a tool for teachers to identify learning barriers and refine their own instructional strategies.

4. Optimisation Paths for Chinese Language Teaching in Malaysian Kindergartens within a Multicultural Context

4.1 Enhancing Teacher Professionalism

The quality of instruction is deeply rooted in the breadth and depth of a teacher's professional competence. Research indicates that educators with specialised backgrounds demonstrate higher efficacy in instructional design, managing individual differences, and providing emotional support (Abdul Rahmin & Lee, 2017). Furthermore, continuous professional growth is essential for maintaining high-quality preschool education (Mamat et al., 2022). Consequently, enhancing teacher professionalism should not rely solely on obtaining academic credentials; rather, it requires a systemic effort driven by policy regulation, market incentives, and school culture.

Firstly, at the policy level, elevating teacher professionalism requires deep synergy between the MOE, early childhood education associations, and higher education institutions. To bridge the qualification gap, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) has introduced diverse academic pathways, such as the Malaysian

Skills Diploma (SKM), Open and Distance Learning (ODL), and the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). These frameworks provide flexible routes for in-service teachers to upgrade their qualifications without leaving the workforce. The MOE should further strengthen oversight by linking professional qualifications quotas to the renewal of kindergarten operating licenses, thereby utilising institutional regulation to compel centres to prioritise staff development. Simultaneously, kindergarten principals should adopt strategic human resource measures, such as establishing tuition subsidies or commissioned training agreements with universities. Such initiatives create sustainable talent cultivation mechanisms that address the root causes of the certification deficit.

Secondly, to ensure teacher competencies align with evolving educational trends, an integrated system of internal and external training must be established. Given the relatively limited public training resources, kindergarten management should dismantle information silos by leveraging the strength of professional education associations. By partnering with higher education institutions, centres can facilitate targeted workshops and seminars that address real-world pedagogical challenges. Internally, kindergartens should strive to cultivate Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Through collective lesson planning, peer observations, and reflective dialogues, schools can foster an environment of professional collaboration. This internal drive for development not only promotes the coordinated evolution of the teaching staff but also provides the professional foundation required to develop indigenous resource libraries and innovate instructional models for Malaysia's unique multilingual landscape.

4.2 Developing a Chinese Language Teaching Resource System for Multilingual Contexts

Guided by the principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), effective language acquisition must be rooted in a child's intrinsic interests and align with their lived experiences. To address the current over-reliance on traditional workbooks, which often leads to de-contextualised learning, there is an urgent need to establish a systematic Chinese language teaching resource

library. Such a system would prioritise meaningful engagement over repetitive, paper-and-pencil drills. First, the Curriculum Development Division (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, BPK) of the MOE should spearhead a collaborative initiative involving higher education experts, researchers, and frontline educators. This partnership should aim to develop a scientifically structured and universally applicable resource library that provides tiered curriculum outlines and teacher handbooks. This ecosystem should be centered on themes that interest children, integrating high quality picture books, nursery rhymes, and multi-sensory activity designs. Crucially, the system must offer graduated instructional levels tailored to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the children. This tiered approach not only reduces the pressure on teachers to redevelop curricula from scratch but also ensures that children of varying proficiency levels receive linguistic input within their zone of proximal development.

Furthermore, building a digital sharing platform is key to ensuring the long-term impact of the teaching resource system. To facilitate practical implementation, the platform should provide detailed activity templates and teaching aid prototypes, enabling teachers to create low-cost, personalised materials tailored to specific classroom dynamics. Simultaneously, the digital platform should serve as a bridge for home-school collaboration. By hosting interactive audio-visual resources, multilingual parent-child activity guides, and educational games, the platform offers vital support to parents who may not be proficient in Chinese. This digital empowerment extends the child's learning environment beyond the classroom and minimises barriers to parental involvement in a multilingual context. Ultimately, these efforts foster a comprehensive, supportive ecosystem for Chinese language acquisition that is both inclusive and culturally responsive.

4.3 Strategic Innovation of Pedagogy

The innovation of pedagogy is the core path toward achieving the national educational vision and enhancing student agency. However, this transformation requires a phased, short, medium, and long-term spiral development strategy to ensure sustainability and professional depth:

1. Short-term Strategy: Contextualised Instruction and Initial Process Evaluation

In the immediate phase, kindergartens should establish internal PLC where teachers regularly collaborate to optimise classroom activity design. The focus should be on implementing the Learning by Doing philosophy within existing lesson plans, allowing children to internalise language skills through authentic social interaction. Teachers should create immersive language environments by integrating daily sharing sessions, picture-book reading, dramatic play, and nursery rhyme. Regarding assessment, the emphasis should shift toward informal formative observations. By utilising anecdotal records or visual documentation of a child's performance during activities, teachers can begin to replace traditional paper-and-pencil assignments. The core of this transition lies in capturing the learning process to understand children's motivation and provide real-time instructional feedback.

2. Medium-term Strategy: Institutionalised Training and Diverse Assessment Tools

As initial attempts unfold, kindergartens should incorporate the synergy between pedagogy and assessment into their annual school-based professional development. By collaborating with education associations and higher education institutions, schools can facilitate experts-led workshops focused on curriculum design and technical application of formative assessment. At this stage, schools should formally introduce diverse assessment tools, such as students' growth portfolios, to systematically document children work, observation records, and activity milestones. This provides a comprehensive display of a child's linguistic and multiple intelligence development, while offering teachers an empirical basis for reflecting on instructional efficacy and adjusting their pedagogical pace.

3. Long-term Strategy: Curriculum Innovation and Indigenous Resource Development

As teacher professionalism matures, the development of teaching resources should transition from external dependence to internal innovation. First, it is recommended that the BPK of the MOE provide top-level leadership by establishing

a scientific Chinese language acquisition framework and core vocabulary Standards. This ensures systemic consistency and a smooth transition between educational levels. On this foundation, kindergartens are encouraged to form core research teams to integrate the national curriculum framework with their own educational philosophies to develop school-based curricula. This development process should focus on organic integration of the logographic characteristics of Chinese characters, cultural connotations, and multicultural social elements. Simultaneously, schools should curate digital resources libraries to build a dynamically updated curriculum ecosystem. Through this strategy, schools can mitigate the limitations of commercial textbooks and empower teachers to transition from being mere curriculum executors to curriculum developers, fundamentally ensuring the appropriateness and quality of Chinese language teaching.

5. Conclusion

This study employs the literature analysis method to systematically review the current landscape of Chinese language teaching in Malaysian kindergartens. The findings reveal that the teaching work force is characterised by experience compensation, meaning that while teachers possess extensive teaching seniority, they often lack specialised academic qualifications in early childhood education and professional knowledge of Chinese language acquisition laws. At the practical level, instruction is largely defined by skill-oriented objectives, heavy textbook reliant, traditional implementation, and one-dimensional assessment models. This has led to a significant theory-practice gap, where the student-centred policy vision remains unfulfilled within the classroom environment.

Overall, Chinese language teaching in Malaysian kindergartens is in a transitional phase filled with both opportunities and challenges. While the flexibility of the national curriculum, teachers' receptive attitudes toward modern pedagogies, and the natural multilingual environment provide a strong foundation, these strengths are limited by inconsistent professional quality, a scarcity of resources, and a persistent path dependency toward exam-oriented methods. Addressing these

challenges requires a collaborative effort from the MOE, higher education institutions, early childhood associations, and individual kindergartens. By prioritising teacher professionalisation, constructing a scientific resource ecosystem, and implementing a phased paradigm shift, the field can successfully transition from an experience-driven to a profession-driven model.

The preschool years represent a critical window for language acquisition, yet the unique logographic nature of Chinese - integrating form, sound, and meaning - adds a layer of complexity to this process. This research aims to fill a gap in the study of early Chinese language acquisition in Malaysia and raise social awareness concerning the development of young children's language literacy. Due to methodological constraints, this study relies primarily on qualitative analysis of existing literature, with samples primarily focused on specific regions. Consequently, the generalisability of these findings should be verified through broader regional sampling in future research. Furthermore, the absence of on-site classroom observations may limit the interpretation of actual instructional dynamics. Future studies should utilise field observations, action research, or qualitative case studies to deeply analyse the underlying logic of teacher behaviours and their practical challenges. Such efforts will provide a more solid empirical foundation for building a Chinese language teaching model that is truly adapted to Malaysia's multicultural context.

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