

Teacher Agency and Adaptive Teaching Styles in Chinese Language Curriculum Implementation in the UAE

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Abstract

This literature review examines how teachers mediate Chinese language curriculum implementation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with particular emphasis on teacher agency, adaptive teaching, institutional conditions, learner diversity, and programme sustainability. Chinese language education in the UAE has developed rapidly from a specialised offering into a nationally supported school subject. However, policy expansion alone does not guarantee coherent curriculum implementation, as teachers remain central to translating policy expectations into meaningful classroom practice. Evidence from comparative research on Chinese as an additional or foreign language and on language curriculum reform indicates that teacher adaptation is shaped by professional biography, identity, pedagogical beliefs, relationships with colleagues, school leadership, curriculum materials, and perceptions of learner needs. Adaptive teaching is therefore better understood as a negotiated form of curriculum enactment rather than either straightforward policy compliance or unrestricted teacher autonomy. While adaptation may enhance contextual relevance and learner responsiveness, it may also narrow curricular purposes when teachers operate under inadequate preparation, limited resources, weak institutional support, or strong accountability pressures. UAE-specific scholarship has provided useful evidence on programme expansion and perceptions of Chinese language and culture, but classroom-based research on teacher agency and adaptive teaching remains comparatively limited. Important gaps concern teachers' lived experiences, classroom enactment, curriculum and assessment practices, learner outcomes, professional learning, and longitudinal development. The review argues that sustainable Chinese language education in the UAE requires a balance between curriculum coherence and contextual flexibility, supported by context-sensitive teacher education, school-based professional communities, relevant curriculum resources, and evaluation systems that recognize purposeful adaptation as an integral component of implementation.

Keywords: Chinese Language Education, Teacher Agency, Adaptive Teaching, Curriculum Implementation, United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Chinese language education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has undergone significant institutional expansion. Its development can be traced from early provision in settings such as the Dubai Police School to the establishment of Chinese language programmes in public schools and, subsequently, the incorporation of Chinese into the national basic education system in 2019. By 2022, the national programme reportedly involved 158 public schools, 54,000 learners, and 172 Chinese teachers (Jin & Charles, 2024). This expansion positions the UAE as an important context for examining language policy implementation within an educational environment shaped predominantly by Arabic and English.

Nevertheless, the expansion of Chinese as a national school subject does not explain how the curriculum is experienced and enacted at classroom level. The central issue is how teachers interpret curriculum expectations and translate them into practices that are meaningful for learners within institutional and cultural contexts. Research on Chinese language education and curriculum reform increasingly conceptualises teacher agency as an ecological and situated phenomenon. Teachers' actions are influenced by their professional biographies, beliefs, identities, students, curriculum materials, colleagues, school structures, and policy expectations. In China, for example, teachers may demonstrate positive attitudes towards curriculum reform while experiencing considerable constraints in translating these orientations into classroom practice. Sustained change is associated with teachers' experiences of reform and opportunities for reflection (L. Wang, 2022). Similarly, research on Chinese language teachers working across cultural contexts demonstrates that professional positioning, social relationships, and imposed roles influence how teachers reconstruct their teaching practices (Lai et al., 2016).

Against this background, this review examines teacher agency and adaptive teaching as interconnected dimensions of Chinese language curriculum implementation in the UAE. UAE-specific literature is treated as the primary contextual evidence, while comparative studies are used to illuminate concepts and patterns that remain insufficiently documented in the UAE. The review considers research on curriculum implementation, teacher agency, curriculum adaptation, teacher identity, learner responsiveness, professional learning, multilingual practice, institutional support, assessment, technology, and programme sustainability.

The review is guided by the premise that curriculum implementation should not be reduced to the faithful transmission of policy into classroom practice. Instead, implementation is viewed as a process of curriculum enactment in which teachers interpret, negotiate, and adapt curriculum expectations according to the learners and conditions they encounter. This perspective is particularly important in the UAE, where Chinese is being established within a multilingual and multicultural educational environment and where programme expansion has occurred more rapidly than the development of a substantial body of classroom-based research.

Policy Ecology and Institutional Architecture

The development of Chinese language education in the UAE represents a rapid transition from targeted provision to national policy. Chinese instruction initially developed within specific institutional settings before expanding into public education and becoming part of the

national basic education system. This policy trajectory has been associated with strengthening China-UAE political and economic relations and with plans for further expansion of Chinese language provision (Jin & Charles, 2024).

The rapid institutionalization of Chinese creates both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, national policy provides legitimacy, visibility, and structural support for the development of Chinese language education. On the other hand, large-scale implementation requires simultaneous attention to teacher recruitment, curriculum progression, instructional materials, assessment, professional development, and school-level coordination. The available UAE policy literature draws substantially on public news reports and teacher recruitment information rather than extensive classroom-based research (Jin & Charles, 2024). Consequently, the number of participating schools and learners should not be interpreted automatically as evidence of pedagogical consistency.

Curriculum policy is enacted through school-level arrangements involving timetabling, learner grouping, resources, assessment, classroom observation, leadership, and professional collaboration. Research on Chinese language curriculum reform indicates that school culture, teacher-student relationships, colleague cooperation, and administrative support can influence teachers' ability to enact reform, even when teachers demonstrate positive attitudes towards policy change (L. Wang, 2022). Similarly, school-based curriculum research demonstrates how teachers may draw upon available human and cultural resources to develop locally distinctive curriculum practices rather than reproduce a uniform curriculum (Tan, 2016).

This institutional dimension is particularly relevant to Chinese language education in UAE schools. The same national curriculum may be experienced differently depending on how Chinese is positioned within individual schools. Leadership priorities, instructional time, access to colleagues, opportunities for cross-grade coordination, and availability of resources may influence the extent to which teachers can adapt curriculum materials and teaching approaches. Such factors should therefore be regarded as integral components of curriculum implementation rather than as peripheral administrative considerations.

Multilingual Positioning in the UAE Education Scape

Chinese enters an educational environment already strongly shaped by Arabic and English. Evidence from a UAE university case study involving questionnaires with 40 students, interviews with three students and a Confucius Institute director, and walking ethnography indicates growing awareness of Chinese language and culture and generally positive perceptions. However, interest in Chinese was lower than interest in Korean and Turkish, partly because these languages benefited from stronger media visibility (Hopkins & Wang, 2024).

This positioning highlights the complex status of Chinese within the UAE linguistic landscape. Although Chinese is institutionally promoted, learner engagement is also influenced by existing language hierarchies, popular culture, future aspirations, and wider social meanings attached to different languages. The curriculum therefore needs to move beyond presenting Chinese simply as a strategic language and consider how Chinese can become meaningful within learners' multilingual experiences.

Teachers have an important role in this process. They may connect Chinese with local multilingual identities, future study, commerce, travel, intercultural communication, and digital media. Such contextualization can provide opportunities to adapt examples, activities, and interaction patterns without abandoning the intended goals of the curriculum.

The rapid expansion of Chinese language education has also created a capacity challenge. The UAE shifted public schools to distance education nationally in March 2020, while research on distance Chinese learning in the country remained limited (Jin, 2024). The combination of rapid system-level change and limited subject-specific evidence reinforces the need to examine implementation capacity at classroom and school levels.

A policy ecology perspective therefore requires attention to more than enrolment figures and the number of participating schools. It requires consideration of whether teachers have usable curriculum guidance, appropriate materials, sufficient instructional time, relevant professional development, suitable assessment arrangements, and opportunities to collaborate. Without these conditions, national expansion may result in a formally established subject whose classroom enactment remains uneven.

Teacher Agency as the Mechanism of Curriculum Enactment

Teacher agency is most appropriately understood as the capacity to interpret and act within professional and institutional conditions rather than as an individual personality characteristic. Research involving 353 Chinese high-school English teachers, supported by three case studies, found that teachers generally held positive attitudes towards reform while their classroom agency remained constrained. Previous experiences and reform-oriented beliefs influenced agency, while experiences associated with reform were particularly important (Wang, 2022).

In curriculum implementation, agency becomes visible through everyday professional decisions. Teachers determine which content requires greater emphasis, how lessons should be paced, which materials should be supplemented, which language should be used for explanation, and how tasks should be adjusted when curriculum expectations do not correspond closely with learners' needs. Research on Chinese language teachers' professional practice demonstrates that agency emerges through interactions between individual aspirations and contextual conditions, with beliefs, identity, and professional relationships influencing how teachers use instructional materials (Bao et al., 2020).

Accordingly, curriculum implementation should be conceptualized as an interpretive process rather than a linear transfer from policy document to classroom. Teachers actively mediate curriculum between prescribed expectations and the realities of learners and schools.

Teachers enter curriculum reform contexts with established educational experiences, professional knowledge, beliefs, and identities. These factors shape how they interpret and respond to new curriculum expectations. Research on Chinese university teachers indicates that identity commitments influence learning, teaching, and research during curricular reform, while professional trajectories mediate teachers' agentic choices (Tao & Gao, 2017). Similarly, research on Chinese foreign-language teachers in the Netherlands demonstrates that cultural and educational backgrounds and intercultural teaching experiences influence

professional identity, while teachers may adapt their practice without abandoning their Chinese professional identities (Liu et al., 2024).

Within the UAE, teacher identity may involve several overlapping positions. Teachers may be native or non-native Chinese speakers, visiting or locally employed educators, language specialists, cultural representatives, and members of Arabic-English school communities. These positions may provide resources for professional agency, but they may also constrain agency if teachers are positioned primarily as cultural representatives rather than as curriculum professionals.

Adaptive teaching is therefore likely to be more sustainable when teachers can maintain meaningful professional identities while developing pedagogical practices appropriate to UAE learners. Teacher agency does not depend on complete professional freedom. Research in a Chinese university context demonstrates that institutional control and compliance structures can coexist with teacher agency, particularly when teachers engage in research and reflection on teaching (Yang & Clarke, 2018). Similarly, research on school-based curriculum in non-elite Chinese schools' associate's teacher agency with the interaction between human effort, available capital, and contextual conditions (Tan, 2016).

These findings suggest that UAE teachers may create spaces for curriculum adaptation even within a centrally coordinated programme. However, individual professional ingenuity cannot indefinitely compensate for inadequate materials, weak induction, limited preparation time, or insufficient institutional support. The key institutional question is therefore whether schools transform individual teacher improvisation into supported professional judgment.

Autonomy becomes more productive when it is accompanied by clear curriculum purposes, professional dialogue, feedback, resources, and opportunities for collaborative learning. Without these conditions, autonomy may instead transfer systemic responsibilities from institutions to individual teachers. Teacher agency should not automatically be assumed to be beneficial. In an ESP language education reform context, teachers adapted policy through implicit classroom practices shaped by academic backgrounds, beliefs about language learning, perceptions of students, and distrust of the curriculum. The study indicated that hidden resistance could protect teachers' reluctance to change while potentially affecting students' academic performance, although negotiated curriculum adjustment and effective teacher education were also emphasized (Deng, 2021).

This distinction is important for understanding adaptive teaching in the UAE. Adaptation should be evaluated according to learner needs and curriculum purposes rather than celebrated simply because it represents local variation. Productive agency can make curriculum content more accessible, preserve learning progression, and increase meaningful learner participation. Conversely, defensive agency may narrow curriculum around familiar routines, teacher preferences, or immediate classroom manageability. Professional learning should therefore encourage teachers to reflect on the reasons for adaptation, the learners who benefit from it, and the evidence available to determine whether a particular adaptation is effective.

Adaptive Teaching Styles and Curriculum Localizations

Adaptive teaching begins when teachers treat curriculum guidance as a resource for professional interpretation rather than as a script that must be reproduced without modification. Research on English curriculum adaptation demonstrates that teachers adjust lessons according to student level, learner population, prior learning, and changing educational conditions. The same study indicates that differences in teachers' biographies and decision-making processes can result in different enactments of the same curriculum (González & Calle-Díaz, 2023).

In Chinese language classrooms in the UAE, contextualization may involve adjusting linguistic demands, sequencing Pinyin and characters, selecting familiar examples, modifying task difficulty, and differentiating activities according to learner readiness. Teachers may also make connections among Chinese, Arabic, and English to facilitate comprehension and participation. Such adaptations should not automatically be regarded as deviations from curriculum implementation. When they preserve intended learning purposes while making curriculum content more accessible to learners, they represent a form of curriculum enactment.

Curriculum materials occupy an important position between policy and classroom practice. Research on new K-12 Chinese teachers in the United States found that limited curriculum access and insufficient curriculum knowledge made professional decision-making difficult. Nevertheless, teachers developed local curriculum practices, adopted student-centered approaches, and incorporated both Pinyin and Chinese characters (W. Wang & Bale, 2024). Similarly, research on new language materials in a Shanghai high school identified different forms of teacher engagement with materials, including approval, compliant agency, and persistent agency, demonstrating a bidirectional relationship between teachers and curriculum materials (Chen & Shu, 2026).

These findings suggest that textbooks should not be regarded as neutral implementation mechanisms. UAE teachers may similarly need to supplement prescribed materials with locally relevant examples, images, names, settings, communicative situations, and differentiated tasks. However, repeated individual adaptation can increase teacher workload and may create inconsistencies across schools. Shared resource repositories, exemplars, collaborative planning, and sufficient preparation time are therefore important if curriculum localization is to become sustainable.

Cross-cultural research on Chinese language education identifies challenges associated with classroom management, instructional strategies, assessment, learner diversity, and collaboration. Research involving Chinese teachers in U.S. public schools shows that these challenges change over time and are influenced by cultural differences, school contexts, teacher backgrounds, and continuing professional learning (Liao et al., 2017). Other research highlights differences in teacher-student roles, pedagogy, classroom management, parent communication, and inclusion of students with special educational needs (Xu, 2012).

For the UAE, learner-centered teaching should therefore be contextualized rather than treated as a universal pedagogical model. Teachers may need to negotiate participation norms, family expectations, multilingual explanation, cultural sensitivities, and learners'

broader educational trajectories. Adaptive teaching may involve guided modelling, structured pair work, visual scaffolding, translanguaging, role-play, and project-based activities. However, the effectiveness of these approaches depends on their suitability for actual learners rather than their association with a particular pedagogical label.

Language teaching in multilingual settings requires teachers to manage linguistic resources beyond the target language. Research on EMI teachers in international education in China demonstrates how teachers may function as translanguagers, balancing language and content roles while negotiating educational and cultural expectations (Xiong et al., 2023). Research on Chinese as an additional language in Hong Kong similarly shows how policy pressures can constrain teacher agency and narrow curriculum towards short-term assessment goals (Tsang, 2020).

In UAE Chinese classrooms, Arabic and English may therefore be used strategically to explain linguistic concepts, clarify meaning, facilitate classroom management, or make cultural comparisons. At the same time, carefully designed Chinese-language interaction remains important for developing communicative competence.

The issue should therefore not be framed as a choice between Chinese-only instruction and multilingual teaching. Rather, teachers need professional discretion to determine when cross-linguistic mediation facilitates participation and when it reduces opportunities for meaningful Chinese language use. Curriculum guidance should consequently emphasize communicative purposes and progression rather than prescribe one language-use pattern for all classrooms.

Teacher Preparation, Professional Learning and Collaboration

Chinese language teachers working internationally frequently encounter differences between their previous educational experiences and the expectations of their new school contexts. Research involving 14 Chinese language teachers' reflective journals over their first two years in U.S. public schools identified challenges related to curriculum development, instructional strategies, assessment, learner diversity, classroom management, and collaboration, with the intensity of these challenges changing over time (Liao et al., 2017). Other research identifies language barriers, culture shock, differences in teacher and student roles, parent communication, classroom management, and inclusion as important challenges for native Chinese teachers working with non-native learners (Xu, 2012).

These findings have implications for teacher induction in the UAE. Teachers require orientation to UAE school structures, learner and family expectations, Arabic-English Chinese classroom interaction, inclusion, assessment practices, and local classroom norms. Induction should be developmental rather than limited to an initial orientation because teachers' professional needs change as they move from initial adjustment towards curriculum design and reflective adaptation.

General Chinese language proficiency alone is insufficient to ensure effective Chinese language teaching. Research involving experienced teachers indicates that Chinese foreign-language teacher education is important for professional identity and professionalism but may provide insufficient practical experience. Limited practicum opportunities may contribute to difficulties in international teaching contexts (Attaran & Yishuai, 2015).

Comparative research on Chinese language teacher education in China and Australia similarly identifies differences in programme aims, content, delivery, and assessment and highlights the need for situated and internationalized teacher preparation (D. Wang et al., 2013). For the UAE context, teacher preparation should include Chinese character and Pinyin sequencing, pronunciation instruction, communicative task design, intercultural communication, differentiation, formative assessment, and age-appropriate cultural integration. Practicum experiences should provide opportunities for teachers to plan, teach, observe learners, revise lessons, and discuss evidence with mentors.

Teacher agency is also socially mediated. Research on Chinese teachers in international schools demonstrates that social relationships, power relations, professional positioning, and imposed roles influence agency and professional learning. The development of school cultures that value diverse pedagogical practices is therefore important (Lai et al., 2016). Similarly, professional relationships among Chinese additional-language teachers can influence how teachers use curriculum materials and exercise agency (Bao et al., 2020).

In the UAE, professional collaboration can be strengthened through subject teams, peer observation, co-planning, cross-school moderation, shared resource banks, and systematic discussion of learner work. The purpose of collaboration should not be to impose one preferred teaching style. Rather, collaboration should make teacher adaptation visible and discussable, reduce professional isolation, and enable teachers to evaluate whether practices contribute to learner participation and progression.

School leadership can influence whether teacher agency is recognized as professional judgment or interpreted as deviation from prescribed curriculum. Research on curriculum reform indicates that administrative support and colleague cooperation can facilitate teachers' ability to enact change, while tensions between examination demands and broader educational aims may constrain practice (L. Wang, 2022). Research on Chinese teachers working across borders similarly highlights the importance of professional development addressing local education systems, intercultural competence, pedagogy, and classroom management (Lü et al., 2019).

Leadership support in UAE schools should therefore include protected planning time, access to mentors, recognition of purposeful curriculum adaptation, and mechanisms for connecting classroom experimentation with curriculum development. Professional learning should also be continuous and inquiry oriented. Teachers can identify learner needs, adapt instruction, gather classroom evidence, discuss outcomes with colleagues, and revise their practices. Such an approach can align teacher agency with accountability without reducing accountability to uniform curriculum delivery.

Learners, Culture and Motivation

Evidence from a UAE university indicates generally positive perceptions of the growing presence of Chinese language and culture, although students showed less interest in studying Chinese than Korean and Turkish (Hopkyns & Wang, 2024). This finding challenges the assumption that political and economic relationships alone generate sustained learner motivation.

Teachers therefore need to diagnose rather than assume learner motivation. Students may value Chinese for employment, travel, trade, higher education, cultural interest, media, peer relationships, or the novelty of learning a less familiar language. Adaptive teaching can provide different entry points into Chinese while maintaining coherent language-learning goals. Tasks connected to UAE contexts, professions, social interaction, and multilingual identities may offer more meaningful opportunities for engagement than generic cultural content disconnected from learners' experiences.

Chinese language programmes can become overly dependent on festivals, symbolic artefacts, or simplified representations of Chinese culture when culture is treated merely as an addition to language instruction. The UAE university study identified growing Chinese influence across university social, educational, and online spaces while also demonstrating that students' language preferences were influenced by broader media and soft-power relations (Hopkyns & Wang, 2024).

Cultural content should therefore be approached as an opportunity for comparison, interpretation, and intercultural learning rather than simply cultural display. Teachers can use local and Chinese social practices, communicative norms, multilingual meanings, and learners' own interpretations as resources for cultural learning. Such practices require teacher agency because prescribed materials may not anticipate the cultural questions that emerge UAE classrooms.

The historical development of Chinese language education in Dubai has been associated with business interests and the perceived importance of Chinese for relations with China (Zhoukuan, 2007). The later national programme also developed alongside stronger political and economic relations between the UAE and China (Jin & Charles, 2024).

These rationales can support policy commitment, but they do not necessarily establish relevance for individual learners. Teachers can translate broad policy rationales into concrete communicative purposes, including travel, digital communication, business interaction, reading signs, accessing media, and intercultural communication. The teacher's role is therefore not simply to promote Chinese but to make its potential uses visible while allowing learners to develop their own purposes for learning the language.

Learner diversity and inclusion remain recurring issues in international Chinese language education. Teachers in U.S. public schools report difficulties related to learner differences, assessment, and collaboration, while other research identifies challenges involving special educational needs and parent communication (Liao et al., 2017; Xu, 2012).

Differentiation in Chinese language education may require varied approaches to sound, script, vocabulary, oral interaction, literacy, and communicative performance. Multimodal resources, additional rehearsal, flexible grouping, and differentiated assessment may be necessary to address differences in prior Chinese exposure, home language, and access to learning opportunities outside school. Teacher agency is particularly important because standardized curriculum materials cannot anticipate the full range of learner profiles encountered in classrooms.

Technology, Evaluation and Programme Sustainability

The UAE's national transition to distance education in March 2020 created significant challenges for Chinese language implementation. A UAE-focused framework highlights the scale of this transition while also identifying the limited evidence available on distance Chinese learning in the UAE (Jin, 2024).

Digital learning changes the conditions under which teachers exercise agency. Pronunciation feedback, character writing, pair interaction, cultural activities, attendance, and formative assessment may require substantial modification when teaching is transferred to digital platforms.

Effective digital adaptation therefore involves more than converting worksheets into electronic formats. Teachers must determine what should occur synchronously and asynchronously, how learners receive feedback, how interaction is maintained, and how differences in access and participation are addressed.

The literature emphasizes the distinction between curriculum enactment and simple compliance, yet evidence concerning Chinese language assessment in UAE schools remains limited. Comparative studies demonstrate that teacher adaptations influence instructional strategies, materials, grouping, and assessment, while policy pressures may narrow curriculum towards short-term measurable outcomes (Liao et al., 2017; Tsang, 2020).

Evaluation of Chinese language programmes should therefore examine not only what teachers are expected to teach but also how learners participate, what forms of Chinese they can use, and how learning progression is determined.

A comprehensive evaluation should combine classroom observations, teacher interviews, learner work, assessment artefacts, attendance and retention information, and student perspectives. Importantly, evaluation should also document the reasons for curriculum adaptation. A modified lesson sequence should not automatically be interpreted as poor implementation if it continues to support intended learning outcomes. Conversely, strict adherence to a textbook does not necessarily indicate quality if learners are unable to use Chinese meaningfully.

The UAE programme reportedly involved 172 Chinese teachers across 158 public schools by 2022 (Jin & Charles, 2024). Such a workforce operates across a large and diverse educational system, and recruitment alone cannot guarantee consistent curriculum quality. International research identifies continuing professional needs related to local educational systems, intercultural competence, pedagogy, classroom management, instructional materials, and professional communities (Lü et al., 2019).

Research on teacher agency further indicates that professional relationships and institutional structures influence teachers' ability to use curriculum materials effectively (Bao et al., 2020). A sustainable workforce strategy should therefore combine the recruitment of experienced Chinese language educators with the development of locally knowledgeable teachers and teacher leaders. Local teachers, school leaders, and Chinese language specialists should also

participate in curriculum review to ensure that localization emerges through collaborative professional processes.

The institutional growth of Chinese language education in the UAE is significant, but sustainability depends on more than programme visibility. Evidence from the UAE university context indicates positive attitudes towards Chinese alongside comparatively lower interest than some other languages, while the distance-learning literature identifies continuing questions concerning the organization and evaluation of Chinese learning (Hopkins & Wang, 2024; Jin, 2024).

Sustainability should therefore encompass stable staffing, realistic workloads, meaningful learner pathways, appropriate resources, institutional support, and evidence that learners can use Chinese for purposes they value.

Teacher agency remains central because teachers sustain curriculum implementation through everyday professional decisions. However, a system that relies heavily on exceptional individual improvisation may expand rapidly without developing sufficient organizational stability.

Synthesis Issues of Teacher Agency and Adaptive Teaching in Chinese Language Curriculum Implementation

The reviewed literature demonstrates that Chinese language curriculum implementation in the UAE is shaped by the interaction between national policy, teacher agency, curriculum resources, learner diversity, and institutional conditions. UAE-specific research provides evidence of rapid programme expansion and growing institutional visibility, while comparative research provides more extensive evidence concerning teacher agency, curriculum adaptation, professional identity, learner responsiveness, and professional learning.

Across the literature, four interconnected arguments emerge. First, curriculum implementation is not a linear process in which policy is simply transferred into classroom practice. Teachers interpret and mediate curriculum expectations according to their professional knowledge, beliefs, experiences, learners, and working conditions. Second, teacher agency is closely connected with adaptive teaching because teachers often modify materials, pacing, activities, task demands, language use, and instructional approaches to address learner needs. Third, agency is embedded within institutional conditions, including leadership, professional development, collaboration, instructional time, resources, and assessment expectations. Fourth, adaptation cannot automatically be regarded as either innovation or deviation; its educational value depends on whether it remains aligned with curriculum purposes and supports meaningful and equitable learning.

Table 1

Synthesis of the Literature on Chinese Language Curriculum Implementation, Teacher Agency and Adaptive Teaching

Theme	Main Synthesis	Implication for UAE Chinese Language Education
Policy and curriculum implementation	Curriculum implementation involves interpretation and mediation rather than simple policy transfer.	Teachers are central to translating national curriculum goals into classroom practice.
Teacher agency	Agency is shaped by teachers' biographies, beliefs, identities, learners, materials, colleagues and institutional structures.	Teacher agency should be examined as situated professional practice.
Curriculum adaptation	Teachers modify materials, pacing, activities and task demands according to contextual and learner needs.	Adaptation may support contextual relevance when curriculum purposes are maintained.
Learner responsiveness	Learner readiness, motivation, language background and diversity influence teaching decisions.	Adaptive teaching is important in multilingual and potentially mixed-level classrooms.
Institutional conditions	Leadership, resources, time, professional development and collaboration enable or constrain agency.	Individual adaptation should be supported by school-level structures.
Professional learning	Continuous professional development and peer learning strengthen teachers' capacity to adapt curriculum.	UAE schools require sustained professional communities rather than one-off training.
Multilingual practice	Arabic and English may mediate Chinese language learning in the UAE.	Teachers need discretion to use multilingual resources strategically.
Assessment	Curriculum quality cannot be established through textbook coverage or compliance alone.	Assessment should consider learner participation, language use and progression.
Technology	Digital teaching creates new demands for interaction, feedback and assessment.	Digital adaptation requires subject-specific pedagogical support.
Sustainability	Programme sustainability requires stable staffing, resources, professional learning and meaningful learner outcomes.	Rapid expansion should be accompanied by long-term institutional and professional capacity building.

The synthesis demonstrates that teacher agency represents a central mechanism connecting policy and classroom practice. Teachers are not passive recipients of curriculum materials; they make professional decisions concerning content emphasis, lesson sequencing, resource selection, differentiation, and learner interaction. However, these decisions are embedded within institutional environments that can either enable or constrain professional agency.

The review further suggests that adaptive teaching should be understood as a form of curriculum enactment rather than simply as departure from standardized curriculum delivery. Adaptation may involve changes to materials, pacing, linguistic input, activities, grouping, and instructional roles in response to learner readiness and contextual conditions. This is

particularly relevant to the UAE, where Chinese is introduced within an educational environment already shaped by Arabic and English and where learners may have diverse linguistic, cultural, and motivational backgrounds.

An important distinction can therefore be drawn between supported adaptation and compensatory adaptation. Supported adaptation occurs when teachers have access to appropriate resources, professional learning, collaborative opportunities, planning time, and constructive feedback. Under such conditions, adaptation can represent meaningful professional judgment. Compensatory adaptation, by contrast, occurs when teachers modify curriculum primarily because of inadequate resources, insufficient preparation, limited instructional time, or weak institutional support. In this situation, individual teacher agency may simply compensate for systemic limitations. The critical questions are therefore not only whether teachers adapt, but also why they adapt, what they adapt, under what conditions, and with what consequences.

Despite the growing international literature, a clear empirical gap remains concerning Chinese language teachers in UAE public schools. Existing UAE research provides important evidence concerning programme expansion, the visibility of Chinese language and culture, and emerging issues related to distance learning. However, classroom-based evidence concerning teachers' lived experiences, curriculum enactment, adaptive teaching styles, assessment practices, learner responsiveness, and institutional conditions remains limited. Future research should therefore move beyond indicators of programme expansion and examine how Chinese language curriculum is interpreted, adapted, and enacted across diverse UAE classrooms.

The literature consequently provides a strong basis for positioning teacher agency and adaptive teaching styles as central analytical concepts in understanding Chinese language curriculum implementation in the UAE. The evidence does not support a choice between complete standardization and unrestricted teacher autonomy. Instead, effective implementation requires a balance between curriculum coherence and contextual flexibility, whereby teachers have sufficient professional space to respond to learners while receiving the institutional support required to make adaptation purposeful, equitable, and sustainable.

Conclusion

Chinese language curriculum implementation in the UAE is best understood as a negotiated process of curriculum enactment in which teachers mediate national curriculum expectations with learner readiness, multilingual and cultural realities, school conditions, available resources, instructional time, and professional demands. The reviewed literature demonstrates that teacher agency is not simply an expression of individual autonomy or willingness to innovate. Rather, agency is shaped by teachers' professional experience, pedagogical beliefs, identities, curriculum materials, leadership, professional learning, institutional support, and the conditions in which teaching takes place.

The review also establishes that adaptive teaching should not be interpreted automatically as either deviation from policy or pedagogical innovation. Its educational value lies in teachers' ability to preserve intended learning purposes while adjusting materials, pacing, activities, task demands, scaffolding, grouping, and instructional roles to respond to learner needs. At

the same time, adaptation may become less productive when it is driven primarily by inadequate resources, limited preparation, insufficient instructional time, unexamined pedagogical preferences, or short-term accountability pressures. This distinction reinforces the importance of supported teacher agency in which professional judgment is accompanied by coherent curriculum resources, relevant professional development, adequate planning time, collaboration, and meaningful monitoring and feedback.

Although Chinese language education has expanded substantially across UAE public schools, significant questions remain concerning how curriculum implementation is experienced and sustained across different school contexts. Existing literature is comparatively limited in relation to classroom observation, teachers' lived experiences, curriculum and assessment enactment, learner participation and outcomes, professional learning, digital provision, and differences between schools. Longitudinal and comparative research would therefore be valuable for examining how teacher agency develops over time and whether forms of curriculum adaptation contribute to meaningful and equitable language learning.

Ultimately, sustainable Chinese language education in the UAE requires a balance between curriculum coherence and contextual flexibility. Teachers need sufficient professional space to respond to learners, but such autonomy should be enabled by institutional structures rather than used to compensate for systemic limitations. The central issue for future research is consequently not simply whether teachers adapt the Chinese language curriculum, but which conditions enable such adaptations to remain pedagogically purposeful, equitable, and sustainable across diverse UAE classrooms.

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