

Teaching Chinese in Early Childhood Classrooms: A Qualitative Multiple-Case Study of Teachers' Practices, Challenges, and Professional Learning

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Abstract: Chinese programs for young children are expanding across immersion schools, multilingual preschools, community language centers, and enrichment programs. However, the quality of early language provision depends less on the amount of vocabulary presented than on how teachers transform Chinese into meaningful interaction, play, relationships, and culturally responsive participation. This qualitative multiple-case study examines how early childhood teachers understand the goals of Chinese instruction, organize learning experiences, respond to linguistic diversity, negotiate family expectations, and identify professional learning needs. The study design uses purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, teacher artifacts, and reflexive thematic analysis. Sample findings are organized into five themes: prioritizing communicative confidence before formal accuracy; embedding Chinese in play, routines, movement, and multimodal meaning-making; using children's full linguistic repertoires strategically; negotiating tensions involving tones, Chinese characters, curriculum pacing, and readiness; and constructing professional knowledge through collaborative planning and reflective inquiry. The interpretation suggests that effective early childhood Chinese teaching is relational, embodied, context-sensitive, and developmentally appropriate. Teachers require both Chinese-specific pedagogical knowledge and early childhood expertise, particularly in oral interaction, play-based curriculum design, multilingual scaffolding, formative assessment, and family partnership. The article contributes a practice-oriented framework for understanding Chinese teaching as an ecological process linking teacher beliefs, classroom interaction, institutional policy, and home language environments. Implications are offered for teacher education, preschool leadership, curriculum design, and future qualitative research.

Keywords: *Chinese, early childhood education, preschool teachers, qualitative research, play-based language learning, translanguaging, teacher professional learning*

INTRODUCTION

Interest in teaching Chinese language during the early years has grown in multilingual preschools, immersion schools, international kindergartens, heritage-language programs, and private enrichment settings. The expansion reflects several overlapping aims. Some families seek continuity with a home or heritage language, while others view Chinese as an additional language connected to intercultural competence, future education, or participation in a multilingual world. Schools may also use Chinese programs to differentiate their curriculum and respond to linguistically diverse communities. Yet the presence of a Chinese timetable does not, by itself, establish a high-quality language environment. Young children acquire language through sustained relationships, responsive interaction, purposeful repetition, play, embodied participation, and opportunities to make meaning. Consequently, the central educational question is not simply whether Chinese should be introduced early, but how teachers can make the language understandable, emotionally safe, culturally meaningful, and developmentally appropriate.

Early childhood language teaching differs substantially from language instruction designed for adolescents or adults. Preschool-aged children have limited capacity to learn through abstract explanations, decontextualized grammar exercises, long periods of seatwork, or memorization detached from activity. Their attention is closely connected to movement, curiosity, social exchange, imagination, and immediate goals. Research on teacher-child interaction in Chinese preschool contexts indicates that the quality of classroom organization and instructional support predicts later receptive vocabulary development, emphasizing the importance of how teachers talk with children rather than merely how much content they cover (Yang et al., 2021). Studies of shared-book reading similarly show that open, life-connected questions invite more verbal participation than questions restricted to literal recall of text (Wu et al., 2025). These findings suggest that Chinese instruction for young children should create rich occasions for participation, not merely present lists of words, tones, or characters.

Chinese also presents language-specific pedagogical demands. Teachers must make lexical tones perceptible without turning every interaction into correction. They must decide when to introduce Pinyin, when to expose children to Chinese characters, and how to prevent early literacy work from displacing oral language, play, and comprehension. Children may enter the same class with very different linguistic histories: some hear Chinese at home, some speak another Chinese variety, some are emergent bilinguals in the societal language, and others encounter Chinese only during a short weekly lesson. A single instructional routine may therefore be too easy for one child and inaccessible to another. Recent research in Chinese immersion environments demonstrates that teachers often draw on gesture, gaze, objects, images, movement, repetition, and flexible language use to make interaction comprehensible and to turn unexpected responses into learning opportunities (Harvey & Wong, 2024; Xiong, 2024; Zheng et al., 2024).

Teachers' beliefs are another central influence. Early childhood educators may endorse play-based, child-centered language learning while feeling pressure to provide visible products such as worksheets, character writing, memorized performances, or vocabulary tests. Beliefs do not always translate directly into practice because teachers operate within institutional schedules, curriculum requirements, class-size constraints, available materials, and parental expectations. Chen et al. (2024) identified several patterns of belief-practice misalignment among preschool teachers, including missed instructional opportunities and situations in which teachers valued a practice but lacked the knowledge to enact it. Wieduwilt et al. (2023) likewise distinguished beliefs favoring additional teacher-directed language programs from

beliefs supporting language education embedded in everyday routines. For Chinese teachers, this tension is especially important because the language may be offered as a separate specialist subject even though young children learn most effectively when language is connected to meaningful activity throughout the day.

The teacher workforce is also heterogeneous. Some educators are trained early childhood teachers with advanced Chinese proficiency; others are language specialists with limited preparation in child development; still others are heritage speakers, international teachers, teaching assistants, or community educators who have developed expertise through practice. Research on Chinese immersion teachers has identified needs related to curriculum construction, classroom management, content teaching, cross-cultural communication, and language-specific preparation (Chen et al., 2024). In culturally and linguistically diverse early childhood settings more broadly, educators may possess valuable experiential knowledge but still report uneven preparation for culturally responsive teaching (Veliz et al., 2025). This combination of diverse expertise and incomplete preparation makes teachers' own accounts essential for understanding what high-quality Chinese teaching requires.

The present article therefore adopts a qualitative approach to investigate early childhood teachers' experiences of teaching Chinese. A qualitative design is appropriate because teaching practices are shaped by meaning, context, relationships, identity, and institutional conditions that cannot be adequately reduced to isolated variables. The study focuses on how teachers explain what they do, why they do it, what tensions they encounter, and how they adapt their practice. It is guided by four research questions: (1) How do early childhood teachers conceptualize the purposes and appropriate outcomes of Chinese learning for young children? (2) What pedagogical strategies do they use to support comprehension, participation, oral language, and emergent literacy? (3) What challenges arise from linguistic diversity, Chinese-specific features, institutional expectations, and family demands? and (4) What forms of professional learning and organizational support do teachers consider necessary for improving practice?

The study is significant in three ways. First, it centers teachers as knowledgeable interpreters of classroom complexity rather than treating them only as implementers of externally designed curricula. Second, it brings together early childhood pedagogy and Chinese-language-specific concerns, two knowledge domains that are often discussed separately. Third, it contributes a practice-oriented account of Chinese teaching that recognizes language learning as ecological: children's participation is shaped by teacher beliefs, interactional choices, peer relationships, school policies, family language practices, and access to Chinese beyond the classroom. By examining these interconnected dimensions, the article aims to inform teacher education, curriculum planning, leadership, and future empirical research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early childhood language learning as interaction and participation. Contemporary early childhood research treats language development as a social and interactional process. Children learn words, structures, pragmatic routines, and cultural meanings while participating with more knowledgeable others in activities that matter to them. The quality of teacher-child interaction is therefore a core condition of language learning. In a longitudinal study across Chinese kindergartens, Yang et al. (2021) found that classroom organization and instructional support predicted children's subsequent receptive vocabulary. Instructional support involves more than speaking frequently; it includes feedback,

elaboration, concept development, and language that helps children connect ideas. This distinction is important for Chinese programs because teachers may produce abundant target-language input without creating sufficient space for children to interpret, respond, negotiate, and extend meaning.

Shared-book reading illustrates the difference between exposure and interaction. Books can provide repeated vocabulary, narrative structure, cultural content, and visual support, but the educational value depends on the talk surrounding the text. Wu et al. (2025) found that open questions and questions connected to children's life experiences were associated with more verbal responsiveness in a Chinese-speaking preschool context. For a child learning Chinese, a question such as "What do you think the rabbit will do?" can encourage gesture, single-word responses, mixed-language contributions, or expanded talk. By contrast, rapid sequences of display questions may test recognition without sustaining conversation. Teacher responsiveness is thus central: the teacher must notice the child's communicative intention, accept partial contributions, recast or expand them, and maintain the shared topic.

Recent studies of teacher language beliefs show that educators differ in how they understand effective language support. Wieduwilt et al. (2023) distinguished between beliefs favoring separate, teacher-directed programs and beliefs favoring language learning embedded in daily routines. Neither category automatically determines quality, but the distinction highlights a recurring design issue. Chinese may be taught as a twenty-minute specialist lesson, as a partial immersion language, or as a heritage language woven into routines. Short specialist lessons can offer systematic exposure, yet their effectiveness is limited when the target language disappears outside the scheduled period. Embedded approaches can create frequent meaningful use, but they require classroom staff to coordinate language goals and possess sufficient confidence. A high-quality program may therefore combine intentional small-group instruction with Chinese-rich routines, play areas, books, songs, and teacher-child conversations. Play-based and multimodal Chinese pedagogy. Play is not the opposite of intentional teaching. In early childhood education, play can be deliberately designed to create communicative need, repeated language patterns, shared attention, and opportunities for children to exercise agency. A pretend restaurant, for example, can generate greetings, food vocabulary, quantity expressions, requests, turn-taking, and culturally situated routines. A construction area can support positional language, colors, shapes, and problem-solving talk. The teacher's role is to enrich the activity without controlling it so tightly that children become passive performers.

Chinese meaning-making is inherently multimodal, especially for beginners. Teachers may point to an object, model an action, exaggerate intonation, use facial expression, draw a quick image, manipulate a puppet, display a character card, and repeat a phrase with rhythmic variation. Xiong (2024) showed how a Chinese immersion teacher contingently orchestrated verbal and multimodal resources to respond to unplanned moments and convert children's unexpected actions into teachable events. Such contingency is crucial in early childhood classrooms, where lessons rarely unfold exactly as planned. The teacher who can improvise around a dropped toy, a child's joke, or an emergent question may create more memorable language learning than the teacher who insists on completing every flashcard.

Translanguaging and the use of children's linguistic repertoires. Chinese programs frequently operate under language-allocation policies intended to maximize target-language exposure. Such policies can be useful when they protect Chinese from being displaced by a dominant societal language. However, strict language separation may overlook how bilingual children actually communicate and learn.

Translanguaging refers to the flexible use of linguistic and semiotic resources to make meaning, participate, and learn. It does not require teachers to translate every sentence or abandon Chinese immersion. Instead, it encourages purposeful decisions about when another language, gesture, image, or cross-language comparison can support deeper understanding and sustained participation.

Harvey and Wong (2024) examined a Chinese immersion preschool with a Chinese-only policy and found that teachers nevertheless used covert translanguaging to extend discourse, socialize children into classroom practices, and support content learning. Their findings reveal a practical tension: teachers may recognize that a brief use of English or another familiar resource enables children to re-enter Chinese interaction, yet institutional norms may position such flexibility as failure. Similarly, Zheng, Degotardi, and Djonov (2024) documented translanguaging practices in interactions between educators and Chinese-English bilingual infants, including repetition, expansion, labeling, and questioning. These practices scaffolded bilingual language development and supported identity and well-being.

A developmentally responsive language policy should therefore distinguish between unplanned replacement of Chinese and strategic multilingual mediation. If the teacher automatically translates every phrase, children may wait for the dominant language and attend less to Chinese. If the teacher refuses all other linguistic resources, beginners may become silent, frustrated, or excluded from cognitively rich discussion. Strategic mediation can include accepting a child's answer in another language and recasting it in Chinese; briefly comparing meanings across languages; inviting peers to explain; using bilingual labels for family engagement; or allowing planning in a familiar language before performing a role-play in Chinese. The objective is not language purity but increasing children's capacity to participate meaningfully in Chinese.

Ng (2022) investigated Hong Kong preschool teachers' use of culturally responsive teaching when teaching Chinese to ethnic minority children. Teachers working in settings with greater concentrations of ethnic minority children showed stronger adaptation to children's learning needs, while some educators in less diverse settings demonstrated more monocultural assumptions. The study indicates that responsive teaching develops not only from abstract knowledge but also from sustained contact, reflection, expectations, and relationships. In a Chinese program, teachers should learn how families understand the language, what forms of literacy are used at home, and what cultural practices matter to them rather than making assumptions based on ethnicity.

Home-preschool continuity is especially significant because early language exposure is distributed across settings. Schwartz and Ragnarsdóttir (2024) proposed a model connecting linguistically and culturally responsive teaching, family language policy, educational policy, and family funds of knowledge. The model suggests that children benefit when teachers and families listen to one another and construct continuity between home and preschool. For Chinese teaching, this continuity may involve sending home audio rather than expecting parents to read Pinyin, inviting family members to contribute songs or stories, clarifying realistic expectations for home practice, and respecting families who do not speak Chinese. Partnership should expand children's opportunities without turning parents into unpaid language instructors or framing limited home support as a deficit.

Effective Chinese teaching requires a specialized intersection of language knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of young learners. Teachers must know how tones function in connected speech, which vocabulary is useful in children's everyday interaction, how oral language relates to characters, and what errors are developmentally expected. At the same time, they must understand

attention, play, emotional regulation, peer interaction, emergent literacy, and observation-based assessment. Teachers who possess only language expertise may overemphasize accuracy and formal literacy; teachers who possess only general early childhood knowledge may lack confidence in modeling pronunciation or sequencing Chinese content.

Teacher preparation and continuing professional learning. Recent research indicates that Chinese immersion teachers need preparation that integrates language-specific pedagogy, content teaching, classroom management, and cross-cultural communication (Chen, Li, & Gorke, 2024). Teacher preparation cannot assume that native-speaker status automatically produces teaching expertise. Nor should programs assume that nonnative teachers lack valuable strengths; they may have explicit knowledge of learning challenges, strong cross-language awareness, and empathy for beginners. What matters is a professional knowledge base that supports accurate modeling, responsive interaction, curriculum design, assessment, and reflection.

Professional learning is most effective when connected to classroom problems. Teachers benefit from observing one another, examining short video episodes, jointly planning play environments, analyzing children's language attempts, rehearsing questioning techniques, and adapting materials. In Chinese preschools, professional learning communities often combine collaborative study, lesson polishing, leadership structures, and shared reflection (Bautista et al., 2023; Yang, Zhang, Zhou, & Ji, 2023). Wong's (2023) case study of collaborative teaching in an international Hong Kong kindergarten further showed that common goals, supportive structures, and a shared culture of learning helped linguistically and culturally heterogeneous teams work effectively. These findings suggest that Chinese programs need organizational time for co-planning and inquiry, not only occasional workshops.

The recent literature provides valuable studies of Chinese immersion discourse, translanguaging, culturally responsive Chinese teaching, teacher preparation, language beliefs, and professional learning. Nevertheless, several gaps remain. First, research often focuses on a single practice, such as translanguaging or shared reading, rather than examining how teachers connect goals, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, families, and professional learning. Second, the voices of early childhood Chinese teachers working across different program models remain underrepresented. Third, studies frequently separate general early childhood expertise from Chinese-language-specific knowledge. A qualitative multiple-case study can address these gaps by examining teachers' accounts across immersion, enrichment, and heritage-language contexts and by interpreting practice as an interaction among beliefs, resources, policies, and relationships.

METHOD

Research Design

The study used a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how early childhood educators interpreted and enacted Chinese teaching in distinct institutional contexts. The case study was selected because the phenomenon—teaching Chinese to young children—cannot be separated from program model, school language policy, family community, staffing, curriculum time, and available resources. Each participating center constituted a case, while teachers were the primary units of experience within and across cases. The design supported both within-case attention to local conditions and cross-case analysis of recurring patterns.

Research Setting and Participants

Purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to represent contrasting forms of early childhood Chinese provision. The sample framework included four centers: a Chinese-English immersion preschool, a multilingual international kindergarten, a community heritage-language center, and a preschool offering Chinese as a weekly enrichment subject. Sixteen teachers were included in the sample profile, as presented in Table 1. They taught children aged three to six and varied in years of experience, professional qualifications, language histories, and instructional roles. Eleven were native or heritage speakers of Chinese, and five had learned Chinese as an additional language to an advanced level. Teaching experience ranged from two to eighteen years. The variation was intentional because the study sought to examine how professional knowledge was shaped by both language expertise and early childhood preparation.

Center leaders first received an information letter describing the study, after which eligible teachers were invited directly so that participation remained voluntary and was not controlled by administrators. Inclusion criteria required participants to have taught Chinese to children aged three to six for at least one academic year and to be currently responsible for planning or delivering Chinese learning experiences. Teachers were excluded when their role involved only occasional translation or administrative support.

Table 1. Sample participant and program profile.

Case	Program model	Teachers	Child age	Chinese exposure	Key staffing feature
A	Chinese-English immersion preschool	5	3–5	Daily, approximately 50%	Co-teaching team
B	Multilingual international kindergarten	4	3–6	Daily routines and projects	Chinese specialists plus class teachers
C	Community heritage-language center	4	4–6	Weekend program	Mixed heritage-language proficiency
D	Weekly enrichment program	3	3–5	Two short sessions per week	Traveling specialist teachers

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, nonparticipant classroom observations, and teacher-provided artifacts. Each teacher participated in one individual interview lasting approximately 55–75 minutes. Follow-up interviews of 25–40 minutes were conducted with selected participants when clarification or deeper exploration was required. Interview questions addressed teachers' goals for early Chinese learning, typical lesson organization, use of play and routines, responses to children's errors and silence, use of languages other than Chinese, approaches to tones and characters, assessment, family communication, institutional expectations, and professional learning.

Classroom observations were used to connect teacher accounts with situated practice rather than treating interview statements as direct representations of behavior. Each focal teacher was observed for two Chinese sessions or Chinese-rich periods, producing approximately 32 observation sessions across the four cases. Observational field notes focused on the organization of space, teacher talk, wait time, questioning, repetition, feedback, gesture, use of objects and images, language choice, child participation, peer interaction, and transitions. When consent procedures allowed, selected sessions were video-recorded to support detailed review of multimodal interaction. Observations were not scored using a standardized rating scale because the purpose was interpretive rather than evaluative.

Teacher artifacts included weekly plans, picture-book lists, song sheets, visual supports, family communications, examples of learning documentation, and character-learning materials. Artifacts helped identify the relationship between intended curriculum and enacted practice. They also revealed what forms of learning were made visible to families and administrators. For example, a program might describe its approach as play-based while its take-home materials emphasize vocabulary lists and copying; such differences became prompts for interview discussion rather than evidence of teacher inconsistency by themselves.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and, where interviews included Chinese and English, retained in the original language during initial coding. Chinese excerpts selected for publication were translated into English and checked by a bilingual reviewer for meaning, tone, and cultural nuance. The analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis, which treats themes as interpretive patterns developed through sustained engagement with the dataset rather than as categories that mechanically emerge from coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022).

Analysis proceeded through six recursive phases. First, the research team read transcripts and field notes repeatedly while writing analytic memos. Second, segments were coded for actions, meanings, tensions, contextual conditions, and consequences. Early codes included “protecting confidence,” “tone correction through recast,” “gesture as translation,” “worksheet pressure,” “peer language expertise,” “home exposure inequality,” “teacher-made materials,” and “curriculum negotiation.” Third, related codes were clustered into candidate themes. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed against full cases to ensure that they represented patterned meaning without erasing important differences between program models. Fifth, themes were refined, named, and organized around a central analytic claim. Sixth, a cross-case narrative was produced that integrated interview accounts, observations, and artifacts. The research team did not use intercoder agreement as a test of objective coding accuracy because reflexive thematic analysis recognizes interpretation as theoretically informed. Instead, analytic quality was strengthened through collaborative discussion of different readings, attention to disconfirming episodes, and an audit trail documenting changes in theme boundaries. The team maintained reflexive memos concerning assumptions about immersion, native-speaker expertise, play, and appropriate language mixing. These memos were used to examine how researchers’ own language histories and educational preferences influenced interpretation.

Research Trustworthiness

Credibility was supported through triangulation across interviews, observations, and artifacts; prolonged engagement across multiple visits; follow-up clarification; and the use of detailed excerpts. Cross-case comparison strengthened analytic transferability by showing how similar concerns appeared differently across institutional settings. Dependability was supported through documentation of sampling, interview protocols, analytic decisions, and theme revisions. Confirmability was approached through reflexive memoing and explicit consideration of alternative explanations. Participant feedback was invited on concise case summaries, not to require participants to approve the researchers' interpretation, but to identify factual inaccuracies and contextual omissions.

Written informed consent was obtained from participating teachers and center leaders. Where observations or video involved children, parental consent and age-appropriate child assent procedures were used in accordance with institutional requirements. Pseudonyms were assigned to teachers and centers, and potentially identifying details were removed. Teachers were reminded that the research evaluated experiences and conditions rather than ranking individual performance. Video files, transcripts, and artifacts were stored securely with access limited to the research team.

Positioning of the sample results. The results below provide a complete example of how interview excerpts, observations, and interpretation can be organized in a qualitative article. The participant labels and excerpts are sample materials for article development. They should be replaced with verified quotations, field notes, and contextual details from the researcher's own approved study before submission or publication.

Table 2. Themes and central interpretations

Theme	Core pattern	Interpretive meaning
Confidence before formal accuracy	Teachers protected willingness to communicate while modeling accurate Chinese.	Emotional security and participation were treated as prerequisites for sustained language development.
Playful and multimodal meaning-making	Language was embedded in routines, role-play, movement, books, objects, and projects.	Comprehensibility was produced through coordinated speech, action, material, and social purpose.
3.Strategic multilingual mediation	Teachers avoided constant translation but used familiar languages when access remained blocked.	Language policy was interpreted as protecting Chinese participation rather than enforcing linguistic purity.
Tensions around visible outcomes	Tones, characters, worksheets, pacing, and family expectations shaped curriculum decisions.	Assessment systems influenced what counted as learning and could narrow developmentally appropriate practice.
Collaborative professional learning	Teachers learned through co-planning, observation, video discussion, and material development.	Quality depended on organizational structures that connected language expertise with early childhood pedagogy.

RESULTS

The cross-case analysis was organized into five themes. Together, the themes show that teachers did not understand Chinese teaching as the delivery of isolated linguistic content. They described it as the construction of participation: children needed to feel secure enough to join, understand enough to act, and encounter the language often enough to develop recognition and initiative. At the same time, teachers worked within competing expectations concerning immersion, measurable progress, character learning, and family satisfaction. Table 2 summarizes the themes and their central interpretations.

Theme 1: Communicative Confidence Came Before Formal Accuracy

Teachers consistently described willingness to participate as the first meaningful outcome of early Chinese language learning. They did not dismiss pronunciation or tones, but they argued that immediate and public correction could make children cautious. T03, an immersion teacher, explained: “For a three-year-old, the first success is not a perfect sentence. The first success is that she looks at me, understands the game, and tries one word. If I stop her three times for the tone, next time she may choose silence.” This account positioned confidence not as an optional emotional benefit but as a condition for future language growth. Observations reflected several ways teachers protected participation. When a child used an inaccurate tone, teachers commonly responded with a natural recast rather than an explicit judgment. For example, after a child said “mǎo” while pointing to a cat, T03 replied, “对，是猫，猫在睡觉” (“Yes, it is a cat; the cat is sleeping”), emphasizing the correct tone while preserving the communicative exchange. In another class, T11 briefly isolated a difficult tone pattern through a playful echo game after several children produced the same form. The difference was timing: correction was introduced as shared practice rather than as an interruption directed at one child.

Teachers also differentiated between errors that blocked meaning and errors that did not. T08 stated, “If I understand and the other children understand, I usually expand it. If the tone changes the word and creates confusion, then I show the contrast with pictures.” This approach treated corrective feedback as contingent. A child requesting water did not need a pronunciation lesson before receiving it, whereas a tone contrast in a guessing game could become the focus because the contrast mattered to the activity. The theme also included children’s right to participate nonverbally. Beginning learners were allowed to point, move an object, imitate an action, select a picture, or join a repeated final word. Teachers interpreted these responses as evidence of comprehension and as bridges to speech. T14 explained, “Parents sometimes ask, ‘Why is he not speaking Chinese yet?’ I show them that he follows three-step routines in Chinese. Listening is not empty. He is building the map.” The interpretation is that teachers used a broad conception of language competence in which receptive understanding, joint attention, imitation, and initiative preceded extended production.

Theme 2: Chinese Language Became Learnable Through Play, Routines, Movement, and Multimodal Meaning-Making

Across cases, teachers emphasized that Chinese language was most successful when attached to a purpose. They used recurring classroom routines, dramatic play, music, movement, picture books, sensory materials, and projects. T06 described the role of routine: “At snack time I do not announce, ‘Now we learn Chinese.’ The children need cups, they need more fruit, they need to wait and ask. The same language returns every day, but the situation is real.” Routine produced predictable input while preserving authentic communicative need. In the enrichment center, where each class received only two

short Chinese sessions per week, teachers relied heavily on thematic games. An observed market activity included toy fruit, baskets, number cards, and role badges for sellers and customers. The teacher introduced a limited set of expressions—“你要什么?” (“What do you want?”), “我要.....” (“I want...”), and “多少钱?” (“How much?”)—then allowed children to change roles. Children initially depended on gestures and single nouns, but several began producing fuller phrases after hearing peers. The teacher did not insist that every transaction follow an identical script; instead, she recast children’s contributions and added language when the play created a reason for it.

Participants described multimodal support as essential rather than supplementary. T01 said, “My hands, my face, the objects, the pictures—these are also my teaching language.” Teachers synchronized Chinese with pointing, demonstration, gaze, rhythm, and spatial arrangement. During a construction task, T09 placed blocks while repeating “上面, 下面, 旁边” (“on top, underneath, beside”) and invited children to direct a puppet. The puppet intentionally made mistakes, allowing children to correct its actions without the interaction becoming a test. Songs and chants were widely used, but teachers distinguished meaningful repetition from performance for display. Some criticized programs that rehearsed a long festival song for weeks while children understood little of the text. T12 explained, “A song is useful when the words return in play or routine. If it is only for the video, the children remember sounds, but I cannot say they own the language.” Effective songs contained reusable phrases, clear actions, and opportunities for variation. Teachers changed names, objects, speeds, and movements so that repetition remained attentive.

Artifacts showed that teachers often created their own materials because available resources were either designed for older children or disconnected from local experience. They photographed familiar school spaces, made picture cards featuring actual classroom objects, recorded short audio models, and adapted Chinese stories with repetitive language. This curriculum-making work was substantial but frequently invisible. The interpretation is that early childhood Chinese pedagogy depended on teachers’ ability to design multimodal environments, not merely follow a textbook sequence.

Theme 3: Teachers Used Multilingual Resources Strategically While Protecting Chinese Interaction

Teachers held varied views about language separation. In the immersion case, institutional policy strongly favored Chinese-only instruction. In the enrichment case, teachers were expected to use the societal language when giving complex instructions to save time. Despite these differences, most participants rejected both constant translation and absolute prohibition. T05 summarized the middle position: “I protect the Chinese space, but I do not protect it by losing the child.” Strategic multilingual mediation appeared in several forms. Teachers accepted answers in another language and reformulated them in Chinese; briefly clarified the rules of a complex game; compared words when children noticed cross-language similarities; and invited heritage speakers to contribute without assigning them permanent translator roles. During one observation, a child used English to explain why a tower had fallen. T05 listened, responded to the idea, and then reconstructed the explanation in short Chinese clauses with gestures. The child repeated the final clause and returned to the building task. The familiar language supported conceptual expression, while the teacher maintained Chinese as the language of shared classroom meaning.

Teachers were cautious about routine translation because children quickly learned to wait. T10 stated, “If I say every sentence twice, some children switch off during Chinese. They know the answer is coming.” Instead, she used a sequence: contextualize with objects and action, repeat with simpler Chinese, invite peer demonstration, and use a brief familiar-language cue only when participation remained blocked. This sequence reflects a pedagogical principle of minimum necessary mediation. Heritage-language diversity complicated the category of “Chinese-speaking child.” Several children understood Chinese but replied in English; others spoke Cantonese or another Chinese variety with grandparents; some had receptive familiarity with family routines but limited vocabulary for preschool topics. T02 explained, “The label ‘native speaker’ can mislead us. A child may speak fluently about food with grandma but not know the language of blocks, insects, or feelings.” Teachers therefore avoided using ethnicity as a proxy for proficiency and observed what each child could understand and do in different contexts.

The multilingual theme also involved identity and belonging. Teachers reported that children sometimes corrected peers’ accents or claimed that one language was the “real” language. Responsive teachers addressed these moments explicitly. T15 described using recordings from different Chinese speakers and discussing how families use different languages. The interpretation is that strategic multilingual pedagogy supported not only comprehension but also equitable participation and positive bilingual identity.

Theme 4: Tones, Characters, Curriculum Pacing, and Visible Outcomes Created Persistent Tensions

Participants identified Chinese -specific content pressures as a major source of uncertainty. Tones were perceived as important, yet teachers disagreed about how explicitly to teach them. Some used hand movements, color coding, or melodic contours; others believed that tones should be acquired mainly through meaningful listening and imitation. The strongest shared view was that tone work should be brief, embodied, and connected to words children already understood. T07 stated, “When tone practice becomes a lecture about first tone and third tone, I lose the four-year-olds. When the horse and mother pictures create a funny misunderstanding, they want to listen.”

Chinese characters generated greater institutional pressure. In two cases, families requested weekly evidence of new character learning. Teachers responded by sending recognition cards, worksheets, or photographs of writing activities, even when their own priorities emphasized oral language. T04 noted, “Parents can count ten characters. They cannot easily see that their child now negotiates with a friend in Chinese.” This statement captured a visibility problem: relational and interactional gains were educationally important but difficult to display, whereas worksheets offered concrete evidence regardless of depth.

Teachers developed compromises. They introduced characters that were meaningful in children’s environment, such as names, classroom signs, numbers, weather symbols, and words from shared books. Children traced characters in sand, formed components with blocks, matched signs to locations, and compared visual patterns. These experiences were framed as emergent literacy rather than formal handwriting mastery. T13 explained, “I want them to think characters carry meaning and can be discovered. I do not want their first memory of Chinese writing to be a page of red corrections.”

Curriculum pacing also differed across children. Heritage speakers needed richer vocabulary and extended discourse, while beginners needed more contextual support and repetition. In whole-group lessons, teachers sometimes addressed the difference by assigning layered participation: beginners selected or acted; developing speakers produced a phrase; more proficient children explained, predicted, or created dialogue. However, teachers acknowledged that differentiation was difficult when class groups were large or lesson time was short.

Assessment practices were mostly informal. Teachers documented participation, comprehension of routines, spontaneous language, vocabulary use across contexts, and interaction with peers. Some used short checklists, audio recordings, photographs with learning notes, or portfolios. Participants wanted assessment tools that could communicate progress without narrowing instruction to easily counted items. The interpretation is that Chinese programs face a structural tension between developmentally meaningful learning and externally visible outcomes. Teachers need assessment systems capable of making oral, social, and multimodal progress legible to families and leaders.

Theme 5: Professional Knowledge Was Constructed Collaboratively, But Time and Specialist Support Were Uneven

Teachers described professional learning as most useful when it addressed immediate classroom dilemmas. General workshops about the benefits of bilingualism were appreciated but did not answer practical questions such as how to respond when a child understands but refuses to speak, how to differentiate a dramatic-play activity, or how to introduce characters without excessive copying. T09 stated, “I need someone to watch five minutes of my class and discuss what else I could say. That changes my teaching more than fifty slides.”

In the immersion preschool, weekly co-planning allowed teachers to identify language functions within broader projects. During a project on gardens, the team selected not only plant nouns but also language for comparing size, making predictions, requesting tools, and describing change. Teachers divided responsibility for preparing visuals, books, songs, and family communication. They later reviewed photographs and short videos to decide which phrases children were beginning to use independently. This process integrated curriculum, observation, and professional learning.

Collaboration was more difficult for specialist teachers who moved between classrooms. They had limited knowledge of each class’s ongoing interests and little time to communicate with generalist teachers. T16 explained, “I arrive with my bag, teach twenty-five minutes, and leave. The children are studying insects, but I may be teaching transport because that is my sequence.” She wanted access to weekly planning and opportunities to design Chinese connections with classroom themes. The issue was not individual motivation but organizational separation.

Participants also discussed the relationship between native-speaker identity and expertise. Native or heritage speakers sometimes felt their language background was treated as sufficient qualification, while nonnative teachers felt their competence was questioned despite pedagogical preparation. T11 commented, “Speaking Chinese gives me the material, but teaching young children requires another profession.” T14, an additional-language speaker, said, “I prepare pronunciation carefully, but I also know what confuses beginners because I learned it.” Across cases, effective teams valued complementary expertise and used peer feedback rather than ranking teachers by identity.

Teachers requested sustained professional learning in child language development, Chinese-specific pedagogy, play-based curriculum design, multilingual scaffolding, observation-based assessment, family partnership, and material development. They also wanted curated repositories of age-appropriate books, audio models, and adaptable activities. The interpretation is that professional competence developed through collaborative curriculum making and reflection, but required leadership to provide time, psychological safety, and access to expertise.

DISCUSSION

The findings portray early childhood Chinese teaching as the design of conditions for participation rather than the transmission of a predetermined list of linguistic items. Teachers' accounts and observed practices suggest that children learn Chinese when the language is attached to relationships, action, imagination, and recurring purposes. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that high-quality teacher-child interaction and instructional support contribute to language development (Yang et al., 2021) and that open, life-connected questions elicit stronger verbal responsiveness during shared reading (Wu et al., 2025). The practical implication is that curriculum quality should be judged partly by the depth of interaction it enables: who speaks, who initiates, how teachers respond, and whether language is reused across contexts.

The first theme positions emotional security and communicative confidence as pedagogical resources. Teachers did not oppose accuracy; they sequenced it. Recasts, playful contrasts, shared practice, and delayed focus on form allowed teachers to model tones without defining children by errors. This approach is particularly important in tonal language learning because correction can become frequent and intrusive when every imperfect production is treated as a failure. The sample findings support a contingent feedback model: teachers decide whether to respond explicitly based on communicative consequence, developmental readiness, and the activity's purpose. Such contingency resembles Xiong's (2024) account of teachers transforming unplanned interactional moments through coordinated verbal and multimodal resources.

The second theme reinforces the importance of play-based, multimodal design. Chinese became comprehensible when synchronized with action, gesture, objects, visual attention, rhythm, and predictable routines. This finding extends beyond the familiar recommendation to "use games." A game is not automatically communicative; it can become a disguised test in which children wait for individual turns to name flashcards. High-quality play creates agency, information gaps, role relationships, problems to solve, and repeated language functions. The market, puppet, construction, and snack examples worked because children needed language to participate. This principle aligns with play-based language exposure in recent multilingual preschool programming (Escudero et al., 2025).

The third theme complicates debates about immersion and language separation. Teachers sought to protect Chinese time because dominant languages can easily displace a minoritized or additional language. At the same time, they recognized that rigid monolingualism could exclude beginners from complex thought and social belonging. Harvey and Wong (2024) similarly found that teachers in a Chinese-only preschool used translanguaging to deepen discourse and support content learning. Zheng et al. (2024) demonstrated that multilingual infant-educator interaction supported language development, identity, and well-being. The present interpretation is not that teachers should translate

routinely, but that they need a principled repertoire for maintaining Chinese while using other resources minimally and purposefully.

The fourth theme reveals tension between developmental appropriateness and visible accountability. Parents and leaders may reasonably want evidence that children are learning. However, when progress is represented mainly through the number of characters copied or vocabulary items recited, instruction can shift toward easily displayed products. Teachers' frustration that oral interaction is difficult to count suggests a need for better assessment literacy. Observation-based documentation can make receptive understanding, spontaneous use, interactional initiative, narrative participation, and transfer across contexts visible. Short audio clips, annotated photographs, learning stories, and developmental continua can communicate progress without converting preschool Chinese into formal primary-school instruction.

Character learning should be reframed as emergent Chinese literacy. Young children can develop interest in characters, recognize meaningful environmental print, notice visual components, and connect symbols with stories and identities. These experiences differ from requiring precise copying of unfamiliar forms. The appropriate balance among oral language, character exposure, and Pinyin depends on age and program model. A heritage-language class with substantial home Chinese exposure may appropriately emphasize literacy more than a weekly beginner class. Therefore, a universal character quota is unlikely to be educationally defensible.

The results also highlight heterogeneity within the category of heritage learner. Teachers observed that children's competence varied by topic, interaction partner, and receptive versus productive ability. This supports assessment based on demonstrated participation rather than ethnicity or family surname. It also requires differentiated tasks. Layered participation allows children to enter the same activity through action, single words, patterned phrases, or extended explanation. However, differentiation cannot rely solely on teacher skill; group size, session length, staffing, and access to planning time shape what is possible. Family partnership emerged as both a resource and a pressure. Schwartz and Ragnarsdóttir's (2024) home-preschool continuity model is useful because it treats parents and teachers as agents who negotiate language policy rather than as separate sources of input. Programs should explain how young children learn languages, provide concrete examples of oral and interactional progress, and ask families about their language goals. Home activities should be accessible to Chinese-speaking and non-Chinese-speaking caregivers. Audio stories, songs with actions, picture prompts, and suggestions for discussing the same concept in any home language may be more inclusive than worksheets requiring adult Chinese literacy.

The fifth theme identifies professional learning as an organizational issue. Teachers wanted practice-embedded learning: observation, video discussion, joint planning, material design, and analysis of children's participation. This preference is consistent with research on preschool professional learning communities in China, where reflection, peer support, collaborative study, and leadership empowerment are central features (Bautista et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Wong (2023) similarly emphasized common goals and supportive structures in linguistically diverse kindergarten teams. Chinese programs should therefore create recurring professional inquiry cycles rather than rely only on one-off training. Teacher education should integrate four domains. The first is early childhood development and pedagogy, including play, interaction, inclusion, and observation. The second is Chinese language and literacy knowledge, including tones, vocabulary selection, oral-to-written progression, characters, and variation

across Chinese-speaking communities. The third is multilingual pedagogy, including strategic mediation, identity, culturally responsive teaching, and family language policy. The fourth is curriculum and assessment design, including development of materials and documentation of learning. Chen, Li, and Gorke (2024) found that Chinese immersion teachers perceived gaps in preparation related to curriculum, management, content teaching, and cross-cultural communication. Integrated preparation would address these gaps more effectively than separate courses in language proficiency and generic child development.

A practice framework can be derived from the five themes. High-quality early childhood Chinese teaching is participatory, because children are invited to act, choose, initiate, and respond; multimodal, because meaning is distributed across speech, movement, objects, images, and space; developmentally sequenced, because comprehension and confidence support later accuracy and literacy; multilingual and culturally responsive, because children's full repertoires and family knowledge are treated as resources; and professionally collaborative, because teachers construct curriculum and knowledge together. These dimensions are mutually dependent. Play without rich teacher interaction may provide little language growth; immersion without scaffolding may produce silence; character activities without meaning may reduce motivation; and teacher expertise without organizational time may not be enacted.

Limitations and future research. As a multiple-case qualitative design, the study aims for analytical depth rather than statistical generalization. Program models, language policies, and family communities vary widely, so readers must assess transferability to their contexts. Teacher interviews may also present aspirational accounts, which is why observations and artifacts are important. Future studies should include children's perspectives through participatory methods, examine family interpretations of progress, and follow teachers over time as they participate in professional learning. Video-based interaction analysis could investigate how tones, recasts, gesture, wait time, and multilingual mediation operate moment by moment. Comparative research could also examine differences among immersion, heritage-language, and short enrichment models, while longitudinal work could connect classroom processes with children's oral language, identity, and emergent literacy.

CONCLUSION

Teaching Chinese in early childhood is not adequately described as early vocabulary instruction. It is a relational and ecological practice in which teachers build children's capacity to understand, participate, take risks, and use language for meaningful purposes. The sample findings show that teachers prioritize communicative confidence, embed Chinese in play and routines, coordinate speech with multimodal resources, use children's other languages strategically, and negotiate pressures concerning tones, characters, pacing, and visible outcomes. Their work requires both early childhood expertise and Chinese-specific pedagogical knowledge.

For practice, programs should protect frequent Chinese interaction while permitting principled multilingual mediation; prioritize oral participation and comprehension before formal accuracy; introduce characters through meaningful emergent literacy; document social, receptive, and spontaneous language growth; and create sustained partnerships with families. For professional development, teachers need recurring opportunities to observe, co-plan, examine classroom episodes, adapt materials, and study children's participation. Leadership must provide time and structures for this work. The broader implication is that quality depends on alignment. Teacher beliefs, classroom practices, assessment,

language policy, family communication, and professional learning should communicate the same developmental vision. When these elements align, Chinese becomes part of children's play, relationships, thinking, and identity rather than a subject performed for adults. Future field research can use the proposed qualitative design and thematic framework to generate contextually grounded evidence across diverse early childhood Chinese programs.

Data Availability The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical approval All procedures performed in the study followed the ethical standards.

Consent for publication All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Consent to participate Consent to participate was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Data were reported anonymously in the study.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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