

Policy Logic, Curriculum Articulation and Practical Dilemmas of Chinese Language Education: A Study Based on New Zealand's 2025 Release on Developing a National Languages Strategy

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Abstract. Facing the long-standing absence of curriculum articulation and overall planning in foreign language teaching in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education of New Zealand released the action plan *Release of a National Languages Strategy (Update)* in 2025, and simultaneously introduced the *Chinese Curriculum Syllabus*. These developments respond, to some extent, to growing social expectations for a national languages strategy. Drawing on the development background of New Zealand's national languages strategy and combined with the historical evolution of its language education policies, this paper analyzes the main contents of these two documents. The action plan clarifies five major goals of foreign language learning in terms of learning resources, Māori language curriculum provision, language proficiency recognition, teaching quality and curriculum system articulation. It also positions Chinese as a strategically significant language at the national level, providing policy guidance for Chinese language learning and the development of related educational resources. organized around the two stages of Novice and Emergent, sets relatively clear expectations for learners' language competence and cultural understanding. It also lays the groundwork for students to progress toward Chinese language learning aligned with the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) at the senior secondary level, thereby addressing the long-standing lack of continuity between primary and secondary Chinese language curricula in New Zealand. Nevertheless, foreign languages including Chinese education currently still adopt non-mandatory moderate measures of encouraging support, and mostly remain at the description of overall goals. More specific language standards and operable teaching requirements still need to be further refined.

Keywords: New Zealand, National Languages Strategy, Chinese language education, language policy, curriculum syllabus

1. Introduction

As a highly diverse immigrant society, New Zealand has developed a multilingual social landscape shaped by its complex ethnic composition and patterns of everyday language use [1]. Driven by colonial history, indigenous rights protection and multicultural development, New Zealand's official language policy has undergone a historical evolution from English monolingual dominance to Māori language revitalization, and then to the coexistence of official and minority languages. In recent years, the scale of immigration in New Zealand has continued to expand, and the number of Chinese immigrants reached the highest level in history before the pandemic [2]. The degree of "super-diverse society" brought by immigration is deepening [3], and accelerated population mobility and changes in ethnic structure have further promoted social demand for multilingual competence. However, despite persistent calls [2, 4, 5], New Zealand has always lacked a unified national languages strategy plan, and foreign language policies present characteristics of "fragmentation" and "autonomization" [6]. As a result, despite the rapid growth in the number and scale of Chinese education over the past two decades, it has continued to face dilemmas of a lack of continuity and articulation across educational levels, insufficient teacher supply and vague teaching standards [7]. In 2022, the Ministry of Education of New Zealand launched the consultation and formulation of the National Languages Strategy (NLS). After multiple rounds of public consultation and policy revision, the Ministry of Education officially released the *Release of a National Languages Strategy (Update)* action plan in 2025, and simultaneously launched the new draft curriculum *Learning Languages – Chinese (Mandarin)*. The introduction of these two policy documents marks a turning point in New Zealand's language education policy from a long-term "no strategy" state to institutionalized development. Then, what is the implementation logic and context of the *Release of a National Languages Strategy (Update)*? How does the new Chinese curriculum translate strategic policy objectives into curriculum design and teaching practice? What are the latest teaching concepts and requirements put forward?

2. Evolution of New Zealand's language education policy and the "strategic gap"

2.1. Development of language policy

New Zealand's language policy has gradually formed in the social development intertwined with colonial history and multiculturalism, transitioning from the "assimilation" policy in the colonial era to the revitalization of the indigenous te reo Māori language in the post-colonial era [8], and then to the non-strategic language policy in the current multicultural stage. Nevertheless, at the national level, language policy has long lacked the overarching direction and coordination that a comprehensive "national languages strategy" would provide.

2.1.1. Colonial assimilation period: English supremacy

Before the 1850s, prior to British colonial rule over New Zealand, Māori was the dominant language in New Zealand. In 1840, the *Treaty of Waitangi* signed between Britain and the Māori established British rule over New Zealand. Since then, English as an official language has continuously suppressed and marginalized the status and usage scenarios of the te reo Māori language. The *Native Schools Act* of 1867 explicitly required schools to prohibit the teaching of te reo Māori [4], and Māori children were forbidden from using their mother tongue at school, with corporal punishment for violators. This "extinctive" language policy led to a sharp decline in the

number of Māori speakers; by the 1970s, fewer than 5% of Māori people could speak te reo Māori fluently [9].

2.1.2. Māori language revitalization period: diversification of official languages

From the 1970s to the early 21st century, with the awakening of political awareness among Māori groups, the rising international attention to minority rights, and the vulnerable position of the Māori language nationwide [4], the status of Māori language and culture in education was re-established. New Zealand's language policy gradually shifted towards Māori language revitalization and bilingual education exploration, and recognized the status of Māori in the *Māori Affairs Amendment Act* of 1972, adding requirements for Māori language teaching and use. During this period, language policy was characterized by promoting Māori language revitalization under the guidance of English's strong position. On the one hand, Māori received unprecedented institutional protection, including the establishment of Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori-medium immersion schools), the development of Māori language media, and the mandatory use of Māori in public service sectors [9]. On the other hand, other immigrant languages (including Chinese) remained marginalized and lacked national-level policy support.

2.1.3. Non-strategic period: weak planning, fragmentation and autonomy

Since the beginning of the 21st century, although the Ministry of Education of New Zealand has introduced a number of action plans or policies for Pacific languages and Asian languages — such as the national "Pacific Languages Strategy" confirmed in 2010 and the "Asian Languages Policy" introduced based on international trade agreements with Asia — overall, New Zealand's education policy is still in a "non-strategy" stage. schools retaining substantial autonomy over the selection of languages to be taught and the ways in which they are incorporated into the curriculum. While such institutional flexibility provides schools with considerable scope to respond to local needs and develop innovative approaches, it has also contributed to a range of structural challenges, including limited and uneven funding for foreign language education, low participation in language learning, disparities in curriculum provision, weak continuity and articulation across year levels, shortages of qualified language teachers, and inadequate teaching and learning resources [10].

2.2. 2022 NLS survey: from "discussion paper" to "formal update"

According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of New Zealand, over the past decade, the demand for Chinese learning in New Zealand has been concentrated at primary and intermediate school levels. The number of primary schools offering Chinese courses increased from 56 in 2007 to 345 in 2017, and the proportion of primary school students taking Chinese electives also rose from 0.9% to 12.6%. However, due to the poor articulation between the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) system and the curriculum, students face increasing difficulty and pressure in the process of Chinese learning, leading to an obvious drop-off in the number of Chinese learners between primary and secondary school. About 54% of primary school students participate in foreign language learning, but this figure drops to 29% at secondary school [11]. Meanwhile, longitudinally, the number of secondary school students learning Chinese has continued to decline over the past decade, with an overall reduction of about 18.5%.

In terms of teaching staff, there are about 200 local Chinese teachers in New Zealand, but only more than 80 are in active service, resulting in a long-standing shortage. Local teachers are familiar

with classroom management and the local education system, but their Chinese proficiency and Chinese cultural literacy are relatively insufficient. By contrast, Mandarin Language Assistants (MLA) have strong language foundations but are not sufficiently familiar with the local teaching system, have limited teaching experience, and only have one-year tenures, leading to high team mobility and insufficient teaching continuity [12].

A third challenge lies in the changing composition of Chinese language learners. A considerable proportion of learners are children of Chinese immigrants, for whom Chinese is more of a "heritage language" rather than an "additional language". However, current policies do not distinguish between the two and still teach uniformly according to the additional language model, resulting in a large mismatch between curriculum content and students' real needs. As to curriculum system, although the Ministry of Education has established broad expectations for Chinese language proficiency, these requirements function primarily as guiding principles rather than as a comprehensive national framework with clearly specified teaching standards, resource requirements, and assessment criteria. Schools retain substantial autonomy over curriculum design and textbook selection.

Overall, the development of Chinese education in New Zealand relies to a large extent on the MLA program and Confucius Institute support under the framework of the *China-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement*, with strong external dependence and vulnerability to shocks such as the pandemic or changes in international relations [11]. For example, during the suspension of the MLA program from 2020 to 2022, Chinese courses in many schools were affected or even suspended, further exposing the inadequacy of local institutional guarantees.

Facing the above six major challenges, calls from all sectors of New Zealand society for the establishment of a national languages strategy have grown increasingly loud. According to the Asia New Zealand Foundation, since 2017, about 77%–84% of New Zealanders believe that understanding Asian languages is important for New Zealand's future economic development, and 90%–93% consider the ability to conduct cross-cultural communication and cooperation using Asian languages important. In the 2024 survey, Mandarin became the language New Zealanders most want to learn (30%), slightly higher than Japanese (28%). This policy shift is not accidental; it is the historical contradiction accumulated over a long period of New Zealand's language education, as well as the result of multiple factors such as the deepening of China-New Zealand relations, changes in immigration structure, and economic globalization against the background of the international environment.

3. Core contents and policy shifts in the Release of a National Languages Strategy (Update)

The 2025 *Release of a National Languages Strategy (Update)* (hereinafter referred to as the "Strategy") upgrades the previous consultative document for discussion to a guiding formal action plan, marking that language education is no longer just an independent choice at the school level, but has been incorporated into the core agenda of national education for future development. The Strategy explicitly puts forward five major goals: first, to expand language learning provision, increase student participation, and support sustained learning of a second or additional language; second, to continue to promote the popularization and promotion of te reo Māori nationwide, and further integrate it into daily communication among teachers, students, families and peers; third, to strengthen the assessment and recognition of learners' existing language proficiency; fourth, to expand the language teaching workforce to improve language teaching quality; fifth, to strengthen the construction of support systems for various languages learned as second or additional languages in schools [11]. From the overall planning level, the Strategy emphasizes articulation and continuity

across different school stages, requiring schools to provide learners with systematic learning programs from introductory to advanced levels. For Chinese education, this framework means building a systematic learning pathway from the Novice stage straight through to NCEA Level 3, fundamentally addressing the long-standing problem of "availability in primary and intermediate schools, but discontinuity and fragmentation in senior secondary schools".

The Strategy explicitly defines Chinese as a "strategic language" and links it to the New Zealand-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA), emphasizing that Chinese is not only a tool for cultural exchange, but also an important resource for promoting trade with China, attracting international students and tourists, and participating in Asia-Pacific economic cooperation. This highlights the economic value of language and its guiding role in international economic and trade cooperation. In terms of curriculum construction, the Strategy plans a relatively clear learning development path for Chinese teaching: Novice 1/2 targets beginners, mainly focusing on pinyin, tones and basic expressions; Emergent 1/2 enters the elementary stage, starting to practice comprehension, expression and simple writing; these two levels further connect to the intermediate and advanced stages of NCEA Level 1–3, with the focus shifting to academic reading, writing and cross-cultural competence [14], forming a curriculum development path from foundation to advanced levels and providing a clear development framework for curriculum design and learning articulation [15]. Meanwhile, the Strategy always revolves around the idea of "Māori language priority, multilingual advancement"; while emphasizing multilingual development, it still places te reo Māori at the core, requiring new language programs to fully consider their impact on Māori language development. For Chinese teaching, attention should be paid not only to the corresponding relationship between Chinese and English, but also to appropriately incorporating Māori as an intermediary auxiliary language into teaching considerations. It is worth noting that the Strategy still does not make Chinese at the Novice and Emergent stages compulsory; it only once again recommends that schools include languages in the core curriculum system and suggests at least 2.5 hours per week. It can be seen that language learning is gradually shifting from interest-based electives in the past to standardized curricula, which puts forward higher requirements for schools in terms of class hours, teaching staff and teaching resources. However, this "recommendation rather than mandate" approach leaves room for maneuver; the Ministry of Education of New Zealand tries to allow students to decide according to their own circumstances without increasing their burden, which is an implicit reflection of policy guidance and schools having the final say on curricula.

At the institutional level, the Strategy largely continues the approach adopted in previous foreign language education policies by maintaining investment in Mandarin Language Assistants (MLAs), national language advisors, digital learning resources, and teacher professional development. As a longstanding programme supporting Chinese language provision in local primary and secondary schools, the MLA Programme is recognized in the Strategy as an important component of Chinese language education. At the same time, the Strategy calls for a gradual reduction in reliance on MLAs and for the development of a more sustainable local teaching workforce through the training and professional development of locally based Chinese language teachers. However, without increasing funding for local teachers, this expectation may still be difficult to achieve. At the same time, the Strategy also recommends continuing to establish and improve the national language advisor system to provide professional teaching guidance and resource support for various schools. Chinese language advisors are responsible for curriculum standard formulation, assessment tool development and teacher training organization, acting as a bridge and link between policy and the classroom [12]. The Strategy also explicitly calls for increased development of digital resources for the first time, including building online learning platforms and developing multimedia and online learning

resources, and requires tertiary institutions to continue to carry out language teacher training and ongoing professional development programs for in-service teachers.

An analysis of the Strategy, however, reveals a potential gap between policy aspirations and implementation conditions. First, this programmatic strategy is not mandatory. Schools' considerable autonomy over Chinese classes means that Chinese classes remain formalistic in most parts of the country, with no real Chinese classes or only an interest group set up at primary school. Second, the teaching workforce is and will long remain structurally short, with scarce teaching resources and unrealistic assessment standards [7]. Third, the phased implementation of the new syllabus (the current curriculum will remain in use until 2028) may exacerbate longitudinal articulation gaps, and uneven resource allocation creates large disparities between schools supported by Confucius Institutes and schools with scarce resources. The ultimate effect depends on whether New Zealand can truly realize the implementation from policy to classroom in terms of resources, teaching staff and society.

4. Framework, goals and articulation design of the *Chinese Curriculum Syllabus*

4.1. Overall framework

The 2025 *Chinese Curriculum* organizes learning into four sub-stages—Novice 1, Novice 2, Emergent 1, and Emergent 2—drawing on the proficiency-level framework of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) while adapting it to New Zealand's local instructional time and educational context. Each stage is accompanied by New Zealand's local class hours and teaching environment to set clear "proficiency descriptions", facilitating teachers and learners to track progress. In terms of curriculum structure, the syllabus establishes a dual system of equal emphasis on "language knowledge" and "cultural and sociolinguistic knowledge". The former covers basic language elements such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and Chinese characters, while the latter emphasizes cultural customs, social norms, cross-cultural awareness and register use, thus breaking through the limitation of traditional language teaching that emphasizes language over culture. Meanwhile, language competence is refined into five dimensions: listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction. Among them, "interactional competence" is listed separately as a core competence, reflecting the communicative language teaching philosophy and the emphasis on social language practice, which is the localization of language proficiency requirements [15].

4.2. Language proficiency goals

In terms of specific proficiency goals, according to the educational philosophy of primary and secondary schools of the Ministry of Education of New Zealand, the Novice stage focuses on cultivating students' interest and "looking for future directions" through exploration in different subjects. At this stage, Chinese language instruction focuses primarily on establishing a solid linguistic foundation. Key learning areas include recognizing and using Pinyin, developing a basic vocabulary, applying simple sentence patterns, and progressively building familiarity with Chinese characters. Vocabulary and character knowledge are developed incrementally across the different sub-stages. Teaching also emphasizes the use of lexical chunks and contextualized learning, thereby reinforcing the communicative function of language and encouraging learners to use Chinese in meaningful contexts. Building on the foundation of the Novice stage, the Emergent stage focuses on the fluency and accuracy of language use, requiring learners to conduct relatively coherent oral expression, understand everyday discourse and complete practical writing tasks, while gradually

reducing dependence on pinyin and enhancing the cultivation of independent reading and expression abilities. Interactional competence goals also transition from simple question and answer to opinion expression and group interaction using the target foreign language, emphasizing meaning negotiation and strategy use in real contexts with the target foreign language.

4.3. Cultural integration design

The 2025 *Chinese Curriculum Syllabus* embodies New Zealand's local teaching philosophy in cultural integration design, systematically sorting out core cultural elements such as greeting etiquette, kinship terms, collectivism and humble expressions. It not only focuses on Chinese-specific greeting forms such as "have you eaten?" and "where are you going?" and differences in address terms on different occasions, but also reveals the family ethics and generational order behind Chinese through the comparison of kinship terms (such as *gēge* / *dìdi* versus "brother"). At the deep value level, the syllabus presents the collectivist tendency in Chinese through the use of "I / we", collective expressions and self-deprecatory language, and points out that these expressions may cause misinterpretation in cross-cultural communication. More innovatively, the syllabus systematically conducts a comparative analysis of Chinese culture and Māori culture for the first time. For example, in terms of the concept of *whānau* (family/community), expressions of intergenerational respect and the logic of number word formation, it points out the similarities between the two cultures in valuing family networks, emphasizing etiquette norms and the morpheme structure of number expressions. The gradual introduction of Māori culture and language as a "mediating language" or "bridge language" [16] into second language learning also lays a foundation for building cultural understanding and resonance among learners of different ethnic groups [9]. It also marks the first time that the official has placed Chinese and te reo Māori in a comparable language and cultural framework in language policy documents, breaking through the traditional practice of taking English as the single reference system, and is an attempt at foreign language teaching in a multilingual and multicultural context.

4.4. Grade-level articulation design

In terms of curriculum articulation, the syllabus aligns the Emergent 2 stage with NCEA Level 1 Chinese, maintaining consistency in proficiency expectations across listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as in internal and external assessment requirements. This alignment is intended to facilitate continuity in Chinese language learning across primary, intermediate, and senior secondary education, while helping learners develop the language proficiency and assessment readiness required for progression to the NCEA level. The syllabus also outlines potential pathways for further education and career development, linking Chinese language learning to university entrance and career fields such as international trade, tourism, translation, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. By connecting language learning with further study and employment opportunities, the curriculum seeks to strengthen its perceived relevance and practical value for learners. The overall framework of the syllabus forms a systematic learning pathway through the progressive layers of the Novice stage at primary school, the Emergent stage at intermediate school and the NCEA stage at senior secondary school. The establishment of learner language profiles mentioned in the syllabus is of great significance for realizing cross-grade information communication and teaching continuity, and can promote Chinese education to gradually move from fragmented to coherent teaching.

5. Policy implementation: dilemmas faced in classroom teaching

For a long time, Chinese education in New Zealand has long faced contradictions in curriculum articulation across primary, intermediate and senior secondary schools, local cultural integration, teaching resource constraints and institutional support [12]. A continuous learning pathway has yet to be fully established across educational stages. At the primary and intermediate levels, Chinese is often offered through interest-based programmes with limited instructional time, resulting in relatively weak learner foundations. Although the senior secondary stage is supported by NCEA examinations and teaching is relatively standardized, the number of students taking Chinese electives is very small [17]. Although the NLS responds to the above problems conceptually, and the new Chinese syllabus makes appropriate adjustments and clear requirements for Chinese language learning, in real teaching practice, classroom practice is still dominated by knowledge instruction. Students lack real opportunities for language interaction and cross-cultural experience, textbooks and digital resources cannot keep up with updates, and culturally integrated content is difficult to truly enter the classroom. In terms of teaching staff and resources, MLAs, as the main resource for local Chinese teaching, provide professional-standard Chinese teaching guidance, but in the long-term practice there are problems of high mobility, regional imbalance and long adaptation cycles. Correspondingly, the number of local teachers is limited and the effect of training and transformation is insufficient [17]. Meanwhile, textbooks and digital resources have long been lacking, and support from tools such as AI has not yet been established. At the same time, although the policy positions Chinese as an "additional language" and emphasizes its instrumental and economic value, in reality a large number of Chinese learners learn it as a heritage language, with learning needs more inclined to literacy deepening and cultural identity construction. This mismatch between the "additional language policy" and the "heritage language reality" further exacerbates the structural mismatch between teaching content and learning needs.

6. Conclusion

New Zealand's language policy is gradually transitioning from "lack of overall planning" to "institutionalized language governance", and Chinese education has risen from a marginalized status relying on external project support to one of the languages of national strategic significance. The new curriculum syllabus does represent progress in concepts and framework, forming a relatively complete design framework in proficiency grading, curriculum articulation and cultural integration [18]. The practice of comparing Chinese culture with Māori culture provides a new exploration direction for the localization of international Chinese education. But at the same time, both the strategy and the curriculum syllabus reflect that the Ministry of Education of New Zealand adopts a moderate and gradual attitude in promoting language policy, which restricts the effective implementation of policy goals to a certain extent. Chinese education still faces considerable challenges in finding a balance between scale expansion and quality improvement.

In response to the above problems, the study argues that improvements still need to be made jointly from three dimensions: institutional guarantee, teacher development and curriculum system. At the curriculum institution level, minimum class hour guarantees and articulation mechanisms from primary to senior secondary school should be established, and discontinuity between school stages should be reduced through unified class hour standards and transfer assessment systems, so that students can continue to learn Chinese along a coherent pathway. In terms of teacher development, it is necessary to stabilize and moderately expand the scale of the MLA program while accelerating the training of local Chinese teachers to realize the localized and sustainable

development of the teaching workforce. Meanwhile, regional Chinese advisors can be established in each region and teacher professional learning communities can be set up, so as to promote teacher training from phased input to continuous teaching support, and facilitate mutual learning among local teachers. In terms of curriculum and assessment system, a unified assessment system matching the Novice–Emergent–NCEA pathway should be constructed, clarifying vocabulary, Chinese character and grammar requirements at each stage, and setting up a dual-track assessment mechanism for "additional language learners" and "heritage language learners" respectively, so that students with different starting points can receive fair and reasonable assessment. In terms of resource construction, the development of Chinese textbooks and digital resources adapted to New Zealand's local cultural context should be accelerated, and a regular update mechanism should be established to enable teaching content to keep up with the changes of the times and students' needs.

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