

RESEARCH ON THE CURRICULUM DESIGN OF CHINESE ELECTIVE COURSES AT RAJAMANGALA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY ISAAN, KHON KAEN CAMPUS (RMUTI KKC)*

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Abstract

Chinese language education has become increasingly important in Thailand amid the deepening economic, cultural, and educational ties between Thailand and China. In vocational higher education, Chinese elective courses are expected not only to develop students' basic language competence but also to enhance their intercultural communication and career readiness. This study investigates the curriculum design of Chinese elective courses at Rajamangala University of Technology Isaan, Khon Kaen Campus. It aims to examine the current status of the curriculum, identify major challenges in its implementation, and propose practical directions for improvement. A qualitative research design was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four lecturers directly involved in the teaching and implementation of Chinese elective courses. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed using

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thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the current curriculum plays a positive role in introducing students to Chinese language learning and in supporting vocational preparation, particularly in tourism, business, and service-related contexts. However, several limitations were identified, including insufficient instructional time, teacher-centered pedagogy, outdated instructional materials, limited cultural integration, and weak alignment between course content and workplace needs. The study recommends revising the curriculum to incorporate more task-based and profession-oriented content, improving assessment practices, and strengthening institutional collaboration with external partners. The findings contribute to the ongoing development of Chinese language curricula in vocational universities and provide practical implications for improving Chinese language education in Thailand.

Keywords: Chinese language education, curriculum design, vocational education, thematic analysis, Thailand

Introduction

In recent years, Chinese language education has gained increasing importance in Thailand due to the deepening economic, cultural, and educational relations between Thailand and China. As bilateral cooperation continues to expand in areas such as trade, tourism, investment, and higher education, Chinese language proficiency is increasingly recognized as a valuable skill for Thai students. In particular, the growing presence of Chinese enterprises, tourists, and educational partnerships has created stronger demand for graduates who are able to communicate effectively in Chinese and engage in cross-cultural interaction in professional settings. Within this broader context, vocational and technological universities in Thailand face increasing pressure to equip students with practical competencies that respond to labor-market needs. Foreign language education, especially Chinese language education, is no longer viewed

merely as an academic subject, but as an important component of workforce preparation and professional development. For students in vocational institutions, Chinese elective courses can provide flexible opportunities to acquire additional language skills that may improve employability in sectors such as tourism, hospitality, business services, logistics, and customer relations. Therefore, the design of such courses should not only focus on basic linguistic knowledge, but also on practical communication, cultural awareness, and workplace relevance.

Rajamangala University of Technology Isaan, Khon Kaen Campus (RMUTI KKC), is an appropriate context for investigating this issue because of its vocational orientation and its emphasis on applied learning. As a public institution committed to developing students' professional knowledge and practical abilities, RMUTI KKC is expected to provide curricula that reflect both academic goals and social realities. In this setting, Chinese elective courses have the potential to function as an important bridge between general education and career preparation. However, although such courses are increasingly valued, their curriculum design may still face a number of challenges related to course structure, teaching methods, learning materials, student engagement, and alignment with vocational needs. Existing discussions on Chinese language education in Thailand have often emphasized language expansion, policy support, and the growing popularity of Mandarin learning. However, less attention has been paid to how Chinese elective courses are designed and implemented in vocational university contexts, particularly in relation to curriculum relevance and classroom practice. This gap is important because elective courses differ from major programs in their objectives, time allocation, student composition, and expected outcomes. A course may be institutionally available, yet still fail to respond effectively to students' learning needs and future workplace demands if its curriculum design is not sufficiently targeted and practical. Against

this background, this study investigates the curriculum design of Chinese elective courses at RMUTI KKC. The study seeks to examine the current status of the curriculum, identify major problems in its implementation, and propose practical directions for improvement. By focusing on lecturers' perspectives and institutional teaching realities, the study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on curriculum reform in vocational higher education. The findings are expected to provide both academic and practical value for universities in Thailand that seek to strengthen Chinese language education in ways that are more responsive to contemporary educational and occupational demands.

Objectives

1. To examine the current status of the Chinese elective curriculum at Rajamangala University of Technology Isaan, Khon Kaen Campus.
2. To identify the major problems and limitations in the implementation of the Chinese elective curriculum at Rajamangala University of Technology Isaan, Khon Kaen Campus.
3. To propose practical directions for improving the curriculum in ways that better support vocational education and workplace needs.

Literature Review

Chinese Language Education in Thailand

With the increasingly close economic, educational, and cultural ties between Thailand and China, Chinese language education has continued to develop in Thailand. The importance of Chinese language in Thai higher education is increasingly prominent, not only reflected in the widespread availability of Chinese language courses but also in the growing expectation that learning Chinese will promote academic progress, employability, and intercultural communication. Recent research indicates that in Thailand, Chinese

language education is closely related to workforce development and international competitiveness, especially in areas such as tourism, business, and regional cooperation (Luo et al., 2023; Yang, 2025).

However, the widespread availability of Chinese language education has not automatically guaranteed effective learning outcomes. Recent empirical studies in Thailand show that university students still face numerous difficulties in Chinese reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary memorization, listening, and oral expression. These challenges are often exacerbated by low classroom participation, insufficient teaching support, and a disconnect between learning activities and learners' actual needs (Luo et al., 2023; Li, 2025). These findings suggest that the key issue is no longer whether Chinese language courses are offered, but rather whether the course design and implementation are effective and aligned with practical realities.

This issue is particularly important in vocational education. A recent study in Thailand points out that Chinese language and culture education for vocational students should be directly related to the growth of Chinese investment in Thailand and the labor market's demand for practical skills. This study identifies curriculum development, institutional support, policy guidance, and skills training activities as core elements for the effective promotion of Chinese at the vocational education level (Nuansri & Chaiyaphak, 2025). Similarly, Yi et al. (2024) emphasize that Thai vocational students need a more personalized and practical Chinese learning environment to meet their actual learning conditions and career development goals. These studies collectively suggest the need to examine the design of elective Chinese courses within the context of vocational universities.

Curriculum Design in Vocational and Elective Language Education

Recent research indicates that language curriculum design in higher education should go beyond content coverage and focus on learners' needs, target communicative contexts, and practical applications. This principle is

particularly important in vocational or professionally oriented environments, as language learning aims to enhance students' workplace competence, not just academic skills. Research on task-based teaching in Thai higher education indicates that even students with relatively low Chinese proficiency can make significant progress in oral communication and course performance when courses are designed around clearly defined tasks and communicative exercises (Waluyo & Wangdi, 2024). This supports the view that vocational university elective language courses should be designed with practical application in mind, rather than focusing solely on rote memorization.

Recent research on Chinese language education in Thailand also points to the need for more innovative and application-oriented curriculum design. For example, Wuttiphan and Kwangmuang (2025) found that well-designed, universally applicable learning environments significantly improved Thai students' critical writing skills in Chinese courses and were associated with higher student satisfaction. Their findings suggest that curriculum improvement should include not only updating course content but also more effective instructional structures, technology integration, and providing opportunities for authentic language use. This is particularly important for this study, as vocational university elective Chinese courses ideally combine language development, practical communication, and vocational relevance.

Another important issue in curriculum design is cultural integration. Recent international research on Chinese language education indicates that cultural teaching plays a crucial role, but the systematic integration of cultural content into curricula and teaching materials still needs further development. Empirical research on cultural vocabulary competence shows that cultural knowledge is not a dispensable supplement, but rather an important component of effective Chinese learning and curriculum improvement (Yang et al., 2025). This is particularly important for vocational school students, as their future language use is likely to involve direct intercultural communication. Therefore,

the curriculum design of elective Chinese courses should not only include language forms and skills, but also cultural content to support practical communication.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on three complementary theoretical perspectives: experiential learning, self-determination theory, and critical language teaching. Recent higher education research consistently demonstrates that experiential learning environments actively promote student engagement, practical understanding, and transferable learning outcomes. In language-related fields, research also shows that active, practice-based learning is more effective in enhancing student engagement and deepening learning compared to passive instruction. This makes experiential learning an effective perspective for examining whether elective Chinese courses provide students with sufficient opportunities for communication, application, and reflection (Duchatelet et al., 2024; Wuttiphan & Kwangmuang, 2025).

Self-determination theory is also relevant, as recent meta-analysis evidence suggests that educational interventions based on self-determination theory significantly improve students' intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence. These structures are crucial in foreign language learning, and students' sustained engagement largely depends on whether they feel competent, supported, and truly engaged in the learning process (Wang et al., 2024). In Thai-Chinese language education, motivation and institutional issues are also considered major factors influencing advanced level preparation and learner persistence, suggesting that curriculum design should closely consider students' psychological and motivational states, rather than just content delivery (Yang, 2025).

Finally, critical language teaching provides a broader explanatory framework for examining how curriculum and pedagogy are influenced by

institutional assumptions, classroom power relations, and ideas about meaningful education. Crookes (2022) explains that critical language teaching focuses on applying critical pedagogy to second language contexts and encourages a shift from passive knowledge transmission to more socially meaningful and participatory language education. This perspective is useful for this study because it helps explain why issues such as teacher-centered instruction, weak context relevance, and limited institutional responsiveness should be understood not only as technical problems but also as curriculum structure issues.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the curriculum design of Chinese elective courses at Rajamangala University of Technology Isaan, Khon Kaen Campus (RMUTI KKC). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore lecturers' perceptions, experiences, and reflections on curriculum implementation in a specific educational context rather than to test hypotheses statistically (Aspers & Corte, 2024). and purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants with direct knowledge of curriculum design, teaching practices, and related challenges (Ahmad et al., 2025). Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide developed from the study objectives, covering curriculum goals, teaching methods, student engagement, institutional support, implementation problems, and suggestions for improvement. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed the researcher to address common issues across participants while also providing flexibility for lecturers to elaborate on their professional experiences (Junnier, 2024). All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, in which the transcripts were read repeatedly, coded systematically, and grouped

into themes representing broader recurrent patterns in the dataset. This method was chosen because it provides a flexible yet rigorous approach for identifying and interpreting patterned meanings in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Ahmed, 2025). The resulting themes were further interpreted through the perspectives of Experiential Learning Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Critical Pedagogy in order to explain issues related to practical learning, learner motivation, and structural curriculum constraints. To enhance trustworthiness, the interviews were recorded and transcribed accurately, and the analytical process was conducted in a systematic and transparent manner, as qualitative rigor depends on clear procedures, careful documentation, and consistency between research objectives and interpretation (Ahmed, 2024; Braun et al., 2024). Ethically, participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained before data collection, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

Results

A thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five main themes regarding the design of the RMUTI KKC Chinese elective course. Overall, the findings indicate that the course possesses clear strategic and career value, but its implementation remains constrained by structural, pedagogical, and institutional limitations. Lecturers repeatedly emphasized the increasing importance of Chinese language education in Thailand due to the growing ties between Thailand and China in tourism, trade, and infrastructure development. In this context, Chinese courses are seen as a crucial pathway to enhancing students' employability and competitiveness, particularly in fields such as hotel management, business, and intercultural communication. The course's position within Business English Management programs has also shifted from an elective to a more significant component of career preparation.

Meanwhile, data shows that the current curriculum only partially meets the needs of students and the job market. Lecturers stated that while these courses help students acquire basic Chinese language skills and initial communicative competence, they are insufficient to equip them for professional or specific career roles. One of the most frequently mentioned issues is the limited class time, typically only one class per week, which reduces opportunities for practice, review, and skill consolidation. Furthermore, the curriculum was deemed overly reliant on passive teaching, including rote memorization and repetitive practice, which undermined student engagement and confidence in practical application. Assessment methods were also considered disconnected from actual language performance, often focusing more on teacher instruction or course completion than on students' communicative competence.

The third major issue was the systemic challenges inherent in Chinese language teaching. Teachers reported significant differences in students' Chinese proficiency, with some entering with no prior knowledge of Chinese while others had prior exposure. This heterogeneity increased the difficulty of teaching and complicated the provision of differentiated support. Teachers also noted that outdated textbooks, limited relevance of course materials to the workplace, superficial cultural introductions, and over-reliance on translation tools like Google Translate were long-standing problems. Additionally, the curriculum was described as fragmented and lacking a standardized framework, further reducing teaching consistency and limiting the long-term development of students' language skills.

The fourth theme concerned practical suggestions for curriculum improvement. In interviews, instructors recommended increasing class time, incorporating task-based and experiential learning activities, revising textbooks to include more industry-relevant content, and adopting more dynamic assessment methods. They also recommended strengthening cooperation with Chinese enterprises or related institutions to provide students with workplace practice,

internships, simulations, and more authentic language use opportunities. Regarding pedagogy, they emphasized the need for teacher training in communicative teaching methodologies and better integration of digital tools and modern communication platforms.

The final topic concerned institutional support and future prospects. While all lecturers acknowledged the university's overall support for Chinese language education and its recognition of its growing importance, they also stressed that this support has not yet translated into sufficiently concrete or systematic reforms. Funding constraints, policy inertia, and a lack of standardized curriculum planning were identified as significant obstacles. Nevertheless, the prospects for RMUTI KKC's elective Chinese language course remain bright, especially as employers continue to value bilingual graduates, and Chinese language proficiency is increasingly important in Thailand's China-oriented economic landscape. Therefore, the findings suggest that the long-term effectiveness of the course will depend on whether institutional support can move beyond symbolic recognition and towards more sustainable curriculum innovation and industry-aligned development.

Conclusion

Curriculum design of Chinese elective courses at Rajamangala University of Technology Isaan, Khon Kaen Campus through a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with four lecturers. The findings show that the curriculum has clear value in supporting vocational education, employability, and cross-cultural communication in a Thai context increasingly shaped by closer ties with China. At the same time, current curriculum remains limited by insufficient class hours, passive teaching methods, outdated and weakly contextualized materials, uneven student proficiency, and inadequate alignment with workplace demands. Although the university recognizes the growing importance of Chinese language

education, more systematic curriculum reform is still needed to translate this recognition into effective practice. Overall, the study concludes that Chinese elective courses at RMUTI KKC should move toward a more applied, task-based, and needs-driven model supported by updated materials, improved assessment, teacher development, and stronger collaboration with external partners. In this way, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on curriculum reform and offers practical guidance for strengthening Chinese language education in vocational universities in Thailand.

Discussion

Demonstrates that RMUTI KKC's elective Chinese language course possesses clear strategic and career relevance within the current context of Thai higher education. As Thailand and China's economic, educational, and cultural ties grow increasingly close, the correlation between Chinese language proficiency and employability, service communication, and intercultural exchange is also strengthening. This finding aligns with recent research indicating that Chinese language education in Thailand has moved beyond general language learning, placing greater emphasis on developing workforce skills, professional competence, and international competitiveness (Luo et al., 2023; Nuansri & Chaiyaphak, 2025). In this sense, the course reflects the school's profound understanding of the evolving demands of the labor market. However, the findings also suggest that strategic awareness alone is insufficient. Despite the course's emphasis by teachers and its relevance to the contemporary professional environment, its current implementation has not adequately supported students in developing practical and career-oriented Chinese language skills.

The gap between course objectives and classroom practice. While the course aims to equip students with practical Chinese skills needed for future

employment, the teaching process remains constrained by limited teaching time, passive instruction, fragmented textbooks, and insufficient workplace relevance. This finding aligns with recent academic research emphasizing that language curriculum design in vocational and higher education should be based not only on content delivery but also on learners' actual needs, authentic communicative situations, and meaningful application (Waluyo & Wangdi, 2024; Wuttiphan & Kwangmuang, 2025). The continued presence of rote memorization and teacher-centered teaching models suggests that the course is not yet fully adapted to the needs of vocational language education. Consequently, students may only have initial exposure to Chinese without developing the confidence and communicative competence required for practical professional applications.

This can be interpreted from the perspective of experiential learning theory. From this perspective, effective learning requires opportunities for active participation, practice, reflection, and application. However, the instructors in this study repeatedly pointed out that students had limited opportunities to use Chinese in authentic or task-oriented contexts. This helps explain why the curriculum seems to support the acquisition of basic knowledge but falls short in developing deeper, transferable communicative skills. Recent research on experiential and hands-on learning in higher education also indicates that students learn better when instruction includes authentic tasks, contextualized problem-solving, and opportunities for active participation, rather than passive information reception (Duchatelet et al., 2024; Wuttiphan & Kwangmuang, 2025). Therefore, the lack of experiential dimension in current curricula may be one of the key reasons for their limited effectiveness.

Self-determination theory offers another explanation for the problems identified in this study. According to this theory, learning is enhanced when students experience autonomy, competence, and meaningful engagement. However, the results suggest that the current curriculum structure may weaken

these conditions. When students are subjected to rote memorization, lack genuine opportunities for interaction, and are exposed to content that is weakly linked to their career goals, their motivation may decline. This interpretation aligns with recent research demonstrating that educational environments based on the principles of self-directed learning can enhance student engagement, confidence, and sustained participation (Wang et al., 2024). In the context of elective Chinese courses, this means that curriculum reform should not merely focus on content revision but also on creating learning environments that foster a sense of accomplishment, engagement, and motivation in students.

Institutional and structural issues, which can be better understood through critical language teaching methods, are also relevant. The problems identified by teachers extend beyond classroom teaching techniques to include a lack of standardized curriculum frameworks, insufficient institutional enforcement, inadequate industry-academia collaboration, and low integration of cultural and vocational content. From a critical perspective, these issues indicate that curriculum design is influenced by institutional assumptions and structural constraints, potentially perpetuating passive and narrow learning patterns rather than genuine educational change (Crookes, 2022). Therefore, the research suggests that improving elective Chinese courses requires more than just minor adjustments to instruction.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the Chinese elective curriculum at RMUTI KKC be revised to better align with vocational education and workplace needs by incorporating more profession-oriented content, such as Chinese for tourism, business, and service communication. Teaching approaches should shift from memorization-based instruction toward more task-based, communicative, and experiential learning activities that can

strengthen students' practical language competence. In addition, instructional materials and assessment methods should be updated to reflect contemporary language use, intercultural communication, and real-life performance. Greater institutional support is also needed in the form of clearer curriculum planning, teacher development, resource allocation, and stronger collaboration with external organizations so that Chinese elective courses can become more relevant, effective, and sustainable in vocational higher education.

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