

Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language: An Analysis of Modern Foreign Language Education Policy at Key Stage 2 in England

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Abstract: This report critically examines the KS2 MFL under the policy of National Curriculum, with a particular focus on the teaching and implementation of Chinese as an MFL. It explores the function of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in ensuring responsibility for educational quality. By analyzing policy achievements and challenges, the report also draws on insights from a researcher's perspective on policy evaluation and an educator's hands-on experience in teaching Chinese. Recommendations are provided to address existing gaps, and highlight the importance of equal access, effective support systems, and better alignment between policy goals and classroom practices.

Keywords: Modern Foreign Language (MFL); Key Stage 2 (KS2); National Curriculum (NC); Ofsted; Mandarin Teaching and Learning as MFL

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

There are notable disparities in foreign language education across England, with French, Spanish, German, Latin, and Chinese among the languages taught. Spanish leads in A-level enrollment, while Chinese reflects its growing popularity (British Council, Language Trends 2023). Language education is crucial for developing students' communication skills, cultural competence, and future career opportunities. In England, the National Curriculum (NC) mandates the teaching and learning of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) for Key Stage 2 (KS2), highlighting its role in equipping students for participation in a globalized society.

1.2 Research Objectives

Smith (2000) introduced significant changes to language education in England. It expanded language options, emphasized the importance of language skills for future opportunities, and recommended starting language learning at age 7. Additionally, it proposed leadership initiatives to improve teaching quality. The introduction of mandatory foreign language learning at Key Stage 2 (KS2), targeting students from Year 3 to Year 6, reflects these recommendations and broader educational reforms. Under this policy, students are required to learn an ancient or modern foreign language, equipping them with essential skills for a globalized world.

The evolution of language education policies can be traced to the Plowden Report (1967), which championed a child-centered

approach. This philosophy emphasized creativity, personal development, and a broad curriculum, aligning with MFL's goals of fostering communication and cultural awareness. The report also stressed meeting individual learning needs, a concept central to differentiated strategies in MFL teaching. Furthermore, it highlighted challenges in teacher training and resources—issues that continue to affect the effective implementation of MFL at KS2.

he Plowden Report (1967) present elements from a theoretical policy analysis framework, such as: Problem identification; Evidence-based policy making; Social equity; Implementation and monitoring.

2. From the Plowden Report era to the present

2.1 Key Terms

The National Curriculum has undergone significant changes since its inception. The Education Reform Act of 1988 laid the foundation, aiming to standardize education across England. Subsequent updates introduced a more inclusive and flexible approach, such as the inclusion of MFL at KS2. These changes reflect a growing emphasis on equipping students with practical skills and preparing them for a multicultural world.

Based on policy review, MFL at KS2 under the policy of National Curriculum (2013) has the goals and objectives:

1. Develop pupils' ability to communicate in a foreign language with confidence and fluency.
2. Foster an appreciation of different cultures and languages.
3. Build foundational skills for future language learning at Key Stage 3.

Key stakeholders include: Students, Teachers, Schools, Parents, Policy Maker, Media, etc.

Policy lever include: Legislation & Policy Documents; Teacher Training & Professional Development; Funding & Resource Allocation; Curriculum & Assessment; School Autonomy & Accountability: Ofsted.

Ofsted, established in 1992, was designed to improve educational standards and accountability in England. It was created to meet the government's and public's demand for strict oversight of educational quality. While Ofsted has played a crucial role in monitoring schools, its impact on MFL education at KS2 raises important questions.

The Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (2019) emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity and preparing students for a globalized world. These priorities align with MFL objectives at KS2, which aim to broaden students' horizons by exposing them to different cultures and ways of thinking. However, there is a gap between these aspirations and the reality in many schools.

2.2 Potential Conflicts

Although the curriculum guides teaching, contradictions may arise during the process of validating the National Curriculum's design through teaching practices. Taking the teaching of Mandarin as an MFL at KS2 as an example, in comparison with other European languages under the MFL framework, Joël Bellassen and Zhang Li (2008), in their study New Concepts of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and Their Implications for Mandarin Teaching, cite DeFrancis (1984), who argued that learning Chinese characters requires four times the effort of learning European languages.

2.2.1 Media and Literature Perspectives

The media has highlighted both successes and challenges in KS2 language education. Positive reports emphasize improved cultural awareness and communication skills, while criticisms focus on resource disparities and inconsistent teaching quality. Literature supports the policy's intent but questions its feasibility given teacher shortages and limited training opportunities (Johnson, 2013). Therefore, the MFL language learning outlined in the National Curriculum (NC) cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to the number of instructional hours. Influenced by various external factors such as media, it is essential to strive for a case-by-case analysis to address specific issues effectively.

2.2.2 Ofsted's Role in MFL Education at KS2

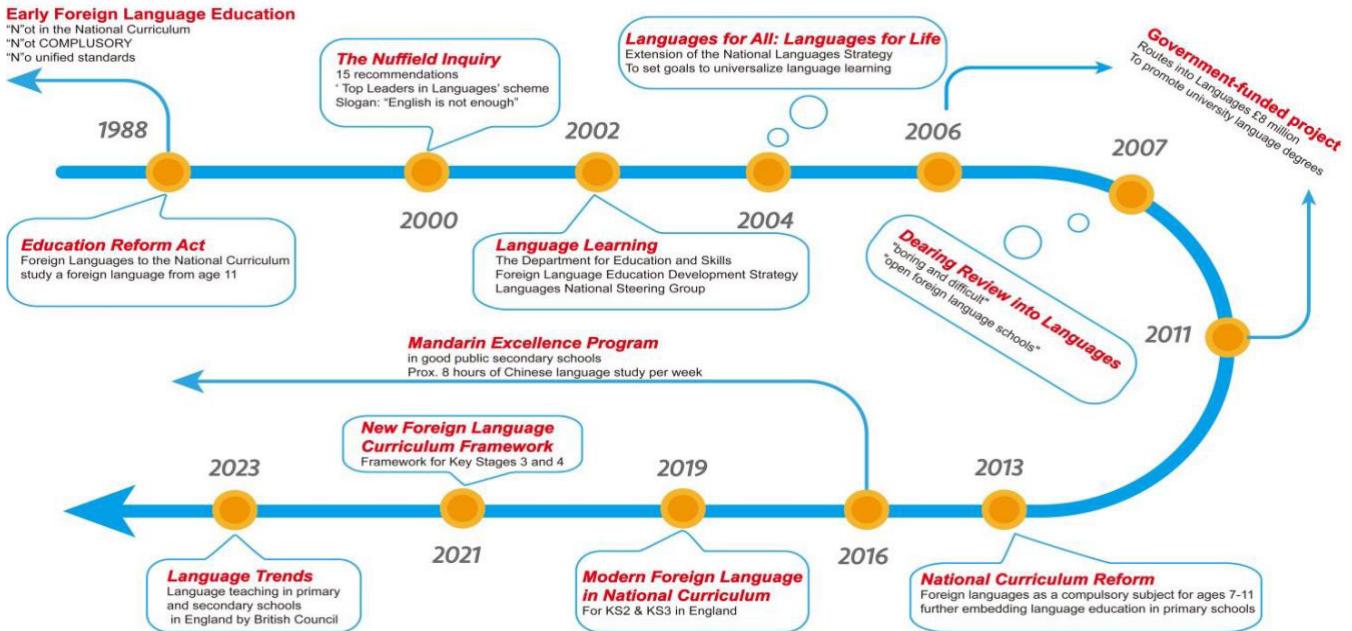
Ofsted has undoubtedly played a key role in holding schools accountable for educational quality. However, when it comes to MFL education at KS2, its emphasis on compliance and measurable outcomes risks undermining the broader cultural and global aims of the curriculum. To truly support MFL, Ofsted must adapt its inspection criteria to focus on meaningful learning experiences, address systemic challenges, and ensure that schools are equipped to meet both practical and aspirational goals.

Without these changes, Ball, S. J. (2003) indicates MFL risks becoming another tick-box exercise rather than a transformative part of the KS2 curriculum.

By examining the historical development of educational policies and the evolution of the National Curriculum, reporter will highlight the increasing importance and challenge of MFL teaching.

3. Development of National Curriculum Policy: Focus on KS2

Figure 1 The Historical Development of National Curriculum in England (by Author's Own)



Historically, the Education Reform Act (1988) included foreign languages in the National Curriculum, starting from age 11 (Key Stage 3). However, language learning was not compulsory and lacked unified standards, leaving younger learners without structured exposure.

3.1 Key Changes for MFL at KS2

The most significant shift occurred with the 2016 National Curriculum Reform (2016), which made foreign languages compulsory for ages 7–11 (KS2). This reform aimed to embed language education in primary schools, ensuring students develop foundational language skills early. It aligned with broader goals to increase language proficiency and global awareness among students.

3.2 Strategic Efforts

Prior to this reform, initiatives such as the 2002 National Languages Strategy (2002) and the 2004 Language Learning Strategy (2004) highlighted the importance of earlier language exposure but lacked enforceable policies for KS2. The 2016 reform (2016) addressed this gap, focusing on fostering speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in a foreign language.

Figure 3: Comparison of LeBron James and Michael Jordan's scoring ability in different positions.

3.3 Recent Developments

Post-2016, the emphasis on early language learning was reinforced by programs like the Mandarin Excellence Program (2023), which highlights the importance of introducing global languages at an early age.

4. Policy Impact on MFL Education at KS2

Making foreign languages compulsory at KS2 has ensured that students are better prepared for language learning at Key Stage 3. This early start provides a stronger foundation, contributing to improved proficiency and engagement in later education stages.

Figure 2 Languages Programmes of Study: KS2 NC in England (Department for Education, 2019)



Department
for Education

Languages programmes of study: key stage 2

National curriculum in England

Purpose of study

Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world. The teaching should enable pupils to express their ideas and thoughts in another language and to understand and respond to its speakers, both in speech and in writing. It should also provide opportunities for them to communicate for practical purposes, learn new ways of thinking and read great literature in the original language. Language teaching should provide the foundation for learning further languages, equipping pupils to study and work in other countries.

Aims

The national curriculum for languages aims to ensure that all pupils:

- understand and respond to spoken and written language from a variety of authentic sources
- speak with increasing confidence, fluency and spontaneity, finding ways of communicating what they want to say, including through discussion and asking questions, and continually improving the accuracy of their pronunciation and intonation
- can write at varying length, for different purposes and audiences, using the variety of grammatical structures that they have learnt
- discover and develop an appreciation of a range of writing in the language studied.

Attainment targets

By the end of each key stage, pupils are expected to know, apply and understand the matters, skills and processes specified in the relevant programme of study.

Schools are not required by law to teach the example content in [square brackets].

Key stage 2: Foreign language

Teaching may be of any modern or ancient foreign language and should focus on enabling pupils to make substantial progress in one language. The teaching should provide an appropriate balance of spoken and written language and should lay the foundations for further foreign language teaching at key stage 3. It should enable pupils to understand and communicate ideas, facts and feelings in speech and writing, focused on familiar and routine matters, using their knowledge of phonology, grammatical structures and vocabulary.

The focus of study in modern languages will be on practical communication. If an ancient language is chosen, the focus will be to provide a linguistic foundation for reading comprehension and an appreciation of classical civilisation. Pupils studying ancient languages may take part in simple oral exchanges, while discussion of what they read will be conducted in English. A linguistic foundation in ancient languages may support the study of modern languages at key stage 3.

Pupils should be taught to:

- listen attentively to spoken language and show understanding by joining in and responding
- explore the patterns and sounds of language through songs and rhymes and link the spelling, sound and meaning of words
- engage in conversations; ask and answer questions; express opinions and respond to those of others; seek clarification and help*
- speak in sentences, using familiar vocabulary, phrases and basic language structures
- develop accurate pronunciation and intonation so that others understand when they are reading aloud or using familiar words and phrases*
- present ideas and information orally to a range of audiences*
- read carefully and show understanding of words, phrases and simple writing
- appreciate stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language
- broaden their vocabulary and develop their ability to understand new words that are introduced into familiar written material, including through using a dictionary
- write phrases from memory, and adapt these to create new sentences, to express ideas clearly
- describe people, places, things and actions orally* and in writing
- understand basic grammar appropriate to the language being studied, including (where relevant): feminine, masculine and neuter forms and the conjugation of high-frequency verbs; key features and patterns of the language; how to apply these, for instance, to build sentences; and how these differ from or are similar to English

The starred (*) content above will not be applicable to ancient languages.

4.1 The Goal of a Broad and Balanced Curriculum

The NC emphasizes a broad and balanced approach, including subjects like MFL to ensure students' holistic development. At KS 2, MFL is intended to enrich students' learning, spark curiosity, and develop communication skills that go beyond their immediate surroundings. However, while the policy's intentions are commendable, its execution raises questions. Is this inclusion truly fostering these skills, or is it merely a superficial addition to meet policy goals? Without sufficient resources or well-trained teachers, this ambition may fail to deliver meaningful outcomes.

4.2 Questioning the Quality of Language Education

The NC framework claims to evaluate the quality of language education by focusing on building "cultural capital" through effective teaching methods and curriculum design. At KS 2, MFL policies should align with Ofsted's standards for high-quality education, emphasizing communication skills and cultural understanding. Yet, the reality often falls short. Many schools face challenges like insufficient teacher training, lack of time allocated to MFL lessons, and inadequate integration with other subjects. These gaps raise doubts about whether the policy genuinely achieves the high-quality education it promises.

4.3 Insights into Mandarin Teaching as an MFL

The British Chinese Language Teaching Society (2013) highlights that reaching A1 proficiency in Mandarin (excluding characters) requires 100–150 hours, while B1 proficiency demands around 1,000 hours. Based on my experience as a KS2 Mandarin teacher, it is evident that Mandarin teaching in schools often fails to align with the National Curriculum. To strengthen Mandarin as a Modern Foreign Language (MFL), several improvements are necessary.

4.3.1 Adjusting Time Allocation

Mandarin lessons need a greater time commitment. Currently, insufficient weekly hours hinder students' ability to practice foundational skills like tones and basic structures. Scheduling at least two hours of Mandarin weekly is essential.

4.3.2 Balancing Element Teaching

Yang (2018) demonstrates that Pinyin, which is regarded as Mandarin pronunciation guide system , plays a crucial role in facilitating early-stage Mandarin learning for beginners, offering a systematic way to connect pronunciation with meaning. However, the language coordinator from my school did not endorse teaching pinyin to students and has instructed me to exclude Pinyin instruction from the beginning of KS1, as Table 1 shows. This approach contradicts the National Curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of exploring language patterns and sounds through songs and rhymes, as well as connecting spelling, pronunciation, and meaning, will have side-effect for the teaching and learning at KS2.

4.3.3 Professional Development for Mandarin Teachers

Cai (2017) discusses the importance of professional development for Mandarin teachers, particularly for those dispatched from China to teach in England. Many visiting teachers struggle to adapt to the unique demands of KS2 education, including the integration of Mandarin into the broader curriculum and the pedagogical approaches used in English schools.

Even as a visiting teacher who teach Chinese Mandarin, participating in school initiatives such as INSET (In-Service Education and Training) days is essential. These sessions provide valuable insights into school-specific strategies, classroom management techniques, and ways to align Mandarin teaching with the expectations of the National Curriculum.

4.3.4 Others

Additionally, integrating MFL into other subjects, such as teaching basic math or geography concepts in Mandarin, can enhance its relevance and provide practical applications.

5.Implementation

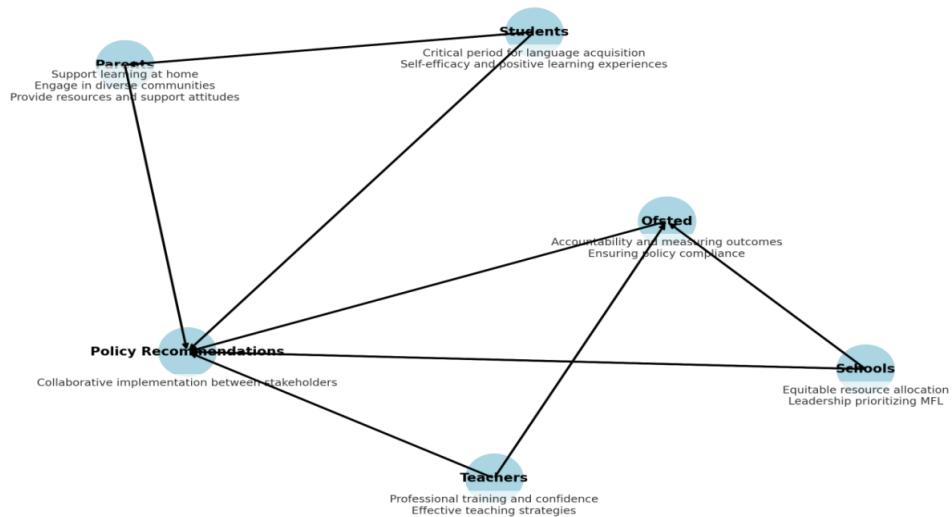
The implementation of policy on MFL at KS2 faces several practical challenges. While the policy aims to essential language skills—such as practical communication, vocabulary building, grammar understanding, and cultural appreciation—it often lacks the necessary support to achieve these goals. As mentioned in the previous chapter 4, the time allocated to MFL at KS2 is often insufficient for students to develop meaningful proficiency. Furthermore, the reliance on generalist primary school teachers—many of whom lack specialized language training—limits the effectiveness of instruction. Although the policy was introduced to address the UK's low language proficiency levels and align with global standards, its success is hindered by

these barriers.

Hattie (2008) and the research framework emphasizes the multi-dimensional factors influencing educational achievement, including contributions from students, families, schools, and teachers. Understanding these stakeholder perspectives is essential for addressing MFL policy challenges.

5.1 Implementation of Policy on MFL at KS2

Figure 4 Implementation of Policy on MFL at KS2 (by Author's own)



5.1.1 Stakeholder Perspectives: Students

Hattie (2008) highlights the importance of age and developmental stages in learning capacity. KS2 (ages 7–11) represents a critical period for language acquisition, making it an ideal stage to introduce MFL. During this stage, students' cognitive flexibility allows them to grasp new languages more easily. Learning a foreign language improves their communication skills, builds confidence, and opens up future opportunities. It also fosters cultural understanding, helping students connect with people from different backgrounds and preparing them for a globalized world. (Especially exposure to Chinese language and culture broadens students' horizons, encouraging curiosity and tolerance.)

5.1.2 Stakeholder Perspectives: Teachers

Teachers design lessons, explain concepts, and guide students through the process of learning a new language. Teachers also motivate students to practice speaking, reading, and writing. However, the lack of specialized training for many primary school teachers can significantly impact the quality of MFL instruction. Teachers' expertise and commitment are critical to ensuring effective language education. (Based on dual roles as a researcher and a KS2 Mandarin teacher, I observe that Mandarin teaching in a primary school does not fully align with the NC. Professional development programs can equip teachers with the skills to teach Mandarin or other MFL effectively.)

5.1.3 Stakeholder Perspectives: Schools

Schools provide the environment and resources needed for MFL education. They ensure that students have access to suitable materials, such as textbooks, digital tools, and audio resources. Schools also play an important role in organizing professional development opportunities for teachers, equipping them with the skills to deliver high-quality lessons. Additionally, schools are responsible for setting achievable goals and monitoring student progress, helping to maintain high standards in language learning. (Introducing Chinese calligraphy clubs, Kungfu classes, or other Chinese cultural workshop can enrich the MFL learning experience.)

5.1.4 Stakeholder Perspectives: Parents

Parents provide essential support for their children's language learning. They encourage regular practice at home, take an interest in their child's progress, and create a positive learning atmosphere. In linguistically diverse communities, parents can also share their own language skills, helping to build stronger connections to the new language. This support boosts students' confidence and motivation to engage with MFL learning. Schools can provide parents with user-friendly resources like apps

or activity sheets to reinforce learning at home.

5.2 Ofsted Role and Accountability

Ofsted, plays a crucial role in evaluating schools' adherence to the KS2 MFL curriculum. Inspection reports focus on teaching quality, student outcomes, and curriculum delivery. However, critics argue that Ofsted's emphasis on measurable outcomes may overshadow the broader goals of cultural appreciation and communication, highlight areas where MFL policy and practice may fall short of Ofsted's expectations, offering recommendations for improvement.

So it is important to examine how MFL policies at Key Stage 2 reflect Ofsted's cultural capital priorities and analyze whether current MFL practices effectively broaden students' horizons and meet Ofsted's standards.

Table 2 KS2 Language Education Mentioned in Ofsted Inspect Report (Ofsted Inspect Report,2023)

Aspect	Primary School	Secondary School
Statutory Language Requirement	Modern or ancient language required from age 7 (from Year 3).	Language required in Key Stage 3; optional in Key Stage 4 (GCSE).
Primary Challenges	Time allocation for languages, teacher training and curriculum planning.	Motivating students, ensuring curriculum continuity, increasing GCSE participation.
Secondary Challenges	Weak communication with secondary schools during transition.	Challenges in sustaining language study post-14 due to optional status.
Focus of Language Curriculum	Building foundational skills and exposure to one language.	Developing fluency, grammar, and cultural understanding.
Common Issues	Inconsistent progress due to variable language time in Year 6.	Declining participation in languages at GCSE and A-Level.
Examples of Languages Offered	Common options include French, Spanish, or German.	French, Spanish, German; some offer Chinese, Italian, or Latin.

6.Challenges and Barriers

Ko J.& Sammons P. (2013) discuss aspects relevant to MFL, especially within the context of KS2. They stress the importance of providing KS2 teachers with robust training and resources for MFL instruction, especially since many primary school teachers may lack confidence or proficiency in foreign languages. They call for clear government policies to promote MFL learning at KS2, including curriculum guidance, resources, and assessment frameworks to ensure consistent delivery across schools.

6.1 Teacher Training

Reflecting on challenges in policy implementation, a lack of qualified language teachers limits effective curriculum delivery, teacher training, and resource allocation that persist from the Plowden era to the present.

6.2 Resource Allocation

Schools in economically disadvantaged areas face difficulties accessing resources and support. Ofsted stresses accountability in delivering policies that meet educational goals, including MFL at KS2.

Challenges such as teacher training, resource allocation, and curriculum design in MFL policy can be evaluated against Ofsted's criteria, examining whether these efforts are sufficient to meet the NC's goals of cultural capital and curriculum breadth.

6.3 Others

There is no standardized assessment for MFL at KS2, creating variability in student outcomes. And it is very important to engage parents, particularly those from linguistically diverse backgrounds, remains a challenge.

7.Recommendations

7.1 Enhanced Teacher Training

It is significant to provide specialized training programs to equip teachers with the skills needed to deliver high-quality language education. Teacher incentives include grants aimed at encouraging individuals to train as MFL language teachers, particularly in English-medium schools, where there is a shortage of qualified staff. For instance, Chinese teacher are encouraged to join school INSET training, which can learn how to incorporate Mandarin into thematic projects or design engaging activities that resonate with KS2 learners. This ensures that Mandarin teachers are not isolated from the school community but are instead active contributors to students' overall education.

7.2 Multi-Position Versatility

Funding could be increased for language programs, particularly in under-resourced schools. Continue to cooperate with public and private companies. Continuously improve the quality and expand the scope of online education and learning materials. Carry out cooperation between different regions and establish virtual language communities across the country.

7.3 Others

A national framework will be introduced for assessing MFL proficiency at KS2 to ensure consistency and accountability.

Strategies can be developed to involve parents, such as workshops and multilingual resources. Parents are encouraged to try user-friendly resources like apps or activity to help learning with KS2 pupils at home.

Students would be encouraged to pursue language studies beyond KS2 through incentives and curriculum integration.

Conclusion

The MFL policy aims to prepare students for global engagement and improve the UK's international education standing. However, the current approach does not seem to be fully aligned with these goals. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) should coordinate foreign language learning programs in primary schools to ensure that every student in the KS2 stage has the opportunity to learn at least one foreign language.

The policy often emphasizes breadth over depth, leaving students with fragmented knowledge rather than practical language skills and insufficient time to build a coherent knowledge system. For a national education policy aimed at meeting standards, there is still room for improvement.

The KS2 MFL policy represents a significant step toward fostering language skills and cultural awareness among young learners. While its goals align with national and international priorities, challenges such as teacher shortages, resource disparities, and inconsistent implementation hinder its success. Addressing these barriers through targeted interventions will enhance the policy's effectiveness and ensure equitable language education for all students. Future research should explore long-term impacts and ways to sustain student interest in language learning.

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Conflict of Interests

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