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Article

Unlocking the Zone of Proximal Development in *hanzi* Instruction: A Sociocultural Perspective on Differentiated Instruction in Chinese Internationalised Schools

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Abstract
As the linguistic diversity of students in Chinese Internationalised Schools (CIS) continues to expand, differentiated instruction (DI) has emerged as an effective way to address heterogeneous leaning needs in Chinese language classrooms. However, existing research has rarely examined how DI is enacted in practice through the lens of Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), particularly in the context of *hanzi* instruction. This study investigates how Chinese language teachers implement ZPD-Guided DI in CIS classrooms and how ZPD informs their instructional decision-making. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study draws on data from three experienced Chinese language teachers across two CIS. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, artifact collection, and reflective journals, and analyzed using thematic analysis that combined an initial bottom-up, inductive coding process with a subsequent top-down, theory-informed analysis. The findings reveal varying levels of DI implementation across classrooms, ZPD provides a productive framework for shaping DI in *hanzi* learning. However, contextual conditions influence the extent and consistency of teachers' DI implementation. By bridging theory and practice, this study offers practical insights for improving DI use in CIS. Implications for teachers and school administrators are provided to enhance DI's effectiveness and adaptability in real classrooms.

Keywords
Differentiated Instruction (DI), Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Chinese Internationalised Schools (CIS), *hanzi* instruction, teacher practices

1 Introduction

Driven by globalization, China currently hosts the largest number of international schools globally (ISC Research, 2025). Among them, Chinese internationalised schools (CIS) have emerged as a rapidly expanding educational segment (Poole, 2019; Poole & Bunnell, 2024; Wu & Koh, 2022). These schools

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integrate China's national curriculum with Western educational frameworks and cater to a heterogeneous student body of both local and international learners (Brady, 2024). Chinese language (*Yuwen*, 语文) has been used as a subject name since 1949, reflecting an integrated view of spoken and written forms: "What is spoken is language, what is written is an article… 'language' (*Yu*, 语) and 'writing' (*Wen*, 文) are inseparable" (Wang, 2021). In CIS, *Yuwen* is positioned as a core and mandatory subject, being taught to local (first-language) and international (second-language) learners in CIS (Li & Si, 2023). This linguistic diversity poses significant challenges in teaching the Chinese language, particularly *hanzi* (Chinese characters). As a morpho-syllabic writing system, *hanzi* requires the integration of semantic, phonological, and orthographic knowledge, making it cognitively demanding and time-intensive to acquire. Consequently, *hanzi* has been widely identified as a major source of learner anxiety in Chinese language learning (Chan et al., 2023; H. Zhang & Yang, 2025). L2 learners often struggle with the form and structure of *hanzi*, whereas L1 learners may possess prior literacy skills but still face difficulties in using *hanzi*, underscoring the need for Differentiated Instruction (DI) when they are taught together in the same classroom in CIS (Tomlinson, 2014; Xie et al., 2025). However, teachers frequently find DI challenging to implement due to lack of clear theoretical guidance on adapting instruction to students' varying readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Bi et al., 2023; Lee & Hung, 2025).

Scholars have emphasized that DI is strongly grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) (Subban, 2006; Ren, 2019), which is defined as the gap between a learner's current level of independent performance and their potential level with guidance from teachers or peers (Wibowo et al., 2025). It provides a vital theoretical lens and alignment for DI, emphasizing flexible grouping, targeted feedback, and collaborative learning—strategies that reflect ZPD's view of social interaction as a catalyst for cognitive growth (Antón, 1999). These approaches boost student motivation and provide scaffolding, helping learners operate within their optimal developmental range and master challenging tasks through structured support (Anwar et al., 2024). However, little empirical research has examined how teachers in CIS operationally define and identify students' ZPD and apply it to differentiate *hanzi* instruction (Liang & Zou, 2025). While existing literature consists predominantly of expert recommendations, few studies have examined teachers' classroom practices to put forth teaching recommendations.

Consequently, this study addresses a critical gap by investigating the practical intersection of ZPD and DI in *hanzi* instruction within CIS. Focusing on teachers' perspectives, it seeks to understand how they implement DI in *hanzi* teaching and how they identify students' ZPD to inform their DI practices. By situating DI with Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, the study aims to bridge theory and practice, offering a structural approach to "unlocking" ZPD through targeted differentiation in linguistically diverse classrooms.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Hanzi* instruction in CIS

In practice, CIS operate in a bifurcated manner, functioning as international schools within a localized context while delivering two distinct curricula: one aligned with global educational standards and another compliant with China's national curriculum framework (Ying & Poole, 2025). As mandated by the Ministry of Education (MoE), CIS need to deliver China's national curriculum for the nine-year compulsory education (Grades 1–9) while concurrently offering international programs in its secondary section (e.g., IGCSE, IBDP) (Wu & Koh, 2022; Ying & Poole, 2025). This structural duality gives rise to persistent pedagogical tensions, particularly in *Yuwen* (Chinese language), a core subject taught primarily in the local language. In addition, the coexistence of local (L1) and international (L2) learners within the same classroom makes *hanzi* (Chinese character) instruction, foundational units for Chinese literacy, a persistent and multifaceted pedagogical challenge (Loh et al., 2015).

Compared with L1 learners, the L2 learners usually perform well in speaking or reading but have poor writing proficiency in *hanzi* (Ye & Liang, 2024). According to the national curriculum standards, students are expected to master approximately 3,500 high-frequency *hanzi* (specifically, the simplified forms) by the end of Grade 9 to achieve functional literacy (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022, p. 14). However, this benchmark is explicitly designed for L1 learners who have experienced sustained oral and written input in Chinese from early childhood. Yet even students from Chinese-speaking regions (e.g., Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan), despite their familiarity with traditional *hanzi*, still face difficulties mastering the structural and orthographic complexities (Jiang & Rose, 2025; Shen, 2005). L2 learners, many of whom come from alphabetic language backgrounds (e.g., English) and lack prior exposure to morpho-syllabic writing systems, often interpret *hanzi* as unfamiliar and seemingly rule-free pictorial symbols and lag behind their L1 peers in academic performance (Loh et al., 2023).

At a structural level, these challenges manifest in multiple dimensions, including the need to acquire their written forms, pronunciations, and meanings, as well as to follow the correct stroke order when writing them (Yang, 2022). Moreover, emerging evidence suggests that morphological awareness plays a more significant role in reading development for L2 learners than for L1 learners, highlighting the importance of explicit form–meaning connections in *hanzi* acquisition (Ke, 2025). Crucially, these learner-specific challenges are compounded by a systemic misalignment between curriculum design and learner needs. Current national textbooks and pedagogical approaches are predominantly oriented toward L1 learners and often fail to accommodate the heterogeneous backgrounds of L2 learners. Although Lam (2011) proposed that teachers can adopt both the "character-centered approach" and the "meaning-centered approach" to enhance L2 students' *hanzi* acquisition with attention to usage and communicative function, there is no one-size-fits-all solution; the optimal strategy depends on teachers' pedagogical expertise and contextual factors.

Notably, many Chinese language teachers face additional challenges when teaching mixed classrooms consisting of both L1 and L2 learners. A key reason is that their initial professional training was designed exclusively for L1 instruction, leaving them insufficiently prepared to adapt pedagogies to linguistically diverse learning environments (Li & Si, 2023). A comparable context can be observed in Hong Kong's mainstream schools, where the integration of ethnic minority L2 learners with local L1 peers—within either pull-out or immersion settings (i.e., in the "pull-out" setting, L2 students are "pulled out" from their classes to receive instruction primarily focused on enhancing these learners' L2 proficiency; in the "immersion" setting, L2 students receive instructions in the majority's language)—has been reported as an effective approach to enhancing the language proficiency of L2 learners through interaction with L1 peers in schools (Loh et al., 2023). However, in contrast to this relatively well-researched context, the pedagogical challenges and instructional practices specific to *hanzi* instruction for students in the CIS are still rarely studied. Given this confluence of the need to accommodate students' diverse learning goals and needs, while also navigating varied curricula across different CIS settings, there is an urgent need for DI that is responsive to learners' varied linguistic backgrounds, prior literacy experiences, and contextual curricular expectations.

2.2 The link between differentiated instruction and Zone of Proximal Development

DI is best conceptualized not as a universal teaching method, but as a socio-cultural situated educational approach shaped by the cultural and value systems in which it is enacted. Its philosophical roots can be traced to the Confucian heritage principle of "*yin cai shi jiao*" (adapting instruction to individual aptitudes) in China, which positions teachers as both academic and moral leaders within a collectivist educational context. Western conception of DI similarly advocates "adapting teaching to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles," but it is embedded in more individualistic values and positions teachers as coaches who design personalized learning experiences (Tomlinson, 2014). These cultural

differences help to explain why Chinese teachers often view DI as mere "individualized tutoring" or "stratified teaching", rather than a systematic pedagogical framework (Hua, 2019).

The actual implementation of DI practices varies according to teacher beliefs, characteristics, and school contexts, which in turn influence teacher instructional decision-making and classroom climates (Rubie-Davies et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2026). In Western educational systems, research consistently find that DI is often under-implemented, treated as an optional "add-on" practice rather than an integral component of core instruction (e.g., VanTassel-Baska et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2014; Smit & Humpert, 2012; Pozas et al., 2020). Similarly, this phenomenon is evident in China, where the traditional "one-size-fits-all" curriculum culture, characterized by uniform textbooks, synchronized teaching progress, and standardized assessment criteria, coexists with limited DI preparation and cultural priorities emphasizing "collective advancement" (Liang & Zou, 2025; Wan, 2016). This conventional approach prioritizes *equality* (treating all uniformly) over *equity* (tailored support for fair outcomes), while achieving full equity remains elusive due to resource constraints and cultural barriers that challenge DI adoption (Levinson et al., 2022).

The theoretical link between DI and the ZPD provides a foundation for understanding its classroom application. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the ZPD is defined as "the gap between a learner's current level of independent performance and their potential level of performance with guidance from teachers or peers" (p. 86) —a conceptual space where each student can identify and operate within their appropriate learning zone (Smit & Humpert, 2012). This concept directly anchors Tomlinson's (2014) central focus on matching instruction to student readiness. Specifically, the differentiated modifications to content, process, and product that define DI serve as the scaffolding mechanism that guides learners through their ZPD. Consequently, DI can be understood as the "practical carrier" of the ZPD, translating a theoretical learning space into practical pedagogical strategies that extend learners' proximal capabilities (Wibowo et al., 2025). This bidirectional, mutually reinforcing relationship has been empirically validated across diverse language teaching contexts (Borja et al., 2015; Davin, 2013; Karimi & Nazari, 2021; Martin-Beltrán et al., 2017).

The core features and principles of a DI classroom, such as ongoing attention to student differences, formative assessment to guide next steps, modification of instructions based on needs, and teacher-student collaboration in learning (Karimi & Nazari, 2021), not only align with students' existing ZPD but also actively generate new ZPD as learners build mastery. Regarding Chinese language instruction in CIS, this theoretical synergy is particularly important. It aims not only to develop linguistic proficiency but also to foster cultural understanding (Li & Si, 2023). This underscores the importance of integrating cultural interaction into DI, as language learning is inherently a sociocultural practice. To support effective DI implementation in such school settings, Liang and Zou's (2025) study identified the key components as collaborative teaching, standards-based assessment, ongoing professional development, and integrated home-school educational strategies. However, many teachers accept the principle of addressing learner variance but report difficulty translating it into classroom practice, highlighting a persistent gap between the theory of ZPD-informed DI and its practical realization (Smit & Humpert, 2012).

Based on relevant literature and previous empirical studies, DI is closely aligned with the concept of the ZPD within sociocultural theory. This theoretical alignment provides a strong foundation for examining how teachers enact DI and identify students' ZPD, thereby linking teacher beliefs, observable practices, and measurable student learning within the sociocultural contexts of CIS. However, existing research has scarcely explored how sociocultural theory can inform DI practices among Chinese language teachers in CIS context. To address this gap, the present study examines how DI is implemented in *hanzi* instruction through the lens of students' ZPD and explores Chinese language teachers' understanding and decision-making processes. Accordingly, this study is one such attempt that addressed two research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese language teachers implement DI in *hanzi* instruction in CIS?

RQ2: How do Chinese language teachers identify students' ZPD to inform their DI practices for teaching *hanzi*?

3 Method

3.1 Context and participants

This study focused on three experienced Chinese language teachers at two CIS located in the central city of the Greater Bay Area, Shenzhen. This study was conducted at two different CIS.

The first institution is a primary and middle school affiliated with a CIS that has been operating for twenty years. It provides education from Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 8 by integrating thematic units drawn from both national and international curricula across multiple subject areas. The Chinese classroom is an "immersion" setting in which L1 and L2 students receive instructions in Chinese. The second institution offering K-12 education, implements a proprietary integrated curriculum that combines elements of China's national education system with Western (U.S. and U.K.) pedagogical programs, grounded in thematic and project-based learning. The Chinese classroom is a "pull-out" setting that allows L2 students to receive instruction separately in small groups.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure information richness and to enable a focused, theory-driven exploration of DI (Patton, 2014). Three information-rich cases with pseudonyms are presented. Ms. Yao and Ms. Xiao have each been teaching for four years at the first school, which operates according to an "immersion" classroom structure. Ms. Chen has been teaching at the second school for three years, which uses a "pull-out" classroom model. They were chosen from these two CIS due to their distinctive and longstanding roles in teaching Chinese to both native-speaking students and non-native learners. Moreover, all participants had acquired foundational knowledge and practical experience with DI prior to the study. This prior exposure enabled them to articulate informed, contextually grounded perspectives that enriched the researchers' understanding.

Although the sample is limited in size, the participants were selected and volunteered for this study due to their pre-existing relationship with the first researcher, which facilitated trust-building while adhering to appropriate ethical standards (De Costa et al., 2021). Each participant has a different career path and personal background, which can help capture multiple aspects of practicing DI. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic information.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Teachers

Name	Years of teaching	Highest degree earned	Grade taught (First semester)	Grade taught (Second semester)	Classroom setting
Ms. Yao	10 years	Master's	Grade 1	Grade 1	L1 and L2 mixed
Ms. Xiao	9-10 years	Bachelor	Grade 2	Grade 2	L1 and L2 mixed
Ms. Chen	11 years	Master's	Grade 4-6	Grade 9-12	L1 and L2 separated

3.2 Data collection

This qualitative study employed three methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews, artefact collections, and follow-up reflective journals.

First, the teachers were interviewed by the first researcher, who has similar experience in teaching Chinese at CIS in Shenzhen. The 30-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted online in Mandarin Chinese (first language of both participants and researchers) at the end of the first semester to explore the teachers' understanding of student diversity and DI, as well as their self-reported experiences and implementation efforts in the classroom. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) guided participants in describing their *hanzi* teaching practices, students' responses to DI, and context-specific challenges.

Second, to capture empirical data on teachers' instructional practices, they were invited to submit a lesson plan that they considered representative of their use of DI in *hanzi* teaching. In addition to the lesson plans, photographs of students' handwriting exercises were collected, encompassing both blackboard work from in-person sessions and home assignments (see Appendix B). Each photograph was labeled and annotated by the respective teachers, specifying student proficiency levels, to ensure data traceability and contextual accuracy.

Third, follow-up reflective journals were completed at the beginning of the second semester to capture post-instruction adjustments in DI implementation during the first semester's teaching. These journals were guided by protocols (see Appendix C) and involved reflections on one or two DI strategies used in previous classes, including specific student responses and instructional adjustments made in real time. Additionally, teachers summarized key developments in their DI practice for the new semester, identified factors that influenced these changes, and reflected on persistent challenges.

The three data sources were triangulated because semi-structured interviews captured primary insights into teachers' beliefs, intentions, and perceived challenges regarding DI; lesson plans and student work provided evidence of actual practices and helped verify self-reported data; reflective journals tracked changes in teachers' understanding and use of DI over time. Together, these data enabled a comprehensive exploration of the research topic by linking teacher cognition with practice and reflection.

3.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2021) was conducted as an iterative process comprising two primary phases: an initial bottom-up, data-driven coding phase, followed by a subsequent top-down, theory-driven phase for organizing and interpreting the identified codes.

The first phase employed inductive coding for initial themes, with codes emerging directly from verbatim transcripts from interviews and reflective journals into meaningful segments. Special attention was given to capturing teachers' full range of experiences to ensure the themes truly reflected their voices. For instance, the interview statement, "*I break down the radical and make a story for each one for my lower-proficiency group*", was coded as simplification. Similarly, the comment, "*there is never enough time to correct every student's handwriting*", was categorized as time constraint challenge. Additionally, the reflective journal entry, "*I changed my teaching content when students cannot recognize the radicals or the pictographic components*", was coded modification. This process ensured that the themes were grounded in the teachers' own accounts.

The next phase involved a systematic thematic analysis of the initial codes, which were then mapped onto Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and Tomlinson's (2014) core principles of DI. This deductive approach helped interpret empirical data within a broader theoretical framework, moving from descriptive coding to meaningful thematic analysis. In a parallel manner, artefacts were analyzed to triangulate findings derived from interviews and reflective journals. For example, lesson plans underwent descriptive content analysis, categorizing content by student proficiency level and instructional content, followed by coding for DI strategies. In addition, the photographs of student work were examined for patterns of error, correction, and mastery, interpreted as tangible evidence of students' different ZPDs (e.g., omission or

correction of *hanzi* in writing tasks). These artefacts served as a critical empirical validation of teachers' self-reported practices and perceived challenges.

To enhance data credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), interview transcripts were verified through member checking, enabling participants to confirm the accuracy of their experiences and correct misunderstandings. Student work samples and lesson plans served as triangulation sources, enabling researchers to corroborate, refine, or expand initial codes and strengthen the cross-validation of DI strategies.

4 Findings

The findings are inductively derived from teachers' self-reported teaching practices and directly address the two core research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). All content emphasizes teachers' first-hand accounts of their *hanzi* instructions, including how they designed, adapted, and implemented DI for *hanzi* teaching and learning, as well as how they identified students' ZPD to inform these instructional practices within CIS.

4.1 Degree of DI implementation in *hanzi* instruction (Addressing RQ1)

All three CIS Chinese language teachers expressed support for DI as an approach to addressing learner diversity, the depth of implementation varied substantially across classrooms. Analysis of teacher interviews and classroom artifacts suggests that *hanzi* instruction remained predominantly structured around whole-class teaching aligned with the needs of L1 learners, with differentiation for L2 students typically occurring through supplementary adjustments rather than modifications to instructional design. The teachers' practices can be categorized into three levels of implementation: (1) minimal differentiation through supplementary scaffolding, (2) partial differentiation through task modification, and (3) comprehensive differentiation through systematic adaptation of instructional materials and strategies. These levels were strongly influenced by contextual factors, including curriculum mandates, classroom composition, parental expectations, and teacher autonomy.

4.1.1 Ms. Yao: Minimal differentiation within whole-class instruction

As Ms. Yao described, she implemented DI in her Grade 1 mixed L1 and L2 classroom, which included one Russian-speaking L2 learner and predominantly L1 students. She relied on the Ministry of Education (MoE)-mandated textbook, as required by CIS, which was designed primarily for L1 learners, as the core resource for *hanzi* instruction (Liu, 2023). As a result, *hanzi* instruction was delivered primarily through whole-class guidance, with pacing aligned to the needs of L1 students who were reported to acquire new *hanzi* quickly.

Within this instructional structure, Ms. Yao implemented limited adjustments aimed at supporting the L2 learner's access to the curriculum. For instance, she provided brief bilingual explanations and short additional practice opportunities following each lesson:

> The textbook starts with simple *hanzi* like "一、 二、 三" and "天、 地、 人"—the L1 students pick these up fast, but the Russian student couldn't recognize any *hanzi* at first. So, I spend 5 extra minutes after each lesson explaining the *hanzi*'s strokes and meaning in Chinese-English bilingual. For example, when teaching "天", I point to the "一" (top stroke) and say "sky is above us" in English, then have him trace the strokes while repeating the sound (Ms. Yao).

From a DI perspective, these practices primarily represent process-level scaffolding, designed to provide additional explanation and guided practice for an individual learner. However, no modifications were

made to instructional content, task complexity, or whole-class pacing, all of which remained aligned with the needs of L1 learners. Ms. Yao explained that slowing down instruction for the entire class was not feasible because L1 students were expected to progress rapidly through the mandated curriculum.

Student work artifacts further illustrated the limitations of this approach. As shown in the L2 learner's handwriting sample (see Appendix B-1), the students gradually reproduced several basic *hanzi* introduced during the early lessons. While this L2 student's handwriting of simple *hanzi* eventually approximated that of L1 peers, persistent errors with certain single-component *hanzi* (dútǐzì), such as "手" (shǒu, "hand"), particularly in the upper strokes and spatial proportions when compared with the writing of L1 peers. These cases suggest that although supplementary scaffolding supported initial access to *hanzi* writing, the absence of DI targeting *hanzi* structure knowledge limited the learner's progress in mastering conventional forms. Overall, Ms. Yao's DI practice reflected minimal implementation of DI, characterized by reactive, individualized support delivered within a standardized instructional framework.

4.1.2 Ms. Xiao: Partial differentiation through task modification

Ms. Xiao noted that her Grade 2 class presented a different instructional challenge. The class included one Pakistani L2 student who had no prior experience with *hanzi* instruction, while the L1 students had already completed one year of formal *hanzi* instruction. This substantial gap in prior knowledge made it difficult for the L2 learner to complete the same writing tasks as L1 peers. To address this disparity, Ms. Xiao modified the product expectations of *hanzi* writing tasks for the L2 learner and encouraged him to participate in the classroom with L1 peers:

> The Pakistani student can't recognize or write most *hanzi* of textbook—if I make him follow the same *hanzi* tasks as L1 students, he shuts down. So, I adapt the task: instead of 'write each *hanzi* 5 times correctly' (what L1 students do), I tell him, "draw the *hanzi* like a picture—copy the shape, even if you don't remember the strokes" (see Appendix B-2). He likes drawing, so he participates. For L1 students, I use Oracle Bone Script videos to show how *hanzi* evolved to help them remember, but the Pakistani student can't follow that—so his *hanzi* 'practice' is just shape-copying. (Ms. Xiao)

This adaptation allowed the L2 student to participate in classroom activities by simplifying the expected learning product, shifting the task from accurate *hanzi* writing to visual shape reproduction. The student's notebook (see Appendix B-2) demonstrated this modification: instead of using correct stroke order and structure, the writing largely consists of approximate visual copies of the *hanzi* shapes.

While this strategy effectively maintained student engagement, it did not narrow the underlying knowledge gap regarding *hanzi* components, such as stroke patterns and radicals. Moreover, Ms. Xiao noted that her differentiation practices were constrained by the expectations from the parents of most L1 students, many of whom favored a teacher-centered, uniform instructional approach. Some parents expressed concern that accommodating the L2 learner might slow the pace of instruction of the rest of the class. Particularly in the second semester, as *hanzi* instruction became increasingly complex—featuring a growing number of compound characters composed of semantic and phonetic radicals—Ms. Xiao's DI efforts increasingly focus on maintaining engagement and leaning process in *hanzi*-related activities for both L1 and L2 students, rather than developing deeper structural knowledge. Consequently, the L2 learner's activities remained largely disconnected from the analytical *hanzi* instruction provide to L1 students. In summary, Ms. Xiao's practice represents partial differentiation, involving task modification but limited adaptation of instructional content or learning processes.

4.1.3 Ms. Chen: Comprehensive differentiation with instructional autonomy

In contrast to the previous two cases, Ms. Chen taught both L1 and non-local L2 students in separate classes, which afforded her flexibility in selecting *hanzi* instructional materials and designing learning activities. This classroom setting allowed her to implement DI more systematically for her L2 learners, two students from Malaysia in Grade 5 and Grade 6. For these students, Ms. Chen selected alternative reading materials with simpler vocabulary and repeated *hanzi* exposure:

> I have two non-local students from Malaysia—one in Grade 5 and one in Grade 6. For them, I use short stories like 'The Seven-Color Flower' (Kataev, 2021), which features *hanzi* such as " 花 " (flower) and " 飞 " (fly). The language is simple, and the repeated phrase " 飞哟飞哟 " helps them remember the *hanzi*. When teaching local students, however, I still use the unified textbook and follow the curriculum requirements mandated by the Ministry of Education. (Ms. Chen)

Beyond adapting content materials, Ms. Chen also emphasized explicit instruction in *hanzi* structure and radicals, which are widely recognized as critical components of Chinese literacy development. For example, when introducing the *hanzi '*等' (děng, wait), she broke it down into '竹' (bamboo) and '寺' (temple), then constructed a narrative ,'Mom asks you to wait near the temple in the bamboo forest,' association to help students remember it.

Similarly, she used radical analysis to help students differentiate the commonly confused homophones such as ' 座 ' and ' 坐 ' (both pronounced zuò). By highlighting the radical ' 广 ' (guǎng), which symbolizes a roof or shelter, she explained that the *hanzi* ' 座 ' is typically associated with physical structures like buildings or bridges, and thus it functions as a noun or measure word. Students' handwriting on the blackboard from this lesson (see Appendix B-3) shows that learners failed to annotate ' 应 ' by identifying its constitute radicals and recording semantic explanations. After Ms. Chen's target instruction on the radical composition of *hanzi*, students demonstrated improved accuracy in writing *hanzi* containing ' 广 ', suggesting that explicit structural analysis supports deeper *hanzi* comprehension. In contrast to the previous cases, Ms. Chen's practice illustrates comprehensive DI implementation, in which instructional content, learning processes, and leaning tasks were systematically adapted to align closely with students' current *hanzi* knowledge and learning needs.

4.1.4 Cross-case patterns

Across the three cases, the findings reveal a consistent pattern: *hanzi* instruction in CIS classrooms remains predominantly organized around whole-class teaching designed for L1 students, with differentiated support for L2 students typically implemented at the margins of the instructional system. In the "immersion" setting classrooms where teachers were required to follow the MoE-mandated textbook and maintain a common instructional pace, differentiation tended to take the form of brief scaffolding or simplified tasks, rather than systematic adaptation of curriculum content or learning trajectories. In contrast, when teachers had greater autonomy, such as teaching L2 students in the "pull-out" setting classroom, they were able to implement DI more fully by adjusting instructional materials, emphasizing *hanzi* structure analysis, and designing learning tasks aligned with students' proficiency levels. Table 2 summarizes different degree of DI implementation in *hanzi* instruction across cases.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while teachers recognize the importance of DI for supporting diverse learners, institutional constraints, such as MoE-mandate textbooks, curriculum pacing expectations, and parental preferences, substantially shape the degree to which DI can be implemented in practice. As a result, differentiation in *hanzi* instruction often remains supplementary rather than structurally embedded within the instructional design.

Table 2

Degree of DI Implementation in hanzi Teaching across Cases

Teacher	Primary Instructional Mode	DI Dimension Adapted	Key Differentiation Strategies	Degree of DI Implementation
Ms. Yao	Whole-class instruction aligned with L1 pacing using MoE-mandated textbook	**Process** (limited scaffolding)	Bilingual explanation of *hanzi* meaning and strokes; approximately 5 minutes of additional one-on-one practice after lessons	Minimal differentiation
Ms. Xiao	Whole-class instruction following mandated curriculum	**Process** (limited)**, Product** (task modification)	Simplified *hanzi*-writing tasks for L2 learner (shape-copying instead of structured writing); engagement-focused participation	Partial differentiation
Ms. Chen	Flexible instruction with teacher-selected materials	**Content, Process, and Product**	Use of simplified story texts; radical-based *hanzi* decomposition; mnemonic narratives; explicit homophone differentiation through radical analysis	Comprehensive differentiation

4.2 Identification of students' ZPD to inform DI (addressing RQ2)

While section 4.1 demonstrated varying degrees of DI implementation across the three cases, the findings also indicate that these differences were closely linked to how teachers identified students' ZPD in *hanzi* learning. In the context of *hanzi* instruction, identifying ZPD therefore requires more than assessing whether students can recognize or reproduce *hanzi*; it involves observing how students respond to instructional mediation, such as modeling, guided practice, or structural explanations of *hanzi*. In this study, ZPD identification is operationalized as teachers' use of diagnostic learning activities combined with scaffolded support to infer students' potential development in *hanzi* learning. Across the three cases, two distinct patterns of ZPD identification emerged: Ms. Chen implemented proactive, *hanzi*-specific approaches, whereas Ms. Yao and Ms. Xiao primarily relied on reactive observational methods.

4.2.1 Proactive identification of ZPD through diagnostic tasks

Ms. Chen demonstrated a proactive approach to identifying students' ZPD by embedding diagnostic tasks into regular classroom routines. At the beginning of each class, she conducted a short *hanzi* dictation exercise (*tīng xiě*) based on the *hanzi* learned in previous lessons. She analyzed students' errors as indicators of partial *hanzi* knowledge and used them to guide subsequent scaffolding.

> Every class, I dictate 5-6 *hanzi* we learned last week. It's the easiest way to see what they're struggling with in learning *hanzi* (Ms. Chen)

For instance, Ms. Chen observed that one student repeatedly emerged the lower strokes of the *hanzi* '是', writing the sixth to eighth strokes '一、丨、一' mixed together rather than separating them correctly. Another students consistently omitted the dot '丶' at the top of '应.' These errors indicated different developmental needs in *hanzi* writing. Ms. Chen responded by guiding students to trace the missing or incorrect components and then asking them to rewrite the *hanzi* independently.

Through this process, dictation functioned as a diagnostic mediation activity, allowing the teacher to observe how students' performance changed when guided support was introduced. Student A's ZPD involves developing accurate stroke segmentation, whereas Student B's ZPD focuses on attending to smaller structural components within *hanzi*. These diagnostic insights enable Ms. Chen to make corresponding adjustments to her scaffolded support. Importantly, Ms. Chen emphasized that students' ZPD were dynamic rather than fixed. As students gradually master the previous knowledge, new difficulties emerge, requiring continuous adjustments to scaffolding strategies. Her classroom practice revealed two core types of ZPD in *hanzi* teaching: stroke-level accuracy and structural understanding of *hanzi*. Table 3 summarizes how scaffolding strategies shift from teacher guidance to independent applications in response to students' evolving ZPD.

Table 3

ZPD Types in hanzi Tearning and Corresponding Adjustments in Scaffolding

ZPD Type in *hanzi* Teaching	**Initial Scaffolding (Addressing Current Level)**	**Adjusted Scaffolding (Targeting Potential Level)**	**Example from Ms. Chen's Classroom**
Stroke-level accuracy	Teacher demonstration (writing " 是 "on the whiteboard	Guided tracing and focused rewriting, followed by independent reproduction of the *hanzi*	A student merged the lower strokes of " 是 ", writing the sixth to eighth strokes together. Ms. Chen first demonstrated the correct stroke sequence, asked the student to trace the strokes, and then required independent rewriting.
Structural understanding of *hanzi*	Visual decomposition (explaining semantic radicals such as " 广 ")	Students rewrite the *hanzi* independently while consciously attending to the previously omitted component	A student repeatedly omitted the top dot " 丶 " in " 应 ." Ms. Chen highlighted the missing component, guided the student to trace it, and then asked the student to rewrite the *hanzi* independently.

As illustrated in Table 3, the instructional scaffolding gradually shifted from explicit modeling to independent application, allowing the teacher to observe whether students could perform tasks with reduced support. In this case, ZPD identification was not limited to detecting errors but involved evaluating how students get improvement through scaffolded interaction. Ms. Chen further noted that scaffolding strategies should be tailored to the structural characteristics of *hanzi*, such as pictographs, ideographs, and associative compounds. Although these formative methods were effective for some *hanzi* whose semantic radicals were easily identifiable, they were less helpful for phonograms such as " 清" (qīng) and "情" (qíng), where the relationship between semantic and phonetic components, like " 氵" (water) or " 忄" (emotion), may be less transparent to learners. Consequently, identifying the ZPD required the teacher to integrate structural explanation with contextual usage.

4.2.2 Reactive identification through classroom observation

On the contrary, Ms. Yao and Ms. Xiao primarily relied on informal classroom observation to identify students' learning difficulties. Because both teachers devote most of their instructional time to whole-

class teaching aligned with the mandated curriculum in their mixed L1 and L2 classrooms, they did not conduct diagnostic assessments to identify individual students' ZPD. Instead, differentiation was implemented reactively when L2 leaners displayed confusion or difficulties during classroom activities.

> Since there was only one English-speaking child in the class, I think it is okay to provide some bilingual assistance when he looks confused. That's all I can do. However, our plan later changed to having another teacher provide him with one-on-one Chinese lessons, which proved more targeted. (Ms. Yao)
>
> For most children with the same language background in the classroom, I would set uniform requirements but incorporate diverse teaching aids, taking into account different learning styles such as visual and linguistic learners. I would also present differentiated requirements and methods for homework. (Ms. Xiao)

Although these strategies supported general engagement, they primarily addressed students' immediate performance difficulties rather than systematically identifying their developmental potential. Without structured diagnostic tasks, teachers could observe students' current performance but had limited opportunities to examine how students' abilities changed under guided support, which is essential for identifying the ZPD. Consequently, differentiation in these classrooms tended to focus on general adaptation, such as bilingual explanations or simplified tasks, rather than targeted scaffolding addressing specific *hanzi* learning difficulties. These practices illustrate how the absence of systematic ZPD identification can limit the effectiveness of DI in *hanzi* learning.

Taken together, these three cases suggest that the effectiveness of DI in *hanzi* learning is closely linked to teachers' ability to identify students' ZPD through systematic diagnostic interaction. When teachers actively embedded diagnostic tasks within instruction, as in Ms. Chen's classroom, differentiation could be aligned more precisely with students' developmental needs. In contrast, when identification relied primarily on informal observation, differentiation tended to remain limited to general adaptation rather than targeted scaffolding. These findings indicate that ZPD identification functions as a mediating mechanism linking instructional differentiation with learners' developmental progression in *hanzi* learning.

5 Discussion

This study examined how Chinese language teachers implement DI in *hanzi* teaching within linguistically diverse classrooms at CIS. The findings reveal that the degree of DI implementation was closely linked to teachers' ability to identify and respond to students' ZPD. Although all three teachers expressed strong support for DI as a pedagogical approach to addressing learner diversity, the depth and consistency of implementation varied considerably across classrooms. Importantly, these differences were not simply the result of individual pedagogical preference or teacher expertise. Rather, they were shaped by a range of contextual conditions at CIS, including curriculum mandates, classroom composition, and parental expectations.

A central finding of this study concerns the role of diagnosing students' developmental readiness, which represents the first step in ZPD-guided DI. One of the key challenges in DI implementation is determining "how to do DI" and "when and how to provide appropriate instructional support." Across the cases, teachers addressed this challenge by informally assessing students' current abilities through classroom interaction, observation, and immediate feedback during *hanzi*-writing activities. These ongoing formative assessments enabled teachers to identify differences between L1 and L2 learners in areas such as *hanzi* recognition, stroke-order knowledge, and familiarity with Chinese orthographic structures (L. Zhang & Xing, 2023). Based on these observations, teachers adjusted learning tasks and instructional pacing, providing targeted guidance and feedback to support students' progression.

Through such teacher-student interactions, instructional scaffolding was dynamically calibrated to students' emerging competencies, enabling learners to move beyond their current level of independent performance (Van De Pol et al., 2010).

This instructional process reflects sociocultural perspectives on DI, which emphasize the importance of interaction with more knowledgeable others in constructing a collective ZPD for language learning (Martin-Beltrán et al., 2017). However, while teachers demonstrated awareness of learners' developmental differences, differentiation often remained supplementary rather than systematically embedded in instructional design. This pattern is consistent with findings from prior research indicating that teachers frequently endorse DI in principle but struggle to integrate it deeply into routine classroom practice (Liang & Zou, 2025; Xie et al., 2025). These challenges suggest that effective implementation of DI requires not only pedagogical awareness but also institutional support and professional preparation (Wan, 2016).

The study further highlights several contextual conditions influencing the extent and consistency of DI implementation. One key factor was instructional autonomy over teaching materials. Teachers working with standardized textbooks designed primarily for L1 learners often relied on whole-class instruction, which limited opportunities to implement DI. Similar challenges have been documented in previous studies of Chinese language education, which note that instructional materials designed for L1 learners may not adequately support the learning needs of L2 students (Zhou, 2021). In contrast, teachers who exercised greater flexibility in adapting instructional resources were better able to design activities that aligned with students' developmental levels, thereby enabling more meaningful differentiation.

Another important factor relates to professional collaboration and institutional support. Participants in this study relied solely on personal teaching experience, with no collaboration or access to professional guidance. This is also observed by Li and Si's (2023) study, their experience as L1 instructors equips them with strong language pedagogy knowledge, diverse resources, and confidence to adapt to their evolving L2 teaching roles in CIS. While previous research suggests that teacher collaboration, particularly through professional learning communities, can enhance the coherence and sustainability of DI practices (Wan, 2020). Establishing collaborative professional structures within CIS contexts may therefore strengthen teachers' capacity to implement ZPD-guided differentiation more consistently.

Finally, parental expectations emerged as an additional influence on instructional decision-making. Perceived as "paying customers" in CIS (Golis, 2025), they placed emphasis on "efficiency" and regarded DI as excessively time-consuming and a factor that slows down the instructional pace. As a result, teachers sometimes experienced tension between pedagogical ideals and perceived parental expectations. Previous research similarly indicates that parental beliefs and involvement can significantly influence the adoption of innovative pedagogical practices, including DI (Liang & Zou, 2025). This finding highlights the importance of strengthening communication between schools and families, particularly in explaining how differentiated learning pathways can support more effective and equitable learning outcomes for students with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

6 Conclusion

By examining teachers' instructional practices, this study contributes to research connecting DI with sociocultural learning theory, particularly the concept of the ZPD. The findings demonstrate how teachers can strategically support *hanzi* acquisition by identifying learners' developmental readiness and providing targeted scaffolding that bridges the gap between students' current abilities and their potential development.

Building on these findings, the study proposes a ZPD-guided framework for differentiated *hanzi* instruction in linguistically diverse classrooms. Importantly, this framework conceptualizes differentiation as a dynamic process involving three interrelated stages: diagnosing learners' developmental readiness,

designing tiered learning opportunities, and providing adaptive scaffolding. By linking DI practices with sociocultural theory, the proposed framework offers a theoretically grounded perspective that may help Chinese language teachers more confidently implement differentiation, particularly in classrooms characterized by linguistic heterogeneity.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size constrains the generalizability of the results. As an exploratory qualitative study conducted within CIS context, this study does not capture the full diversity of Chinese language teaching environments. Second, the analysis relied primarily on teacher interviews and reflective accounts. Although participants documented continued use of DI in their reflective journals, the study would be strengthened through longitudinal, multi-observation designs involving independent researchers to capture the dynamic process of scaffolding in real instructional settings.

Appendix A

Interview protocol in Chinese with English translation

Part 1: Understanding the teacher and student background

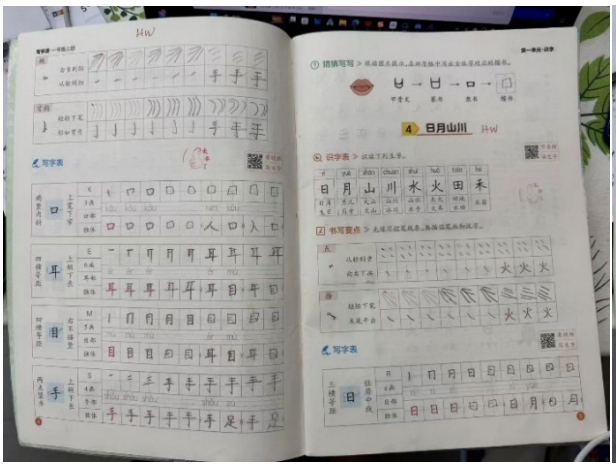
1. 请问你作为中文老师有多长的时间？
   How long have you been engaged in teaching Chinese?
2. 请问你的学历还有专业是什么？
   May I inquire about your academic background, including your degree and major?
3. 学生背景如何？汉字教学中最大的难点是什么？
   What are the characteristics of their backgrounds? And what do you consider to be the most significant challenges in *hanzi* teaching?

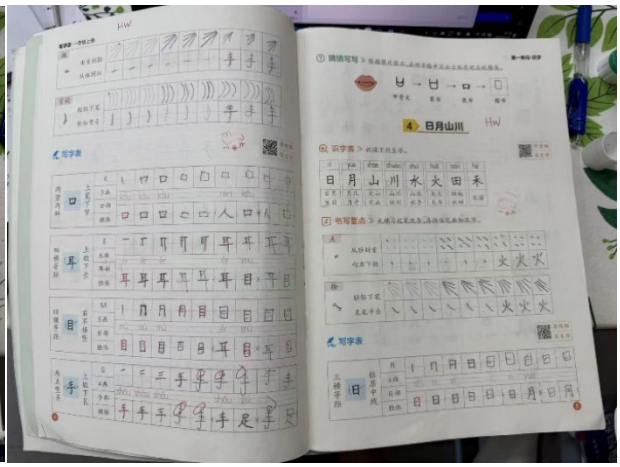
Part 2: Understanding the experience and attitude of DI implementation

4. 请问你对于不同程度的学生所采取的教学是不同的吗？请举例。
   Do you implement different teaching approaches for students with different proficiency levels? Could you please provide some illustrative examples?
5. 请你在汉字教学当中采取不同的教学方法的效果如何？为什么？请举例。
   What outcomes have you observed from applying diverse teaching methods in your teaching *hanzi* practice? What are the underlying reasons? Please elaborate with specific examples.
6. 请问你对自己的教学方法有没有值得改进的地方？为什么？请举例。
   Are there any areas in your teaching methods that you believe require improvement? What are the justifications? Please share some relevant examples.
7. 请问你了解“差异化教学法”吗？你的理解是什么？有哪些教学策略？
   Are you familiar with the concept of “differentiated instruction”? How do you interpret it? What teaching strategies are associated with it?
8. 请问你将来还会选择使用差异化教学吗？为什么？
   Will you choose to use differentiated instruction in the future? Why?

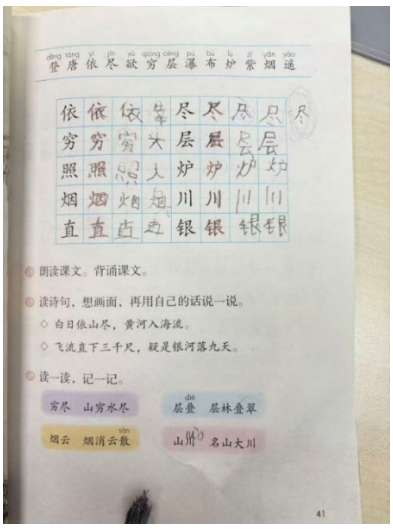
Appendix B

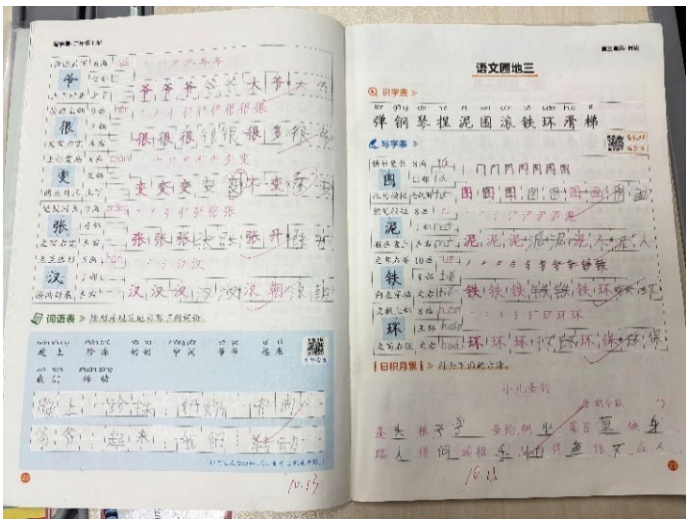
Samples of students' works



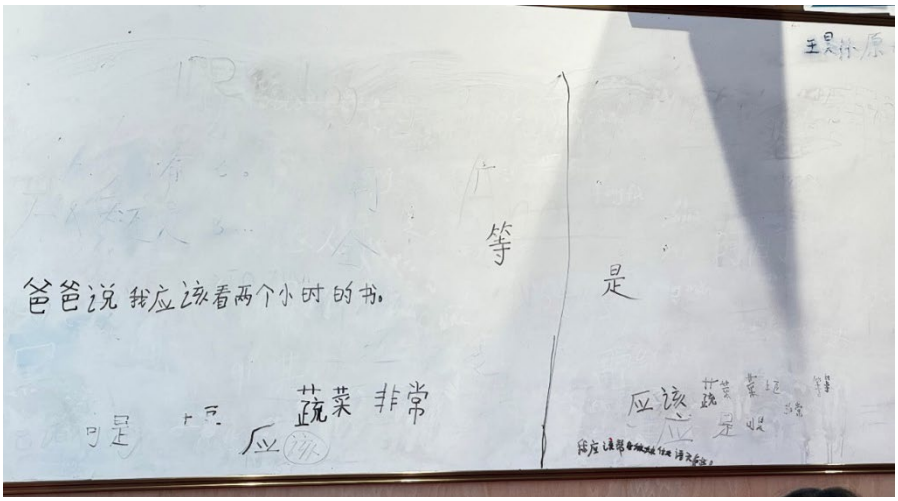


B-1: Ms. Yao's L2 student's handwriting Ms. Yao's L1 student's handwriting





B-2: Ms. Xiao's L2 student's handwriting Ms. Xiao's L1 student's handwriting



B-3: Ms. Chen's L2 students' handwriting

Appendix C

Prompts for reflective journals.

As the final task of this study, we invite you to reflect on any potential shifts in your thinking regarding the extent to which you have implemented differentiated instruction (DI) in the current semester. Please take approximately 20 minutes to write a short essay on this topic

- With respect to DI implementation for students of mixed abilities in your classroom, have your pedagogical strategies changed this semester? If so, please identify a few examples, and explain how and why these changes occurred. If you feel your approach has remained unchanged, please also explain why.

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解锁汉字教学中的最近发展区：中国国际化学校差异化教学的社会文化视角

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摘要
随着中国国际化学校不断增加的学生语言多样性，差异化教学已成为解决汉语课堂中不同学生学习需求的有效方法。然而，现有的研究很少从维果茨基的“最近发展区”这一视角来探讨差异化教学在实际中的实施情况，尤其是在汉字教学的背景下。本研究旨在探究汉语教师如何在中国国际化学校的课堂中，实施基于“最近发展区”的差异化教学，以及“最近发展区”如何影响他们的教学决策。本研究采用定性研究设计，基于来自两所中国国际化学校的三名经验丰富的汉语教师的数据。通过半结构化访谈、实物收集和反思日志收集数据，并使用主题分析方法，结合初始自下而上的归纳编码过程，和随后自上而下基于理论的分析。研究结果表明，不同课堂中差异化教学的实施程度各不相同，“最近发展区”为塑造汉字学习中的差异化教学提供了一个有效的框架。然而，具体的环境条件会影响教师实施差异化教学的程度和一致性。通过将理论与实践相结合，本研究为在中国国际化学校中提升差异化教学的运用提供了实用的见解。同时，也为教师和学校管理者提供了相关建议，以提高差异化教学在实际课堂中的有效性和适应性。

关键词
差异化教学，最近发展区，中国国际化学校，汉字教学，教师实践

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