

Review

The Applicability of Personnel Management Models to International Chinese Language Education

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Abstract: International Chinese language education (ICLE) now employs a workforce of tens of thousands across roughly 150 countries, yet the way that workforce is managed has drawn very little attention from either human resource scholars or ICLE researchers. This paper asks a practical question: how well do three mainstream personnel management traditions—strategic human resource management (SHRM), the competency-based approach, and cross-cultural HRM—travel to a setting built on short deployments, dual authority structures, and a workforce that mixes volunteers, government-sponsored staff, and locally recruited teachers? Drawing on empirical evidence published between 2018 and 2025, this review argues that none of the three transfers cleanly on its own, but that each contributes something the others leave out. SHRM disciplines the link between programme strategy and day-to-day HR decisions; a competency scaffold anchored in the 2022 International Society for Chinese Language Teaching standards gives recruitment and appraisal a shared vocabulary; cross-cultural HRM supplies the missing infrastructure for expatriate adjustment, dual-authority coordination, and re-entry. A contextualized framework is sketched from these three components, together with the practical implications for programme administrators. The analysis relies on secondary sources and concentrates on the tertiary and Confucius Institute segments of the field; K–12 and private-sector ICLE settings need their own study. This review contributes to the growing literature on ICLE governance by offering an integrative, evidence-informed model that bridges personnel management theory and the operational realities of international language education programmes.

Keywords: international chinese language education; personnel management; strategic human resource management; competency framework; cross-cultural management

1. Introduction

The teaching workforce supporting international Chinese language education (ICLE) has grown to a scale that warrants systematic management attention. Volunteer teachers dispatched from mainland China totaled approximately 47,000 by the end of 2018, and the broader network of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms engaged over 46,000 teaching staff at its peak. This scale is widely recognized [1]. What remains underexplored is the workforce as an integrated entity—rather than as a collection of individual teachers with distinct identities, motivations, and wellbeing characteristics.

Empirical research on ICLE teachers has advanced significantly over the past decade [2]. Studies have examined teacher cognition related to intercultural communicative competence, motivational patterns driving entry into the field, stress associated with cultural adaptation across different national contexts, and the evolving structure of the research domain itself. However, comparable attention has not been given to ICLE through the lens of human resource management—the frameworks typically applied in transnational professions to guide recruitment, training, performance evaluation, retention, and separation.

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This paper addresses that gap [3, 4]. The focus is deliberately narrow. While personnel management is a broad discipline and ICLE operates within a specific context, the central question concerns which mainstream corporate and educational human resource management models are transferable to this setting—and which encounter structural features unique to ICLE. Four such features are especially salient: the workforce operates across national boundaries; assignments are generally time-bound and short-term; teachers often report to multiple institutional authorities simultaneously; and the mission integrates language education with cultural exchange in ways that are not always explicitly articulated. Each feature appears separately in existing human resource literature; their convergence defines the distinctive nature of ICLE.

The analysis proceeds through three model families and four human resource practice domains, enabling systematic assessment of each model's applicability [5]. The outcome is a hybrid framework—explicitly normative—and a set of actionable implications for programme administrators.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Personnel management refers to the integrated set of practices through which an organization recruits, deploys, develops, evaluates, and retains its workforce [2]. Three conceptual model families are pertinent, each offering distinct analytical utility.

2.1. Strategic Human Resource Management

Strategic HRM (SHRM) treats HR practices as instruments of organizational strategy rather than as administrative overhead. Research on educational organizations has shown that treating teachers as strategic resources reshapes recruitment, professional development, and appraisal simultaneously—as an integrated set—rather than in sequence. Evidence from other national education systems supports this view: studies of school leadership have found that principals who explicitly align HR decisions with the institution's educational goals report measurably higher levels of teacher engagement, controlling for other factors.

Two SHRM concepts serve as central analytical tools in subsequent discussion. Vertical fit refers to the alignment between HR practices and organizational strategy; horizontal fit denotes the internal consistency among HR practices themselves [5]. Both concepts are especially valuable when the strategy under examination—such as that of ICLE—pursues dual objectives across two distinct national contexts. For instance, a recruitment policy optimized for language teaching may conflict with an appraisal framework designed to reinforce institutional cohesion. Such misalignment is precisely what horizontal fit helps identify and resolve.

2.2. Competency-Based Management

Competency-based management shifts attention from job descriptions and hierarchies to the underlying capabilities that produce effective performance [6]. For teachers, the standard list spans content knowledge and pedagogical repertoire, classroom management, intercultural sensitivity, and—more recently—digital literacy. A framework of this kind was applied to international Chinese language teachers in Shaanxi, revealing specific gaps in language proficiency and intercultural competence relative to the professional standards issued in 2022 by the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching. The principal advantage of this approach lies in its capacity to translate a diffuse ideal into measurable dimensions. However, a competency profile that appears coherent on paper may yield inconsistent results when implemented in real-world host-country contexts, making contextual calibration essential.

2.3. Cross-Cultural Human Resource Management

Cross-cultural HRM addresses the challenges of managing personnel operating across national and cultural contexts. Its core components—expatriate selection, pre-departure preparation, on-arrival support, and repatriation—closely align with the experiences of Chinese educators assigned to overseas Confucius Institutes and Confucius

Classrooms. Recent empirical findings confirm this alignment: studies of foreign educators in Chinese universities and Chinese educators in the UK consistently identify shared stressors, including language limitations, divergent pedagogical expectations, professional isolation, and unfamiliarity with local institutional practices [7]. A distinctive feature of international Chinese language education lies in the dual institutional framework: unlike conventional expatriate assignments governed by a single employer, educators in this context operate under coordinated oversight from both sending and host institutions.

Table 1 sets out the three model families side by side.

Table 1. Comparison of the Three Personnel Management Model Families.

Model family	Central premise	Headline practices	Typical measure of success
Strategic HRM	HR practices must serve organizational strategy	Workforce planning; vertical & horizontal fit; HR–strategy alignment	Organizational performance; strategic goal attainment
Competency-based	Effective performance follows from underlying competencies	Competency profile; profile-based selection, training, appraisal	Competency scores; performance–profile correspondence
Cross-cultural HRM	Managing employees across cultures requires distinct practices	Expatriate selection; pre-departure training; in-country support; repatriation	Adjustment quality; turnover; assignment completion

3. Personnel Challenges in International Chinese Language Education

The recent empirical literature consistently identifies key pressure points, and any personnel model applied to International Chinese Language Education must address them directly.

The workforce is genuinely heterogeneous in ways that conventional human resource practices are not well equipped to manage. Most Confucius Institute teaching teams comprise three distinct groups: volunteer teachers recruited from mainland China on short-term contracts, government-sponsored teachers with longer-term assignments, and locally recruited teachers whose professional careers are rooted in the host country. These groups are not interchangeable variants of a single role; they differ significantly in prior teaching experience, English proficiency, cultural exposure, and expectations of institutional support [6]. Consequently, any comprehensive HR policy must simultaneously accommodate three divergent career trajectories.

Turnover among volunteer teachers is inherently high, as one- or two-year terms were intentionally designed into the programme from its inception; rotational deployment was an integral feature rather than an unintended outcome. However, this rotation incurs predictable costs—including erosion of institutional memory, disruption to curriculum continuity, and weakening of student–teacher relationships that typically deepen only over multiple years. It has been observed that annual cohort replacement, while administratively efficient, may impede the development of sustained professional

identity. This represents a deliberate trade-off—not an oversight—and warrants explicit recognition.

Professional development opportunities are unevenly distributed across the deployment cycle. Pre-departure training tends to be intensive and heavily focused on language and culture, whereas on-arrival support is often minimal. The most effective elements of in-service continuing professional development—such as sustained mentoring, peer observation, and collaborative feedback—are precisely those least accommodated by short deployment timelines. This pattern is revisited in Section 4.2.

Dual authority structures constitute another persistent source of operational friction. Volunteer teachers report formally to both a Chinese director appointed by the sending institution and, in principle, to a host-country co-director. When these directors hold differing views on pedagogical approaches or working styles—which occurs regularly—teachers occupy an intermediary position that can compromise decision-making autonomy. Research indicates that teacher agency in International Chinese Language Education is closely shaped by how such institutional relationships are structured, and that ambiguous lines of authority tend to constrain rather than enhance professional discretion. In contexts where accountability is unclear, educators often default to conservative choices, which seldom align with innovative or adaptive teaching practices.

Cross-cultural adjustment remains the most extensively documented pressure point [8]. Studies of foreign teachers in Chinese universities and Chinese teachers in English-speaking countries converge on a consistent set of challenges—including language barriers, divergent expectations between teachers and students, and unfamiliarity with institutional norms—and confirm that adjustment difficulties continue to influence teaching effectiveness well beyond the initial orientation period. Anyone who has observed a newly arrived colleague navigating whether expressions such as 'quite good' carry positive or neutral connotations will recognize this dynamic. Figure 1 sketches the workforce composition and the reporting lines in a representative Confucius Institute.

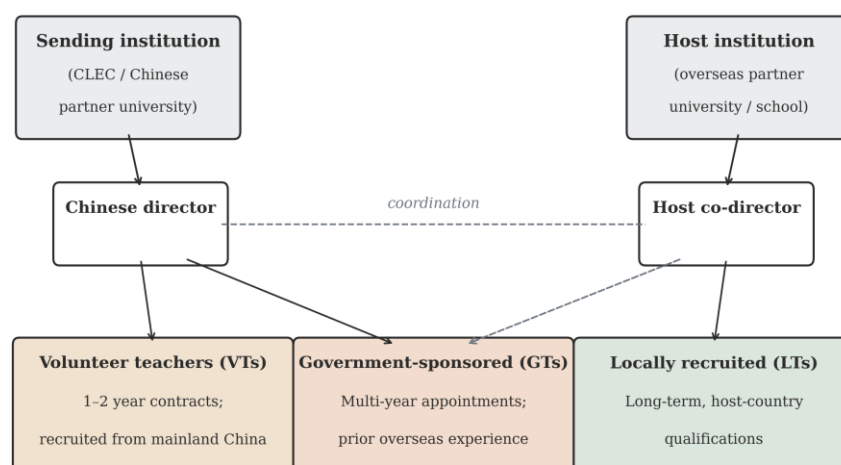


Figure 1. Workforce Composition and Reporting Lines in a Representative Confucius Institute. Solid Arrows Denote Formal Reporting; the Dashed Line Denotes Coordination between Directors.

4. Applicability Analysis

With the theoretical frameworks and key pressure points established, applicability can be assessed across four core HR practice domains: recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management, and retention. Each domain highlights distinct configurations of strengths and limitations among the three model families.

4.1. Recruitment and Selection

The SHRM tradition would push ICLE recruitment toward tighter alignment between programme strategy and candidate profile [9, 10]. In current practice, the VT

pipeline is more often driven by supply: post-graduate students in TCFL programmes seeking overseas experience are recruited into whatever assignment is available. Competency-based selection could sharpen this by scoring candidates against a standard profile before they are matched to posts, and the 2022 revision of the International Chinese Language Teacher Standards provides a foundational framework for such profiling. Cross-cultural HRM would add a third layer, namely explicit assessment of intercultural readiness. A case study of a single institute documents a recruitment process that leaned heavily on academic transcripts and language ability, with intercultural competence assumed rather than tested — a pattern consistently identified in expatriate-focused research over the past two decades.

One way to see what a competency-based selection would need to attend to is to plot the three teacher types on the six-dimension profile drawn from the 2022 standards. Figure 2 does this. The scores are indicative rather than measured — the underlying evidence is drawn from multiple recent studies — but the heterogeneity is clearly visible. VTs score highest on content knowledge, lower on intercultural sensitivity, classroom management, and wellbeing. GTs sit in the middle across the board. LTs, whose careers are already localized, lead on intercultural sensitivity, pedagogical repertoire, and wellbeing but run a little behind on the content side [11]. A selection system that treated the three groups interchangeably would misdirect training resources by roughly the shape of Figure 2.

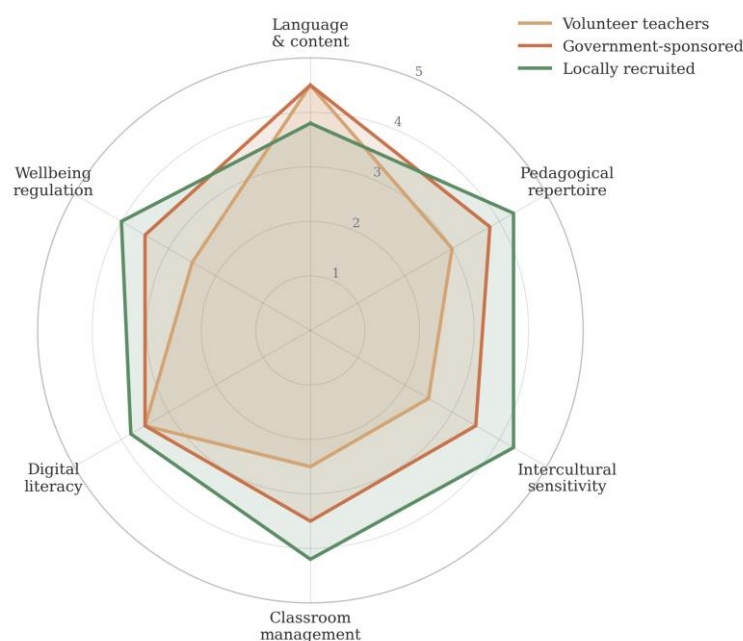


Figure 2. Indicative Competency Profiles for the Three Teacher Types Against the Isclt 2022 Standards. Scores Are Analytical, Drawn from the Literature Cited in Section 3.

4.2. Training and Development

Training programmes for ICLE teachers are, on the whole, well designed at the point of departure. It is what happens afterwards that presents the main challenge. Pre-departure programmes concentrate a substantial amount of language, culture, and pedagogical content into a short timeframe, while on-arrival support tends to be irregular and unsystematic. The gap lies less in initial content coverage than in sustained professional development. Cross-cultural human resource management principles suggest continuous in-country mentoring, ideally delivered by peers who have successfully navigated similar transitions. A competency-based approach would require periodic re-assessment against established standards, with individualized development plans addressing specific areas for growth. Strategic human resource management

emphasizes aligning continuing professional development with overarching programme objectives rather than relying solely on individual preferences. Although these perspectives differ in emphasis, they converge on a shared diagnosis—one made evident when current practice is contrasted with the pattern implied by the integrated framework.

Figure 3 makes the diagnosis concrete. Current practice concentrates training almost entirely in the pre-departure phase and the first weeks after arrival; the curve then remains flat for the remainder of the two-year assignment. The pattern implied by the framework in Section 5 does not require intensified pre-departure training. Instead, it calls for a development trajectory that tapers gradually rather than declining abruptly.

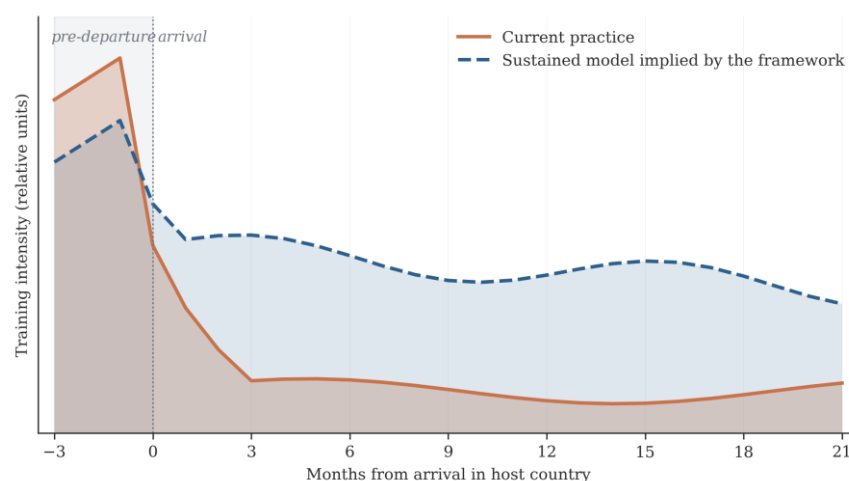


Figure 3. Training Intensity Across the Deployment Cycle. The Solid Line Traces the Front-Loaded Pattern Typical of Current Practice; the Dashed Line Traces the Sustained Pattern Implied by Combining the Three Model Families.

Table 2 sets out key competencies for international Chinese language teachers, drawing on widely adopted professional standards and recent empirical analyses, and maps them against the three model families.

Table 2. Key Competencies for International Chinese Language Teachers and Their Coverage by the Three Model Families.

Competency	SHRM emphasis	Competency-based emphasis	Cross-cultural HRM emphasis
Language & content knowledge	Aligned with programme level and student profile	Core; profile-based assessment	Not directly addressed
Pedagogical repertoire	Aligned with programme learning outcomes	Core; observable competency	Localization for host pedagogy
Intercultural sensitivity	Aligned with diplomatic mission	Explicit dimension	Central; selection, training, appraisal
Classroom management	Aligned with student demographic	Explicit dimension	Culturally inflected; needs local calibration
Digital literacy	Aligned with programme modernisation	Explicit dimension since 2022 standards	Not directly addressed

Emotional & wellbeing regulation	Underweighted in most SHRM models	Increasingly included	Core for expatriate adjustment
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4.3. Performance Management and Appraisal

Performance management in ICLE remains underdeveloped, with prior characterizations describing it as informal, largely qualitative, and heavily reliant on interpersonal dynamics with the Chinese director—a pattern consistently observed across subsequent studies. In contrast to strategic human resource management expectations—where performance metrics align with institutional priorities—or competency-based frameworks—which anchor assessment cycles to defined role profiles—most CI arrangements depend on end-of-year reports whose evaluative significance remains ambiguous even to those completing them. This structural limitation incurs substantial downstream consequences: systematic talent identification becomes challenging, formative feedback diminishes, and the reward mechanism appears opaque to participants. Localization of appraisal processes is not a simple solution, as judgments of teaching quality are inherently shaped by cultural context. Divergent expectations between the Chinese director and the host co-director regarding classroom conduct reflect distinct pedagogical values; privileging one perspective over the other is counterproductive. A viable appraisal system must therefore integrate both viewpoints rather than select among them [12, 13].

A further complication arises that conventional appraisal theory does not fully anticipate. In typical school settings, appraisal primarily serves the institution itself. Within CI arrangements, however, it implicitly responds to three distinct constituencies simultaneously—the sending institution, the host institution, and, albeit less formally, students and their families. Any appraisal instrument neglecting any one of these stakeholders is likely to fail. Current practice disproportionately emphasizes the sending institution's expectations, which may account for why many CI teachers perceive appraisal as an administrative exercise rather than a developmental opportunity [14].

4.4. Retention and Career Trajectory

Retention is the domain where the three model families diverge most visibly. Strategic human resource management treats teacher retention as a strategic asset and designs career ladders accordingly; competency-based approaches link promotion to demonstrated growth in professional competencies; cross-cultural human resource management emphasizes post-assignment transitions, particularly the re-entry challenge following overseas service—a persistent issue that warrants attention regardless of its complexity. Empirical work using Q-methodology has identified four distinct motivational profiles among teachers of Chinese as a foreign language, only one of which aligns with long-term commitment to teaching abroad. The remaining profiles reflect transient engagement, suggesting current personnel practices may be well-suited to those seeking personal development or migration pathways, yet insufficiently supportive of individuals motivated by sustained professional dedication.

The distinction among locally recruited, government-sponsored, and volunteer teachers clarifies the retention question with unusual precision. Locally recruited teachers can, in principle, pursue full careers within a single host institution, facing retention challenges comparable to those in domestic school systems. Government-sponsored teachers occupy an intermediate position, with career prospects contingent on future assignments and eventual reintegration into institutions in China. Volunteer teachers, by design, are not retained within the international Chinese language education workforce—they typically transition to further academic study or unrelated employment sectors. Applying a uniform career ladder across these three groups is fundamentally inappropriate, and no single model family alone resolves this structural misalignment.

Table 3 summarises how the three model families cover the four practice domains, and Figure 4 presents the same information as a heat matrix—facilitating rapid visual interpretation of coverage patterns.

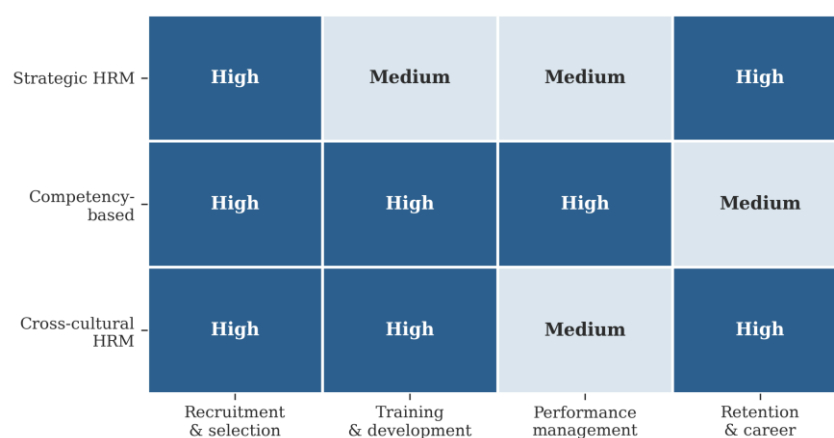


Figure 4. Applicability Heat Matrix. Darker Cells Indicate Stronger Coverage of a Given HR Practice Domain by a Given Model Family.

Table 3. Applicability of Personnel Management Models Across HR Practice Domains in ICLE.

Practice domain	Strategic HRM	Competency-based	Cross-cultural HRM
Recruitment & selection	High — clarifies strategic profile	High — enables profile-based screening	High — adds intercultural readiness
Training & development	Medium — CPD tied to strategy	High — ongoing competency assessment	High — sustained in-country mentoring
Performance management	Medium — requires new metrics	High — appraisal against profile	Medium — needs joint appraisal design
Retention & career	High — career ladder design	Medium — promotion via competency growth	High — repatriation and re-entry

Two patterns stand out in Figure 4. Cross-cultural human resource management demonstrates strong coverage across three of the four domains, underscoring the tangible cost of its current marginalisation in international Chinese language education practice. No single model family achieves high coverage across all domains, justifying the hybrid framework proposed in Section 5 rather than wholesale adoption of any one tradition.

5. A Contextualized Framework

No single mainstream model fulfills all requirements, yet the integration of three complementary approaches addresses most essential functions of a viable ICLE personnel system. The system comprises three interdependent layers [15].

The first layer is strategic anchoring: human resource decisions must be explicitly aligned with a clearly articulated programme strategy—including an honest assessment of whether the primary objective is long-term language education or whether cultural engagement objectives are also integral. Vertical coherence requires that recruitment,

training, performance appraisal, and retention collectively advance the same strategic goals; horizontal coherence ensures these functions do not inadvertently conflict. Neither form of coherence is consistently achieved in current practice.

The second layer is a competency scaffold. A shared, locally adapted competency profile—grounded in internationally recognized professional standards and refined to reflect host-country contexts—provides a unified reference point for recruitment, training, and appraisal. Crucially, this profile must undergo periodic, scheduled review rather than being treated as static. Earlier standards required comprehensive revision within fifteen years; given evolving educational and intercultural demands, future updates will likely occur at shorter intervals, and the personnel system must be designed for iterative adaptation.

The third layer—most conspicuously absent in current implementation—is cross-cultural infrastructure [16, 17]. Given the distinctive composition and operational context of ICLE personnel, foundational supports typically assumed in conventional human resource management must be deliberately established: on-site intercultural mentoring, transparent protocols for resolving leadership differences between Chinese and host-country directors, and structured support for both deployment and reintegration phases. This layer offers the highest anticipated impact relative to investment.

Figure 5 presents the three layers as an integrated framework.

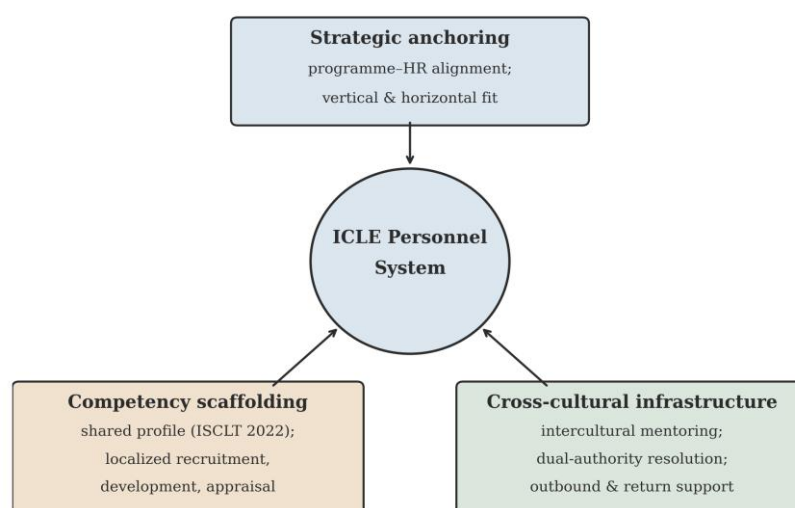


Figure 5. A Contextualized Personnel Management Framework for ICLE, Combining Strategic Anchoring, Competency Scaffolding, and Cross-Cultural Infrastructure.

6. Discussion

Three limitations of this analysis warrant explicit acknowledgment. The study relies exclusively on secondary sources rather than primary fieldwork. While the empirical literature exhibits considerable consistency, and the diagnostic conclusions are grounded in that convergence, direct observational or interview-based data would enhance analytical precision—and would provide concrete evidence against which the proposed framework could be empirically tested, rather than merely advanced through argumentation [18]. Furthermore, the analysis disproportionately emphasizes tertiary-level international Chinese language education and Confucius Institute contexts, reflecting their relative prominence in existing research; programmes integrated into mainstream K–12 schools abroad or operating within private language institutions may exhibit distinct characteristics. Finally, the institutional landscape underpinning much of the reviewed literature is undergoing transformation: the 2020 reorganization of Hanban into the Center for Language Education and Cooperation introduced a new administrative structure, though frontline implementation practices have remained

largely unchanged to date—yet whether this stability persists is precisely the kind of question best addressed through longitudinal investigation.

The proposed framework is normative rather than descriptive. Its adoption hinges on institutional commitment from both partner entities, a factor no management model can guarantee. What the analysis contributes is conceptual clarification: international Chinese language education already incorporates selected human resource management principles, and making such integration intentional would strengthen its effectiveness [6, 13].

7. Conclusions

Personnel management models developed in mainstream corporate and educational settings can be adapted to international Chinese language education—but not through direct transfer, nor in isolation. Strategic human resource management underscores the necessity of aligning HR practices with programme objectives and ensuring coherence among recruitment, development, and appraisal functions. Competency-based management—grounded in the 2022 ISCLT standards—provides a unified framework for defining, assessing, and advancing professional capabilities. Cross-cultural human resource management addresses transnational workforce dynamics that the other two approaches do not fully encompass. Together, these three orientations collectively address most core requirements of a viable international Chinese language education personnel system.

What remains outside their scope is the political and institutional feasibility of implementing such a system. This constitutes a distinct challenge beyond the conceptual scope of this paper. The most productive next step is not further theoretical refinement but empirical investigation: primary studies conducted in non-Confucius Institute contexts, and longitudinal research tracking teachers across full deployment cycles rather than at isolated time points. Whether the key pressure points identified here persist under such rigorous scrutiny is the central question for future research.

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