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Original Research

Language soft diplomacy in foreign language education: A systematic review (2015–2025)

Niki Raga Tantri[1,2*], Urip Sulistiyo[2], Mukhlash Abrar[2]

[1]Hebei International Studies University, Shijiazhuang, China
[2]Universitas Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia

Research on language soft diplomacy in foreign-language education examines institutions, programmes, curricula, policies, instructional materials, promotional activities, and participants. Existing reviews leave the evidential relationships among these subjects unclear. This systematic review synthesised peer-reviewed research published from 2015 to 2025 and identified the educational categories, target languages, geographical contexts, research approaches, findings, and diplomatic connections represented. Following PRISMA 2020, Scopus, ERIC, and ScienceDirect were last searched on 22 August 2026. The searches produced 1,070 records, of which 24 met the eligibility criteria. The studies underwent descriptive classification, thematic synthesis, and quality appraisal. The mean quality-appraisal score was 4.5. Coursebooks formed the largest single category (n = 11), and 13 studies examined institutions, programmes, curricula, promotional activities, or language-promotion policies. Fourteen studies concerned Asian settings, and nine examined English as the sole target language. Methods corresponded to the evidence source. Coursebook studies used discourse, semiotic, multimodal, and content analysis. Institutional and policy research used case studies, quantitative analysis, mixed methods, reviews, and policy analysis. Seven studies directly examined soft diplomacy, soft power, or diplomatic agency, four mentioned the diplomatic connection as context, and 13 received that connection from the review authors. No coursebook study directly examined soft diplomacy. The review identifies an evidential discontinuity among institutional provision, instructional content, participant response, and diplomatic outcomes. Its analytical framework separates the educational site investigated, the evidence supplied, and the status of the diplomatic connection, supporting more precise claims in future research.

Keywords: *language education, language promotion, soft diplomacy, systematic review, coursebooks, acquisition planning, cultural representation*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign-language education takes place in schools, universities, language programmes, and cultural organisations. Its provision involves decisions concerning curricula, instructional materials, staffing, and activities intended to encourage language study. Scholarship in this area addresses language teaching, access to instruction, curriculum content, learner responses, cultural learning,

* Corresponding author
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programme delivery, and the availability of teachers and educational materials (Gu & Deng, 2024; Hernández, 2018; Likoko & Wu, 2025; Pajtinka, 2014). Several studies connect these educational arrangements with international cultural and educational activity through the terminology of soft power, public and cultural diplomacy.

Within this strand of scholarship, soft power describes influence sought through attraction, culture, and education (Nye, 1990, 2004). Public diplomacy refers to communication and educational activity addressed to people outside the promoting country (Melissen, 2005), and cultural diplomacy refers to international cultural and educational exchange (Pajtinka, 2014). Language soft diplomacy describes the use of foreign-language education or language promotion for purposes associated with these forms of international activity. Literature using this terminology consequently includes studies of institutions, programmes, curricula, instructional materials, promotional activities, and language-promotion policies.

These educational categories supply different kinds of evidence. Studies of institutions, programmes, and policies document educational provision, curriculum implementation, student demand, staffing, material availability, and participation by educators and programme organisers (Gu & Deng, 2024; Hernández, 2018; Likoko & Wu, 2025; Cabaña Rojas, 2025; Solikhah & Budiharso, 2020; Tang et al., 2025). Studies of curricula, coursebooks, and other instructional materials document cultural content, social-group representation, relationships with curriculum requirements, and learner responses (Canale, 2016; Choi & Lee, 2024; Vinall & Shin, 2019; Widianto & Pusse, 2025). Promotional materials and cultural activities supply further evidence concerning the presentation of language study to prospective learners and other audiences. The literature thus combines evidence about educational provision, instructional content, participation, and diplomatic purposes, with each primary study addressing a particular part of the educational process. This variation leaves unclear which subjects have received sustained research attention and how much of the available evidence directly concerns soft diplomacy.

Existing systematic reviews leave these questions unresolved. Gauttam et al. (2024) reviewed education as a soft-power resource, Taqdir (2025) reviewed visual and cultural representation in textbooks, and El Moudden and Said (2025) reviewed critical coursebook research. A systematic account of the educational categories, target languages, and geographical contexts represented in this literature remains unavailable. The research designs, analytical methods, theoretical frameworks, and findings reported for the different educational categories have also not been synthesised within a single review. The degree to which the primary studies directly investigated soft diplomacy remains similarly uncertain.

The aim of the present study is to synthesise research published from 2015 to 2025 on language soft diplomacy in foreign-language education. The review examines instructional materials, language programmes, curricula, institutions, promotional activities, and language-promotion policies. It documents the educational categories, target languages, and geographical contexts represented, identifies the research approaches used, synthesises the reported findings, and establishes how directly soft diplomacy was investigated in the primary studies.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. Which categories of foreign-language education, target languages, and geographical contexts are represented in the included studies?

2. Which research designs, analytical methods, and theoretical frameworks were used in the included studies?

3. What findings were reported for instructional materials, language programmes, curricula, institutions, promotional activities, and language-promotion policies, and how directly did each study examine soft diplomacy?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a systematic literature review design and was reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review examined peer-reviewed research on foreign-language education, language promotion, and soft diplomacy. Eligible subjects comprised coursebooks and other instructional materials, language-teaching institutions, programmes, curricula, promotional materials, and language-promotion policies. The review documented the publication characteristics, research designs, methods, theoretical frameworks, and findings of the included studies.

2.1. Search and study selection

The search was limited to Scopus, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. Scopus was used for multidisciplinary journal coverage, ERIC for education-specific indexing, and ScienceDirect was searched as a publisher platform for additional journal records in language education and applied linguistics. No other databases were included in the original search. This restriction limits the coverage of the review and may have caused relevant studies to be missed.

The initial query combined terms relating to foreign-language textbooks, sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and soft power. This query returned no results in Scopus or ERIC. Three additional search iterations were therefore used. Search 2 concerned critical analysis of instructional materials, Search 3 concerned language diplomacy and policy, and Search 4 concerned language promotion. Table 1 presents the search topics and terms.

Table 2 presents the database-specific queries, search fields, filters, and number of hits for each search iteration. The syntax was adjusted for each source. Scopus searches

Table 1
Search strategy in all databases

SEARCH ITERATION	INCLUDED KEY TERMS
Search 1: combination of critical coursebook analysis and soft diplomacy	('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*') AND ('sociolinguistics' OR 'critical discourse analysis') AND ('soft power')
Search 2: critical analysis of learning materials	('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*') AND ('critical discourse analysis' OR 'sociolinguistics' OR 'cultural representation')
Search 3: language diplomacy and policy	('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*' OR 'language policy') AND ('national language' OR 'soft power' OR 'cultural diplomacy')
Search 4: language promotion	('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*' OR 'language promotion') AND ('national language' OR 'soft power' OR 'cultural diplomacy')

Table 2
Results per database (publication years 2015–2025)

DATABASE	SEARCH FIELDS	FILTERS	SEARCH ITERATION / HITS	EXACT QUERY (AS ENTERED)
Scopus	Title, abstract, keywords	2015-2025 English	1 / 0	TITLE-ABS-KEY (('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*') AND ('sociolinguistics' OR 'critical discourse analysis') AND ('soft power'))
			2 / 33	TITLE-ABS-KEY (('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*') AND ('critical discourse analysis' OR 'sociolinguistics' OR 'cultural representation'))
			3 / 198	TITLE-ABS-KEY (('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook' OR 'language policy') AND ('national language' OR 'soft power' OR 'cultural diplomacy'))
			4 / 21	TITLE-ABS-KEY (('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*' OR 'language promotion') AND ('national language' OR 'soft power' OR 'cultural diplomacy'))
Science Direct	Title, abstract, author keywords	2015-2025 full text available	1 / 24	('foreign language textbook' OR 'coursebook') AND ('sociolinguistics' OR 'critical discourse analysis') AND ('soft power')
			2 / 504	('foreign language textbook' OR 'coursebook') AND ('sociolinguistics' OR 'critical discourse analysis' OR 'cultural representation')
			3 / 232	('foreign language textbook' OR 'coursebook' OR 'language policy') AND ('national language' OR 'soft power' OR 'cultural diplomacy')
			4 / 33	('foreign language textbook' OR 'coursebook' OR 'language promotion') AND ('national language' OR 'soft power' OR 'cultural diplomacy')
ERIC	Advanced search (Boolean)	2015–2025	1 / 0	('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*') AND ('sociolinguistics' OR 'critical discourse analysis') AND ('soft power')
			2 / 6	('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*') AND ('critical discourse analysis' OR 'sociolinguistics' OR 'cultural representation')
			3 / 18	('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook' OR 'language policy') AND ('national language' OR 'soft power' OR 'cultural diplomacy')
			4 / 1	('foreign language textbook*' OR 'coursebook*' OR 'language promotion') AND ('national language' OR 'soft power' OR 'cultural diplomacy')

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used the TITLE-ABS-KEY field. ScienceDirect searches used the Advanced Search interface with the title, abstract, or author-specified keywords field and the full-text-availability filter. Boolean strings were entered in the ERIC search interface. The searches returned 1,070 hits before duplicate removal: 252 from Scopus, 793 from ScienceDirect, and 25 from ERIC. All four search iterations were completed on 22 August 2026 and were limited to publications dated from 2015 to 2025. Backward and forward citation searching of the included studies was not performed.

Eligibility criteria concerned publication type, publication language and date, full-text availability, educational setting, subject matter, and relevance to the research questions. Direct examination of soft diplomacy was not required for inclusion (Table 3).

Table 3
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

CATEGORY	INCLUSION CRITERIA	EXCLUSION CRITERIA
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles reporting empirical studies, systematic reviews, conceptual analyses, or policy analyses and proposals, retrieved from Scopus, ERIC, or ScienceDirect	Publications outside peer-reviewed journals, including books, book chapters, theses, dissertations, reports, working papers, preprints, conference papers or abstracts, and organisational or government publications
Language	Published in English	Published in a language other than English
Publication date	Published from 2015 to 2025	Published before 2015 or after 2025
Availability	Full text available	Full text unavailable
Educational setting	Foreign-language education or promotion of a national language to learners outside its principal national setting	First-language or mother-tongue education with no relevance to foreign-language education or international language promotion
Subject matter	Coursebooks or other instructional materials; language-teaching institutions; language programmes or curricula; promotional materials or activities; or language-promotion policies	No substantive connection to foreign-language education, instructional materials, or language promotion
Findings	Findings relevant to at least one research question, including research methods, theoretical frameworks, educational or cultural content, learner response, programme provision, curriculum implementation, institutional provision, promotional activity, policy implementation, or resource conditions	No findings relevant to the research questions
Relationship to soft diplomacy	Direct examination of soft diplomacy was not required. The relationship between each study and soft diplomacy was classified after inclusion	Diplomatic relevance inferred by the review authors was not sufficient on its own to establish eligibility

Note. Conceptual papers and policy proposals published in peer-reviewed journals were eligible when they contained substantive analysis relevant to the research questions. An empirical design was required only for articles presented as empirical research.

The 1,070 records were imported into Rayyan. Automated duplicate detection identified possible duplicate records, which were checked before removal. After 339 duplicates were removed, 731 records remained for title and abstract screening. Two reviewers independently screened the titles and abstracts. The full texts of all 155 records selected at that stage were retrieved, and two reviewers independently assessed them against the eligibility criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. When the two reviewers could not reach agreement, a third reviewer made the final decision.

Data were extracted for each included study. The recorded information comprised publication details, geographical context, target language, educational category, study design, research methods, theoretical framework, principal findings, and relationship to soft diplomacy.

The eligibility criteria permitted studies of coursebooks, instructional materials, institutions, programmes, curricula, promotional materials, and language-promotion policies. A study was not required to examine soft diplomacy to qualify if it met the other eligibility criteria and supplied findings relevant to the research questions.

After eligibility was determined, every included study was assigned one of the following classifications:

1. Directly examined: soft diplomacy or soft power formed part of the study's stated aim, theoretical basis, analysis, or evaluated outcome.
2. Mentioned but not examined: the study referred to soft diplomacy or soft power as background or context but investigated another subject.
3. Connection proposed by this review: the primary study did not investigate soft diplomacy, and the connection was inferred by the review authors.

The classifications were assigned after study inclusion and were not used as an independent basis for eligibility. The classifications and study-level explanations for all included studies are reported in the supplementary files cited in the Data Availability Statement.

2.2. Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of descriptive classification, thematic synthesis, and quality appraisal. The descriptive classification recorded the educational category, target language, geographical context, study design, research method, and theoretical framework of each included study.

For the thematic synthesis, the first author read the full texts of all 24 included studies and conducted open coding. Coding concerned each study's aims, theoretical basis, methods, principal findings, and references to soft power, soft diplomacy, or language promotion. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into descriptive categories. All authors reviewed and revised these categories through discussion.

The final themes concerned: (i) research methods and theoretical bases; (ii) cultural and social representation in coursebooks; (iii) findings concerning institutions, programmes, curricula, promotional materials, and policies; and (iv) learner reception and the actions of teachers, programme founders, and other non-state participants.

The unit of coding was the findings and conclusions reported in each primary study, not the abstract alone. Mixed and unclear findings were retained as such. A study that did not assess a particular subject was not counted as evidence concerning that subject. All authors reviewed the final assignment of studies to categories and resolved differences through discussion.

Quality appraisal was completed using five Quality Assessment Rules (QARs) reported by Rahmani et al. (2024). The criteria concerned clarity of research aims, appropriateness of the method, reporting of findings, reporting of limitations and implications, and contribution to the field. Each criterion was rated from 1 to 5: 1 = 'not met', 2 = 'minimally met', 3 = 'adequately met', 4 = 'well met', and 5 = 'fully met'. A mean score was calculated for each study and for the included corpus. QARs of the included studies are presented in the Appendix.

The QAR criteria were originally developed for empirical studies and systematic reviews. The five general criteria were also applied to eligible conceptual papers and policy proposals. Two reviewers independently appraised every included study. They discussed differences and agreed on the final scores. The QAR scores were used descriptively to summarise the reported methodological strengths and limitations of the included studies. They were not used to exclude, weight, or prioritise studies in the synthesis.

The extracted data were arranged according to the three research questions. For RQ1, studies were classified by educational category, target language, and geographical context. For RQ2, study designs, research methods, and theoretical frameworks were recorded. For RQ3, reported findings were synthesised by educational category and relationship to soft diplomacy: directly examined, mentioned but not examined, or proposed as relevant by the review authors. Findings were reported according to educational category because the included studies used different units of analysis and supplied different types of evidence. Coursebooks and other instructional materials, institutions, programmes and curricula, promotional materials and activities, and language-promotion policies were analysed as separate categories. The categories were not compared as measures of a common outcome.

This systematic review was not registered in a systematic-review registry, and no separate written protocol was deposited before the review began. The authors used an internal working document for the search, screening, data extraction, and synthesis procedures. During manuscript revision, the eligibility criteria were clarified to confirm that peer-reviewed conceptual papers and policy proposals could qualify for inclusion. Records affected by this clarification were rechecked under the revised criteria.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Language promotion as educational provision

Foreign-language education comprises organised decisions about access to instruction, teaching settings, the curriculum to be followed, the materials available to teachers and learners, and the people who participate in teaching and programme development. Language planning offers a coherent basis for examining these decisions (Tollefson, 1991). Cooper (1989) defines language planning as deliberate efforts to influence the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of language varieties. His account of acquisition planning concerns efforts to increase the number or distribution of language users through opportunities and incentives for learning. Foreign-language institutions, programmes, curricula, teacher provision, learning materials, and promotional activities can therefore be studied as connected parts of organised language provision. Language

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promotion identifies the educational provision being organised. A diplomatic purpose is assessed as a separate attribute of that provision.

This connection also clarifies the evidence supplied by the studies included in the present review. Research on the location or expansion of language institutes provides evidence about institutional provision and access. Programme and curriculum studies provide evidence about teaching arrangements, staffing, materials, implementation, and participation. Research on language-promotion policies provides evidence about stated objectives and the conditions under which educational provision is established. Pajtinka (2014), for example, includes language courses, instructors, teaching materials, and library resources among the educational practices discussed in relation to cultural diplomacy. The common analytical subject is the organisation of foreign-language education. Each study examines a particular part of that organisation and supports claims concerning the part for which it presents data.

Organised provision sets the conditions under which teaching occurs. The linguistic and cultural content presented within those conditions requires an account of language learning as socially situated communication. Canale and Swain (1980) define sociolinguistic competence through knowledge of the sociocultural rules governing appropriate language use.

Canale (1983) develops this account by relating appropriateness to meaning, communicative purpose, participants, and setting. Kramsch (2013) likewise locates culture within the symbolic meanings produced through language use.

These approaches place social relations, cultural knowledge, and communicative context within the subject matter of foreign-language education and provide the connection between programme provision and the content selected for curricula and teaching materials.

3.2. Cultural representation

Curricula and teaching materials specify portions of the language, social context, and cultural knowledge made available for instruction (Tomlinson, 2012). Their selection of speakers, places, activities, linguistic varieties, and communicative situations establishes a curricular account of where the language is used and whose experience is represented (Yuen, 2011). Risager (2007) relates language-and-culture pedagogy to national and transnational contexts, allowing cultural content to be examined through the geographical and social relations attributed to language use. Curdt-Christiansen (2017) places textbooks within language socialisation, in which instructional texts contribute to learners' encounters with social values, identities, and expected forms of participation. Coursebooks consequently form one documented site within the educational provision described above.

Research on coursebooks examines the textual, visual, and task-based selections through which cultural content is organised. Multimodal analysis distinguishes representational, interactive, and compositional meanings in visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and semiotic coursebook research examines relationships among images, written text, and cultural meaning in instructional materials (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Canale's (2016) synthesis of foreign-language textbook research locates cultural representation within the production, textual composition, and classroom use of instructional materials. This account supports analysis of inclusion, omission, prominence, and association within coursebook content. It also separates several kinds of evidence that require different data. Textual and visual analysis can establish which cultural groups, practices, and settings appear in a material and how they are presented. Classroom observation and teacher research can establish how the material is used during instruction. Learner-response data can establish how specified learners understand or evaluate the content in a particular setting (Bazhutina & Chizhatkina, 2023). Each form of evidence supports the question for which the data were collected.

National identity is examined in research on cultural representation in foreign-language and international education, including relationships among language learning, intercultural communication, and national identification (Pavlenko, 2003; Pavlovskaya, 2021). Anderson (2006) explains national belonging through socially produced accounts of collective membership. Wodak et al. (2009) identify recurrent discursive strategies through which national identities are constructed and reproduced. The discourse-historical approach relates textual strategies to their social and institutional contexts, and critical-discourse procedures support analysis of social actors and relationships between textual choices and social practice (van Leeuwen, 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). In research on instructional materials, these perspectives support the examination of named social groups, attributed characteristics, collective histories, cultural practices, and relations between national, local, minority, and international reference points. Such analysis establishes the representational structure reported in a primary study. Claims about learners' responses require learner data, while claims about educational or diplomatic outcomes require evidence designed for those outcomes.

The reviewed literature therefore supplies related forms of evidence within foreign-language education. Studies of institutions, programmes, curricula, and policies concern the provision and implementation of teaching. Studies of coursebooks and promotional materials concern the linguistic and cultural content presented to intended audiences. Studies involving learners or programme participants concern responses and participation in specified

settings. These categories belong within one review because they address connected parts of language provision. Their findings retain the unit of analysis and evidential limits of each primary study.

3.3. The evidential boundary of soft diplomacy

Within the reviewed literature, language promotion identifies an educational activity, and soft diplomacy identifies a purpose attributed to that activity. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction, while Melissen (2005) discusses public diplomacy as communication and engagement addressed to foreign publics. Pajtinka (2014) includes educational and cultural exchange within cultural diplomacy. Language courses, institutes, curricula, teaching materials, and cultural activities may be connected to diplomatic purposes when a primary source states and investigates that connection.

Diplomatic terminology concerns the declared purpose, theoretical basis, analysis, or evaluated outcome of an educational activity. The existence of a language programme establishes educational provision. Growth in enrolment or institutional presence establishes participation or geographical reach. Coursebook analysis establishes features of instructional content. Learner research establishes responses within the setting studied. Evidence of soft diplomacy arises when the primary study explicitly relates such data to a diplomatic aim or evaluates an outcome defined in diplomatic terms. This boundary prevents educational provision, cultural representation, institutional expansion, and learner response from being converted automatically into evidence of diplomatic effectiveness.

The same boundary applies to studies that mention soft diplomacy in introductory context and then investigate another subject. In such cases, the findings remain evidence about the subject examined, such as cultural representation, curriculum implementation, institutional provision, or resource availability. A diplomatic connection proposed by the review authors has the status of a review inference. It identifies a possible relation for subsequent research and carries no claim that the primary study investigated diplomacy. This evidential distinction permits the review to examine one corpus of foreign-language education research while preserving the stated purpose and findings of every included study.

3.4. Analytical framework for the present review

The analytical framework links three sites within foreign-language education: organised provision, curricular or material content, and participant response. Institutions, policies, programmes, and curricula are examined for evidence concerning access, implementation, resources, and participation. Coursebooks and promotional materials are examined for evidence concerning linguistic and cultural representation. Studies involving learners, teachers, founders, or other participants are examined according to the participant group and activity documented in the primary research. The relationship to soft diplomacy is then assessed separately from the educational category and the type of evidence supplied.

This framework determines the scope of the synthesis. A finding about institutional expansion remains a finding about provision. A finding about cultural imbalance remains a finding about representation. A learner's evaluation of coursebook content remains evidence of reception in the reported setting. Each finding is classified as a direct examination of soft diplomacy, a contextual mention, or a connection proposed by the present review, using the criteria stated in the Methodology. The resulting synthesis can identify where diplomatic purposes were explicitly investigated, where the term supplied context, and where the available research concerns foreign-language education without direct diplomatic inquiry.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Study selection and corpus characteristics

This section addresses RQ1. The searches produced 1,070 records, comprising 252 records from Scopus, 793 from ScienceDirect, and 25 from ERIC. The records were imported into Rayyan. Removal of 339 duplicate records left 731 records for title and abstract screening.

Title and abstract screening excluded 576 records. Of these, 289 were unrelated to the research questions and 287 did not meet the publication-type or language criteria. All 155 reports sought for retrieval were obtained and assessed against the eligibility criteria. Full-text assessment excluded 131 reports. Seventy-one examined coursebooks outside foreign-language education and supplied no findings relevant to the research questions. Forty-four concerned diplomacy without a substantive connection to language education or language promotion. Sixteen reports were excluded because they did not present an empirical study, systematic review, conceptual analysis, or policy analysis relevant to the research questions. Twenty-four studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the review. The searches were rerun on 22 August 2026 with publication dates restricted to 2015—2025 (Figure 1).

All 24 studies underwent quality appraisal using the five Quality Assessment Rules reported by Rahmani et al. (2024). The mean score was 4.5. For Q1, clarity of research aims, 21 studies received a score of 5 and three received a score of 4. The same distribution was recorded for Q5, contribution to the field. For Q2, methodological appropriateness, seven studies received a score of 5, 15 received a score of 4, and two received a score of 3. For Q3, support for findings, 13 studies received a score of 5, ten received a score of 4, and one received a score of 2. For Q4, reporting of limitations and implications, eight studies

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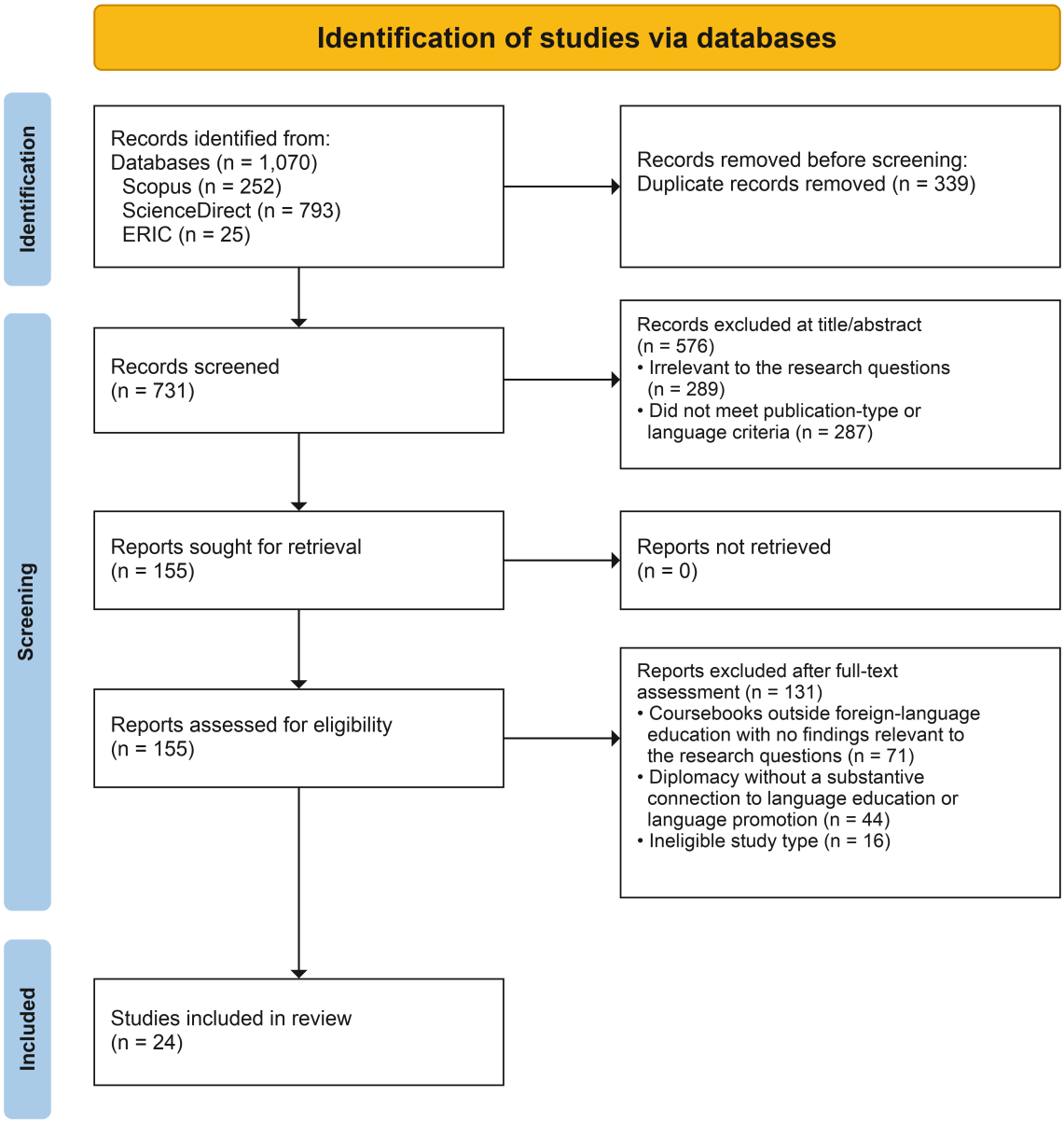

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of study selection (n = 24)

received a score of 5, nine received a score of 4, six received a score of 3, and one received a score of 2. All studies were retained. The scores were reported descriptively and were not used to exclude, prioritise, or assign different analytical weight to individual studies (Figure 2).

The 24 studies were published between 2016 and 2025. One study was published in 2016, one in 2018, three in 2019, one in 2020, three in 2021, three in 2022, six in 2023, two in 2024, and four in 2025. No included study was published in 2015 or 2017 (Figure 3).

Fourteen studies (58%) examined Asian contexts, including South Korea, Indonesia, China, Thailand, the Philippines, and Pakistan. The remaining studies concerned European, Latin American, African, North American, or multi-country settings. Nine studies concerned English as the sole target language. The remaining studies concerned Korean, Chinese, Bahasa Indonesia for foreign speakers, Japanese, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, or more than one target language.

Coursebooks constituted the largest single educational category, with 11 studies. Four studies concerned cultural institutes or institutional proposals, four concerned language programmes or curricula, two — promotional materials or cultural activities, and three — language-promotion policies or policy reviews. The study-level characteristics are reported in the supplementary files.

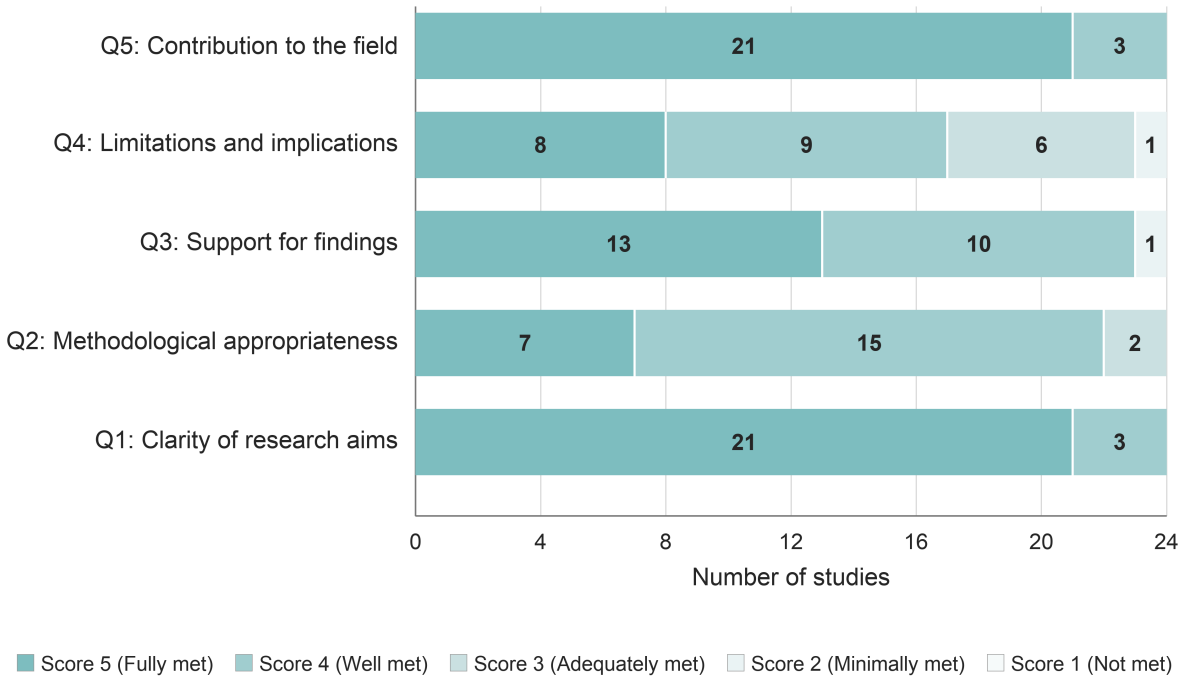

Figure 2. Quality-appraisal scores of the included studies (n = 24)

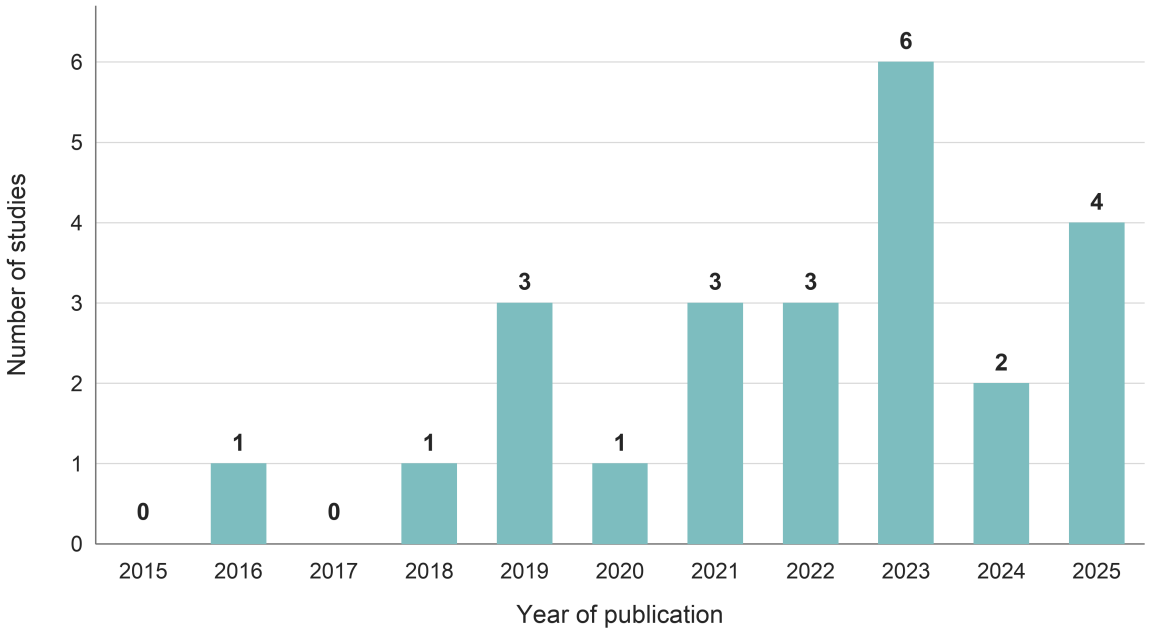

Figure 3. Annual distribution of the included studies (2015–2025)

4.2. Research designs, methods, and theoretical frameworks

This section addresses RQ2. The corpus included primary qualitative and quantitative research, mixed-methods research, systematic and qualitative reviews, and conceptual or policy analysis. The methods corresponded to the educational subject and source material examined in each study.

4.2.1. Research designs and methods

The eleven coursebook studies used critical discourse analysis, multimodal or semiotic analysis, qualitative content analysis, and qualitative synthesis. Vinall and Shin (2019), Shah (2023), Choi and Lee (2024), Smith (2023), and Aoumeur and Ziani (2022) used forms of critical discourse analysis. Choi and Lee (2024) also used visual image analysis and semi-structured interviews with 20 Thai

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Table 4
Analytical methods used in the 11 coursebook studies

ANALYTICAL CATEGORY	SPECIFIC ANALYTICAL APPROACH	STUDY
Critical Discourse Analysis	Thematic analysis and CDA	Vinall and Shin (2019)
	CDA and Foucauldian theory	Shah (2023)
	CDA and Visual Image Analysis	Choi and Lee (2024)
	CDA and the discourse-historical approach	Smith (2023)
	CDA, social–actor analysis, transitivity analysis, and ideological analysis	Aoumeur and Ziani (2022)
Multimodal and semiotic analysis	Multimodal semiotic content analysis	Kaliska (2022)
	Qualitative multimodal content analysis with systemic functional linguistics	Lavrenteva and Orland-Barak (2023)
	Peircean and social-semiotic analysis	Wang & Hemchua (2022)
Qualitative content analysis	Cultural-content framework based on Adaskou et al. (1990)	Sulistiyo et al. (2021)
	Cultural-gradation framework based on Chao (2011)	Widianto and Pusse (2025)
Qualitative synthesis	Synthesis of inclusion and exclusion practices	Canale (2016)

university students. Kaliska (2022), Lavrenteva and Orland-Barak (2023), and Wang and Hemchua (2022) used multimodal or semiotic procedures. Sulistiyo et al. (2021) and Widianto and Pusse (2025) used qualitative cultural-content classification. Canale (2016) conducted a qualitative synthesis of previous empirical research. Table 4 records the specific procedures reported in the eleven coursebook studies.

Gu and Deng (2024), Hernández (2018), Mamedov (2023), Cabaña Rojas (2025), and Zhou (2021) used qualitative case-study designs to examine language programmes, cultural institutes, or language-promotion activities. Gu and Deng (2024) combined qualitative and quantitative documentary analysis. Solikhah and Budiharso (2020) combined qualitative content analysis with a survey, while Likoko and Wu (2025) used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. Two studies used cross-country quantitative designs. Eom et al. (2019) used logistic regression to examine the international placement of Korean-language institutes, and Ding and Wu (2023) used panel data to examine factors associated with Korean-language demand.

Several studies used document-based or review designs. Alkateeb (2023) used visual social-semiotic analysis of promotional videos, and Díaz Rodríguez (2021) combined semiotic, policy, and discourse analysis of cultural exhibitions. Brett and Schaefer (2019) presented a comparative policy analysis and institutional proposal. Tang et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of language in Chinese higher-education internationalisation. Wang and Hemchua (2022) and Canale (2016) synthesised previous studies of coursebook content.

4.2.2. Theoretical frameworks

The coursebook studies used critical discourse analysis, multimodality, social semiotics, visual grammar, systemic functional linguistics, cultural-content classification, intercultural competence, the tourist gaze, World Englishes, and post-structuralist discourse theory. These frameworks supported analysis of linguistic choices, images, tasks, social-group representation, cultural categorisation, and national identity in instructional materials.

Soft power provided a stated theoretical basis in Brett and Schaefer (2019), Eom et al. (2019), Gu and Deng (2024), Hernández (2018), Mamedov (2023), and Zhou (2021). These studies combined soft power with public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, nation branding, language planning, language-learning motivation, or human-capital theory. Cabaña Rojas (2025) used public diplomacy, everyday diplomacy, and diplomatic agency. Language policy and planning informed Gu and Deng (2024), Likoko and Wu (2025), Solikhah and Budiharso (2020), Tang et al. (2025), and Ding and Wu (2023). Alkateeb (2023) used visual social semiotics, linguistic imperialism, and native-speakerism, while Díaz Rodríguez (2021) used semiotics, symbolic power, and postcolonial theory.

4.3. Findings by educational category and relationship to soft diplomacy

This section addresses RQ3. Findings are reported according to educational category and the evidence supplied by each primary study. Institutional provision, programme implementation, curricular or material content, and participant response are reported separately. The final subsection reports whether soft diplomacy was directly examined, mentioned as context, or proposed as relevant by the present review.

4.3.1. Institutions, programmes, curricula, and policies

Four studies concerned cultural institutes or institutional proposals. Eom et al. (2019) reported associations between the international placement of Korean-language institutes and official development assistance, foreign direct investment, and the international popularity of Korean culture. Zhou (2021) reported institutional support for Chinese-language institutes in Thailand, together with concerns concerning local identity and cultural dominance. Mamedov (2023) described Turkish-language provision through cultural centres, educational networks, certification examinations, and media activity in Georgia. The study also reported tensions associated with religious initiatives. Brett and Schaefer (2019) proposed a centralised institute for language and cultural programmes and attributed existing limitations to fragmented provision and funding.

Four studies examined language programmes or curricula. Cabaña Rojas (2025) found that local individuals and organisations initiated and maintained major Japanese-language programmes in Chile. Hernández (2018) reported that Korean-language students in Mexico associated language study with cultural knowledge, while the programmes provided limited literary and historical content and lacked formal recognition in some educational and diplomatic settings. Solikhah and Budiharso (2020) reported the inclusion of cultural content in the BIPA curriculum and classroom practice, together with underdeveloped vocabulary and academic outcomes. Likoko and Wu (2025) reported policy support for Chinese-language education in Tanzania, together with insufficient funding, teacher shortages, and outdated materials.

Three studies examined language-promotion policy or policy implementation. Gu and Deng (2024) documented the expansion of Japanese-language education through a specialised provider of language and cultural programmes. Ding and Wu (2023) found associations between Korean-language demand and trade, foreign direct investment, migration, study motivation, and Korean cultural media. The relative contribution of these factors differed between country groups. Tang et al. (2025) reported differences between stated language-policy objectives and educational implementation in Chinese higher education, including limited pedagogical standardisation for Mandarin promotion and extensive multilingual practice.

4.3.2. Coursebooks and promotional materials

The eleven coursebook studies examined cultural content, social-group representation, national identity, linguistic ideology, visual materials, and curriculum-material relations. Their findings concerned the specific materials and settings examined in each primary study.

Sulistiyo et al. (2021) reported a relatively even distribution of target- and local-culture content in reading passages, together with greater representation of Western content in pictures and audio recordings. Widianto and Pusse (2025) classified 55% of the examined BIPA coursebook as local cultural content, 27% as national content, and 18% as global content. They also reported an emphasis on tourism-related content. Kaliska (2022) found that the Italian coursebooks examined gave greatest attention to a national cultural paradigm and provided limited contextual treatment of contemporary social issues. Vinall and Shin (2019) reported that the South Korean English coursebooks presented Korean culture through a tourist perspective, with greater attention to tradition and limited attention to everyday life.

Aoumeur and Ziani (2022) reported the exclusion of Berber identity and limited representation of several social groups in an Algerian English coursebook. Shah (2023) found that state-mandated Pakistani English coursebooks presented a unitary national subject through religious, historical, and patriotic references, while religious and linguistic minorities received limited representation. Smith (2023) reported Anglo-centric representation and limited representation of women, people of colour, and speakers from outside inner-circle English settings. Canale (2016) identified the omission of internal cultural diversity and the presentation of cultural products and practices with limited attention to their social and ideological contexts.

Lavrenteva and Orland-Barak (2023) reported limited representation of Arabic and Russian minority cultures in the Israeli English coursebooks examined. They also found that several images had a decorative function and that the accompanying tasks provided limited opportunities for critical cultural examination. Wang and Hemchua (2022) reported that images in the studies included in their synthesis were used inconsistently for cultural learning. Choi and Lee (2024) reported strong attention to Korean history, economic development, and national narratives in Korean-language coursebooks produced in Thailand. Their learner evidence is reported in Section 4.3.3.

Two studies examined promotional materials or activities. Alkateeb (2023) reported that promotional videos for English-language courses linked English proficiency with educational and professional success, presented the course

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provider as enabling access to these opportunities, and gave native English speakers greater authority. Díaz Rodríguez (2021) reported that Spanish cultural exhibitions in the Philippines connected Spanish with colonial history and symbolic status and gave limited attention to local languages.

4.3.3. Participant response and participation

Choi and Lee (2024) was the only coursebook study that collected direct learner-response data. Based on interviews with 20 Thai university students, the authors reported that students questioned, reformulated, or resisted some of the cultural and ideological content in the Korean-language coursebooks. This evidence concerns learner responses in the reported Thai university setting.

Participant evidence in the programme and policy studies concerned different groups and activities. Hernández (2018) reported students' accounts of cultural learning and their reasons for studying Korean in Mexico City. Likoko and Wu (2025) reported that 87% of respondents recognised educational value in Chinese-language provision in Tanzania, while respondents also identified funding, staffing, and material shortages. Cabaña Rojas (2025) examined programme founders, organisers, and advocates. The study attributed the establishment and continuation of Japanese-language programmes in Chile to these local participants. Cabaña Rojas (2025) therefore supplies evidence about programme development by local participants, not learner response to teaching materials.

4.3.4. Relationship to soft diplomacy

Seven of the 24 studies directly examined soft diplomacy, soft power, or diplomatic agency as part of the stated aim, theoretical basis, analysis, or evaluated outcome. These were Brett and Schaefer (2019), Eom et al. (2019), Gu and Deng (2024), Hernández (2018), Mamedov (2023), Cabaña Rojas (2025), and Zhou (2021). Seven studies met the criteria for direct examination. Table 5 presents the primary-source evidence supporting this classification.

Table 5
Studies classified as directly examining soft diplomacy, soft power, or diplomatic agency

STUDY	BASIS FOR CLASSIFICATION	CLASSIFICATION
Brett and Schaefer (2019)	The article is a policy proposal explicitly based on soft-power institutions	Directly examined
Cabaña Rojas (2025)	The article explicitly uses public diplomacy and everyday diplomacy to examine diplomatic agency	Directly examined
Eom et al. (2019)	Soft power and public diplomacy are part of the stated aim	Directly examined
Gu and Deng (2024)	Soft-power construction forms part of the questions and analysis	Directly examined
Hernández (2018)	Soft power and public diplomacy are part of the stated aim	Directly examined
Mamedov (2023)	Language education is only one part of the article, but soft power itself is explicitly investigated	Directly examined
Zhou (2021)	Case study of Chinese-language institutes in Thailand using a dedicated soft-power framework	Directly examined

Four studies mentioned soft diplomacy or soft power as background but investigated another educational subject. Ding and Wu (2023) described Korean-language promotion as a means of increasing soft power but analysed the factors associated with international Korean-language promotion. Widianto and Pusse (2025) examined cultural gradation and tourism-related content in a BIPA coursebook. Solikhah and Budiharso (2020) examined cultural inclusion in the BIPA curriculum and teaching practice. Tang et al. (2025) examined language policy and higher-education internationalisation.

The distribution of included studies by educational category and relationship to soft diplomacy is reported in Table 6.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Educational categories, target languages, and geographical contexts represented (RQ1)

The corpus distributes research attention among several sites of foreign-language education. Coursebooks form the largest single category, with 11 of the 24 included studies. The remaining studies concern cultural institutes or

Table 6
Distribution of included studies by educational category and relationship to soft diplomacy

EDUCATIONAL CATEGORY	STUDIES	PRINCIPAL EVIDENCE SUPPLIED	DIRECT	MENTIONED	PROPOSED
Coursebooks	11	Cultural and social representation, curriculum-material relations, and learner response	0	1	10
Cultural institutes and institutional proposals	4	Institutional provision, placement, support, and programme development	4	0	0
Language programmes and curricula	4	Programme provision, curricular implementation, resources, and participation	2	1	1
Promotional materials and activities	2	Linguistic and cultural representation in promotional content	0	0	2
Language-promotion policies and policy reviews	3	Policy conditions, demand, institutional provision, and implementation	1	2	0
Total	24	—	7	4	13

institutional proposals (n = 4), language programmes or curricula (n = 4), promotional materials or activities (n = 2), and language-promotion policies or policy reviews (n = 3). Coursebook research therefore constitutes a substantial part of the evidence base, within a corpus in which 13 studies concern other forms of educational provision. This distribution supports an account of language promotion as an organised educational process involving institutions, programmes, curricula, materials, personnel, promotion, and participation.

Cooper's (1989) account of acquisition planning supplies a theoretical basis for this reading of the corpus. Efforts to increase the number or distribution of language users depend on opportunities and incentives for study, together with the institutional and material conditions through which instruction is provided. Pajtinka (2014) similarly includes courses, instructors, teaching materials, and educational resources within language-related cultural activity. The categories represented in the review correspond to different parts of this educational process. Institute and programme studies document where instruction is established and how it is maintained. Policy and curriculum studies document objectives, implementation, and resource conditions. Coursebook and promotional-material studies document the linguistic and cultural content presented to learners or prospective learners. Participant studies document responses and contributions within specified settings.

The geographical and linguistic distribution narrows the population represented by the review. Fourteen studies concern Asian settings, and nine examine English as the sole target language. Korean, Chinese, Bahasa Indonesia for foreign speakers, Japanese, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, and multilingual settings appear in smaller numbers. These counts describe the retrieved literature and provide no estimate of the international distribution of language-promotion activity. The concentration may reflect publication patterns, database indexing, the English-language eligibility criterion, and the search vocabulary, which gave substantial attention to coursebooks. It may also reflect sustained scholarly attention to language education in Asian settings. The present corpus cannot separate these possible explanations.

Previous reviews addressed particular branches of this literature. Gauttam et al. (2024) synthesised research on education as a soft-power resource, Taqdir (2025) examined visual and cultural representation in textbooks, and El Moudden and Said (2025) reviewed critical coursebook research. The present review places these branches within one account of foreign-language education and documents the distribution of research among educational sites, languages, and locations. Its value at this stage concerns the specification of the evidence base. Coursebooks constitute one documented site of language provision, and the remaining categories account for more than half of the included studies.

5.2. Research designs and evidential scope (RQ2)

The methods used in the included studies correspond closely to their research objects and sources. Critical discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, social semiotics, and qualitative content classification predominate in the coursebook studies. These procedures support claims about textual and visual selection, prominence, omission, association, and social-group representation. Canale's (2016) account of coursebook research places such evidence within the textual composition of instructional materials, and the work of Risager (2007), Curdt-Christiansen (2017),

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> *'Previous reviews addressed particular branches of this literature. Gauttam et al. (2024) synthesised research on education as a soft-power resource, Taqdir (2025) examined visual and cultural representation in textbooks, and El Moudden and Said (2025) reviewed critical coursebook research. The present review places these branches within one account of foreign-language education and documents the distribution of research among educational sites, languages, and locations. Its value at this stage concerns the specification of the evidence base.'*

Anderson (2006), and Wodak et al. (2009) supplies theoretical resources for analysing cultural reference, language socialisation, and national identity within foreign-language curricula and teaching materials. The resulting findings concern the materials selected for analysis and the representational categories used by each primary study.

Research on institutes, programmes, and policies uses a different methodological repertoire. Qualitative case studies document institutional provision, programme development, educational activity, and participation in particular settings. Cross-country quantitative studies estimate associations concerning institute placement or language demand. Mixed-methods research combines survey, interview, and policy evidence concerning implementation and resources. Policy analyses and reviews synthesise institutional arrangements or advance proposals. Each design supplies evidence at a specified level of educational activity, and the differences among these levels determine the claims available for synthesis.

The theoretical frameworks display a corresponding division of labour. Coursebook studies use discourse theory, multimodality, semiotics, systemic functional linguistics, intercultural competence, World Englishes, and theories of national identity. Studies of institutions and policies use language planning, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, soft power, nation branding, language-learning motivation, and economic accounts of language demand. Cabaña Rojas (2025) uses public diplomacy, everyday diplomacy, and diplomatic agency to examine programme founders and organisers. This theoretical distribution reflects the questions asked within each research area. Material research studies linguistic and cultural representation, and institutional research studies provision, policy, demand, and participation.

This methodological specialisation produces an evidential separation within the literature. Textual and visual analysis can establish the content and organisation of a material. Evidence concerning classroom use requires classroom data. Evidence concerning learner response requires learner data. Evidence concerning institutional reach requires information about sites, programmes, enrolment, or access. Evidence concerning a diplomatic outcome requires an outcome defined and assessed in diplomatic terms. The included studies usually address one or two of these evidential stages. None follows the complete sequence from a stated diplomatic purpose through educational provision, curriculum or material selection, teaching activity, participant response, and a defined diplomatic outcome.

The limited participant evidence is especially consequential. Choi and Lee (2024) supplement coursebook analysis with interviews from 20 Thai university students, making their study the sole coursebook investigation with direct learner-response data. Hernández (2018) reports students' accounts of Korean-language study, Likoko and Wu (2025) report respondent assessments of Chinese-language provision, and Cabaña Rojas (2025) examines founders, organisers, and advocates. These participant groups contribute evidence about different activities. Their findings cannot be combined as one measure of reception or agency.

The quality appraisal describes the reporting of the included studies under the selected criteria. The mean QAR score of 4.5 reflects generally clear aims, appropriate methods, and adequately supported findings under the selected criteria. Reporting of limitations and implications received the most variable scores. The appraisal was descriptive and covered empirical studies, reviews, conceptual analyses, and policy proposals. Its results support attention to study-specific strengths and limitations during synthesis. A common ranking of evidential authority among dissimilar designs falls outside the purpose of this appraisal.

5.3. Findings for educational provision, instructional content, and participants (RQ3)

The findings concerning educational provision document the establishment, distribution, implementation, and maintenance of language education. Eom et al. (2019) associate the international placement of Korean-language institutes with official development assistance, foreign direct investment, democracy, and the international popularity of Korean culture. Zhou (2021) documents institutional support for Chinese-language institutes in Thailand together with concerns about local identity and cultural dominance. Mamedov (2023) describes Turkish-language provision through cultural centres, educational networks, examinations, and media activity in Georgia, including tensions connected with religious initiatives. Brett and Schaefer (2019) present a policy proposal for a centralised institute for language and cultural programmes and attribute existing limitations to fragmented provision and funding. These studies concern institutional location, support,

activity, and policy reasoning. Their different research designs and outcomes describe several aspects of provision. A common measure of institutional success is unavailable.

Programme and curriculum research adds evidence concerning implementation, participation, and educational conditions. Cabaña Rojas (2025) attributes the establishment and continuation of Japanese-language programmes in Chile to local founders, organisers, and advocates. Hernández (2018) reports cultural learning among Korean-language students in Mexico City together with limited literary and historical content and restricted formal recognition. Solikhah and Budiharso (2020) document cultural inclusion in the BIPA curriculum and classroom practice together with underdeveloped vocabulary and academic outcomes. Likoko and Wu (2025) report policy support for Chinese-language education in Tanzania together with shortages in funding, teachers, and materials. The combination of provision and constraint within these studies resists a single evaluative label. Institutional support can coexist with curricular, staffing, material, or recognition problems in the same educational setting.

The policy studies demonstrate the dependence of language promotion on educational and economic conditions. Gu and Deng (2024) document the expansion of Japanese-language education through a specialised provider of language and cultural programmes. Ding and Wu (2023) associate Korean-language demand with trade, foreign direct investment, migration, study motivation, cultural media, and learning resources, with estimates differing by country group. Tang et al. (2025) identify differences between stated language-policy objectives and implementation in Chinese higher education, including limited pedagogical standardisation and extensive multilingual practice. These findings support Cooper's (1989) account of acquisition planning as a set of decisions concerning opportunities and incentives for language learning. They also show that stated policy, institutional provision, demand, and classroom implementation require separate evidence.

The coursebook studies address a different part of foreign-language education. Their findings concern which cultures, groups, histories, practices, and communicative settings appear in instructional materials and how textual, visual, and task-based resources organise those selections. Several studies report limited representation of minority or local groups, strong emphasis on national or Anglo-centric reference points, tourism-centred cultural content, decorative uses of images, or restricted opportunities for critical cultural examination. Sulistiyo et al. (2021) also report a relatively even distribution of target and local culture in reading passages alongside greater Western representation in pictures and audio. Widianto and Pusse (2025) report local, national, and global cultural content in the examined BIPA coursebook, with the largest proportion assigned to local culture and an emphasis on tourism-related material. These findings include variation within studies and among materials, which rules out a uniform judgement about coursebooks as a category.

The theoretical literature clarifies the educational significance of these findings. Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) place sociocultural rules, communicative purpose, participants, and setting within communicative competence. Kramsch (2013) connects language learning with symbolic and cultural meaning. Risager (2007) relates language-and-culture pedagogy to national and transnational contexts, and Curdt-Christiansen (2017) locates textbooks within language socialisation. From this perspective, cultural selection in a coursebook concerns the social contexts made available for instruction. Textual and visual evidence can establish the representational structure of the material. Claims concerning classroom use, learner response, educational attainment, or diplomatic effect require data collected for those questions. A study published after the review period examines multimodal EFL discourse in relation to language competence, cognitive engagement, and multimodal literacy (Malakhova, 2026).

The participant findings illustrate this evidential sequence. Choi and Lee (2024) report that Thai university students questioned, reformulated, or resisted cultural and ideological content in Korean-language coursebooks. This finding supplies evidence about learner response in one university setting. Hernández (2018) supplies student accounts of language study and cultural learning. Likoko and Wu (2025) supply respondent assessments of educational value and resource conditions. Cabaña Rojas (2025) supplies evidence about programme creation and continuation by local participants. The participant category therefore includes learners, respondents, founders, organisers, and advocates whose activities differ substantially. Precise attribution preserves the educational activity documented in each study and prevents one participant group from standing as evidence for another.

5.4. Status of the soft-diplomacy evidence (RQ3)

The classification by relationship to soft diplomacy establishes the evidential status of the findings reported above. Seven studies directly examine soft diplomacy, soft power, or diplomatic agency through their stated aims, theoretical bases, analyses, or evaluated outcomes. Four mention soft diplomacy or soft power as context and investigate another educational subject. Thirteen receive their diplomatic connection from the present review. Within the coursebook category, no study directly examines soft diplomacy, Widianto and Pusse (2025) mention it as context, and the connection for the remaining ten studies is proposed by the review authors.

The direct category contains substantial internal variation. Brett and Schaefer (2019) offer an institutional proposal. Eom et al. (2019) estimate associations concerning

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'This framework corrects a recurrent category problem in the literature. Institutional presence, enrolment, language demand, policy implementation, cultural representation, learner response, and diplomatic outcome refer to different research objects. Combining them under a general judgement of success or failure would remove the criteria by which each finding was produced. The present synthesis retains those criteria and identifies the connections that primary studies established explicitly.'

institute placement. Gu and Deng (2024) analyse language planning and cultural communication. Hernández (2018) studies Korean-language education in relation to soft power. Mamedov (2023) studies Turkish initiatives in Georgia. Cabaña Rojas (2025) studies diplomatic agency among local programme participants. Zhou (2021) studies Chinese-language institutes in Thailand within a soft-power framework. Direct examination therefore identifies explicit diplomatic inquiry in the primary article. Diplomatic effectiveness remains dependent on the outcome defined and assessed in each study.

The distinction follows the theoretical boundary established by Nye (2004), Melissen (2005), and Pajtinka (2014). A diplomatic purpose concerns attraction, communication with foreign publics, or international cultural and educational activity. A language institute, course, curriculum, coursebook, or cultural event supplies an educational setting through which such a purpose may be pursued. Evidence of provision establishes the existence or distribution of that setting. Evidence of representation establishes characteristics of its content. Evidence of participant response establishes responses within the population studied. A claim concerning diplomatic effect requires an explicit connection between the reported data and a diplomatic outcome.

This classification identifies an evidential discontinuity. Studies with an explicit diplomatic basis concern institutions, programmes, and policies. Coursebook research concentrates on cultural and social representation and supplies almost no explicit diplomatic inquiry. Institutional studies seldom include detailed analysis of instructional materials, classroom activity, or learner response. Coursebook studies seldom include institutional objectives or diplomatic outcomes. The literature documents adjacent parts of language education, and their empirical connections through a complete educational and diplomatic sequence remain untraced.

The finding modifies the research gap identified in previous reviews. The separation encompasses topic coverage, research question, data source, and permitted claim. Gauttam et al. (2024) address education as a soft-power resource, and Taqdir (2025) and El Moudden and Said (2025) address textbook representation and critical coursebook research. The present synthesis establishes where these research areas refer to the same educational process and where their evidence remains separate. It also identifies the status of every diplomatic connection, preserving the distinction between a primary-study finding and an inference introduced during review.

5.5. Contribution and implications for research

The principal contribution is an analytical framework based on three questions for every included study: which site of foreign-language education was investigated, what type of evidence was supplied, and how directly the study investigated soft diplomacy. Applying these questions permits institutions, programmes, curricula, policies, coursebooks, promotional materials, and participants to be synthesised within one educational account. It also preserves the evidential limits attached to each research design.

This framework corrects a recurrent category problem in the literature. Institutional presence, enrolment, language demand, policy implementation, cultural representation, learner response, and diplomatic outcome refer to different research objects. Combining them under a general judgement of success or failure would remove the criteria by which each finding was produced. The present synthesis retains those criteria and identifies the connections that primary studies established explicitly. The three-part diplomatic classification adds source attribution to this procedure, which allows a contextual reference or review-author inference to remain visible as such.

The resulting research priority concerns empirical connection among the stages of foreign-language education. Future studies can state the diplomatic purpose under investigation, specify the educational activity through which it is pursued, document programme and curriculum decisions, analyse the instructional materials used, examine classroom activity and participant response, and assess an outcome defined in advance. Linked documentary, material, classroom, participant, and longitudinal data would permit stronger conclusions about the relationship between educational provision and diplomatic purpose. Each study can identify the stage it investigates and limit its conclusions to the evidence collected.

Several methodological implications follow. Coursebook research that makes claims about learner response requires learner data, and claims about classroom practice require evidence from teaching settings. Institutional research can identify institute numbers, programme availability, enrolment, and geographical reach as measures of provision. Studies seeking to assess diplomatic effects need an explicit outcome and a stated decision rule for evaluating it. Research involving participants should distinguish

learners, teachers, programme founders, administrators, and other local actors, since their activities and evidential significance differ.

The same principles have value for curriculum and material research. Evaluations of cultural representation need explicit theoretical and educational criteria for inclusion, balance, diversity, or intercultural learning. Material analysis can then state which groups, practices, settings, and communicative relations appear in the selected texts and images. Classroom and participant research can assess how teachers and learners use or respond to those materials. This sequence connects the linguistic and cultural analysis of instructional content with the educational settings in which meaning is produced.

5.6. Limitations

The conclusions apply to English-language peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from Scopus, ERIC, and ScienceDirect for 2015—2025. The search omitted Web of Science, LLBA, other sources, grey literature, books, chapters, dissertations, reports, and non-English publications. Backward and forward citation searching was absent. The search vocabulary gave substantial attention to coursebooks and may have missed studies indexed under terminology specific to programmes, curricula, institutions, or language-promotion activity (Malyuga & Grishechko, 2026). These restrictions limit the completeness and geographical representation of the corpus.

The review lacked registration and a separately deposited protocol. Eligibility for peer-reviewed conceptual analyses and policy proposals was clarified during revision, and affected records were rechecked under the revised criteria. The three-part classification of diplomatic connection also required reviewer judgement. Independent screening, duplicate appraisal, author discussion, and study-level reporting of the classification decisions increased procedural transparency. Classification decisions remain dependent on the stated criteria and the reporting available in each article.

The corpus contains dissimilar research designs, educational settings, data sources, target languages, and outcomes. The QAR criteria were originally developed for empirical studies and systematic reviews, which limits comparability for conceptual analyses and policy proposals. The synthesis consequently supports conclusions about the subjects studied, the evidence reported, and the connections investigated in this corpus. Prevalence estimation for foreign-language education or the international success of language soft diplomacy falls outside its scope.

The corpus combined primary research with reviews and conceptual or policy analyses. Overlap between studies included directly and studies summarised within the included reviews was not assessed, so recurrence across reports was not regarded as independent replication.

6. CONCLUSION

The reviewed literature places language soft diplomacy within a sequence of educational decisions and activities encompassing institutional provision, programmes, curricula, instructional materials, promotional activity, and participation. Research attention is distributed unevenly among these sites and remains concentrated in Asian settings and English-language education. The methods follow the evidence source: institutional and policy studies document placement, access, implementation, demand, and resources, and material studies document linguistic, visual, and cultural representation. Participant research records responses, forms of participation, and educational activity among identified groups in the specific settings examined. This methodological specialisation produces findings with distinct evidential limits, since institutional reach, material content, participant response, and diplomatic outcomes require different data.

Direct diplomatic inquiry is concentrated in studies of institutions, programmes, and policies, and the diplomatic connection assigned to coursebook research comes mainly from the present review. Representational findings from coursebooks consequently remain evidence about instructional content, and findings from institutional studies remain evidence about provision, support, or implementation. Participant evidence retains the activity and population documented in each study, including learners, respondents, programme founders, organisers, and advocates. Organising the corpus according to educational site, evidence type, and status of the diplomatic connection places these studies within one account of foreign-language education and preserves the claims supported by their respective designs.

The unresolved empirical question concerns how a stated diplomatic purpose relates to acquisition planning, institutional provision, curriculum and material decisions, classroom activity, participant response, and predefined outcomes. Existing studies document separate sections of this sequence, leaving their connections insufficiently tested. Research addressing this question would combine policy and institutional documents with material analysis, classroom observation, participant data, and longitudinal outcome assessment. Explicit outcome criteria would permit diplomatic effects to be assessed, and precise identification of participant groups would preserve the evidential significance of their activities.

The restricted bibliographic sources, English-language journal criterion, coursebook-centred search vocabulary, and absence of citation searching limit the coverage of the corpus. Within this defined evidence base, language soft diplomacy is most defensibly studied as a specified relationship among educational purpose, institutional provision, curriculum and material content, participant response, and a predefined outcome.

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Appendix. Quality Assessment Rules (QARs) of the included studies

Adapted QAR (Rahmani et al., 2024) questions used:
QAR 1. Are the objectives and research questions clearly stated?
QAR 2. Is an appropriate methodology used to address the research questions?
QAR 3. Are the findings supported by data and evidence?
QAR 4. Are limitations and implications discussed?
QAR 5. Does the study contribute to knowledge in the field?

Scoring criteria: 1 = 'not met'; 2 = 'minimally met'; 3 = 'adequately met'; 4 = 'well met'; 5 = 'fully met'.

NO.	AUTHOR(s) (YEAR)	QAR 1	QAR 2	QAR 3	QAR 4	QAR 5	AVERAGE POINTS
1.	Choi and Lee (2024)	5	4	5	5	5	4.8
2.	Vinall and Shin (2019)	5	5	5	4	5	4.8
3.	Lavrenteva and Orland-Barak (2023)	5	4	4	2	5	4.0
4.	Smith (2023)	5	5	5	4	5	4.8
5.	Kaliska (2022)	5	4	4	4	4	4.2
6.	Widianto and Pusse (2025)	5	4	5	5	5	4.8
7.	Wang and Hemchua (2022)	4	3	2	3	4	3.2
8.	Sulistiyo et al. (2021)	5	4	5	4	5	4.6
9.	Aoumeur and Ziani (2022)	5	5	5	4	5	4.8
10.	Canale (2016)	5	4	4	5	5	4.6
11.	Brett and Schaefer (2019)	4	3	4	3	5	3.8
12.	Tang et al. (2025)	5	5	5	5	5	5.0
13.	Solikhah and Budiharso (2020)	5	4	4	5	4	4.4
14.	Cabaña Rojas (2025)	5	5	5	3	5	4.6
15.	Alkateeb (2023)	5	4	5	4	5	4.6
16.	Gu and Deng (2024)	5	4	5	3	5	4.4
17.	Shah (2023)	5	4	5	3	5	4.4
18.	Díaz Rodríguez (2021)	5	4	4	4	5	4.4
19.	Hernández (2018)	5	4	5	4	5	4.6
20.	Mamedov (2023)	5	4	4	4	5	4.4
21.	Zhou (2021)	5	4	4	3	5	4.2
22.	Likoko and Wu (2025)	5	5	4	5	5	4.8
23.	Eom et al. (2019)	4	5	4	5	5	4.6
24.	Ding and Wu (2023)	5	4	5	5	5	4.8
Total average points							4.5

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Niki Raga Tantri
MA in Education, Lecturer
School of International Finance, Hebei International Studies University, Shijiazhuang, China
29 South Hongqi, 050091 Shijiazhuang, China
School of Education, Universitas Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia
H. Arifin Manaf, 36361 Jambi, Indonesia
Email: nikitantri@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8259-6175

Urip Sulistiyo
PhD in Education, Professor
School of Education
Universitas Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia
H. Arifin Manaf, 36361 Jambi, Indonesia
Email: urip.sulistiyo@unja.ac.id
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3270-1261

Mukhlash Abrar
PhD in Education, Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia
Lintas Jambi – Muara Bulian, 36122 Muaro Jambi, Indonesia
Email: mukhlash.abrar@unja.ac.id
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9764-9919