

**Exploring FFI for Use in the ELT Context of
Chinese High Schools**

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, the practice of English Language Teaching (ELT) in China's classrooms has been greatly influenced by western-oriented innovations in Second Language Teaching (SLT) pedagogy. SLT methods focusing on meaning and communicative tasks have been introduced and have become superfluous throughout the country, outdating the traditional grammar-centered instruction. However, the decision to employ these new methods was taken with little reference to needs of real-life classrooms, and consequently a context-practical method is still urgently needed for practical implementation.

In this paper, I explore current research into form-focused instruction (FFI) at the levels of approach, method, and procedure, with a view to its use at the particular context of Chinese high schools. The focus is on one of the greatest challenges facing SLT pedagogy – how to maintain grammar competence while developing communication proficiency. I meet this challenge by adopting a FonFs type of instruction and its requisite method to design English courses critically according to various contextual constraints. I have also designed a five-stage procedure for the implementation of this contextual method for use in the classroom, which is illustrated by a design sample. The method and procedure presented here can be used to stimulate SLT research in China's context, and the design sample can strengthen classroom instruction as well as text design.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Approach, method, and procedure

Three terms regarding language teaching theory are continuously referred to in this paper: approach, method, and procedure, which represent three hierarchical levels of any language pedagogy trend. The approach level involves the fundamental theories of any language teaching theory. These are views about what language is, and how it is acquired (Richards and Rogers 1986: 16). The method level (which Richards and Rogers refer as “design”) encapsulates the ways to design an instructional system in harmony with the theories of a particular approach (ibid.: 20). This system defines how and what to choose in the components of language programmes, e.g. objectives, syllabi, teaching and learning activities, teacher and learner roles, and instruction material roles (ibid.). The last level is called procedure. It includes actual “moment-to-moment techniques, practices, and behaviours” that operate in teaching a language, via an implemented method (ibid.: 26).

1.2 Overview of mainstream SLT pedagogies

Over the past 5 decades, the study of Second Language Teaching (SLT) has progressed in parallel with the development of linguistic theory and second language acquisition (SLA) research (see Note 1). This has produced a series of SLT approaches: the traditional approach (TA), the communicative approach (CA, sometimes called “communicative language teaching”), the natural approach (NA), and more recently form-focused instruction (FFI), etc. Throughout these studies, fundamental theories about language and language learning have continued to change, entailing modifications in practical methods as well as implemental procedures.

• The traditional approach

The TA is the conventional approach of SLT opposed to newer innovative approaches. It takes a structural view of language, being primarily concerned with a set of

prescribed rules about how to form sentences. It assumes that, by mastering these rules, learners will naturally be able to use them in real-life settings. Based upon these fundamental theories about language and language learning, the TA centers language programmes around a list of pre-selected structures. At the procedure level, it follows grammar-centered instruction stages – presentation, practice, and production (PPP) of target structures. Moreover, it employs mechanical grammar exercises to help students remember those structures.

This traditional pedagogy has been criticised by both applied linguists and SLA researchers. One main criticism comes from applied linguists, who view language not as a set of grammar rules, but rather as a structural system conveying communicative values in discourse and contexts. Another censure relates to the learnability problem. Empirical research into SLA suggests that there is “a natural sequence of acquisition”: learners develop second language (L2) grammar in broadly similar stages. Although this order varies in details according to the nature of the first language (L1) and other factors relating to the learner, it will not be changed by instructional intervention (R. Ellis 1994: 73). Thus, teaching pre-selected structures that learners are not yet ready to learn will be futile (R. Ellis 1997: 149). As a result, from the 1960s on, the TA has not been considered as an appropriate SLT approach.

- **The communicative approach**

A shift of focus onto communication started in the British SLT forum in the 1970s, leading to a widespread approach called CA. This method was based on a number of linguistic theories that examine language from a communicative point of view. Hyme’s (1972) theory of communication competence, for example, holds that what speakers need to have is not merely a set of rules to form sentences, but also the knowledge and ability enabling them to communicate competently in a speech community. A concurrent linguistic theory that complements Hyme’s view of the communicative competence is Halliday’s (1970; 1975; cited in Richard and Rogers 1986: 70) powerful language function theory which studies language in use with functions and meanings. Other theories investigating the communicative nature of language include Widdowson’s (1978) research into the relationship between structures and functions, and what Canale and Swain (1980; cited in Richard and

Rogers 1986: 71) proposed as four sub categories of communication competence (grammar competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence).

In contrast to this rich base of language theory, early CA literature did not offer much discussion of language learning. Only from pioneering practice can some elements be discerned to characterise the CA's underlying language learning theories, e.g. the communication principle, the task principle, and the meaningfulness principle (Richards and Rogers 1986: 72). According to these principles, communication competence can be acquired when learners are involved in communication, carry out tasks, and use language meaningfully. Later, an alternative theory focusing on skill-learning was proposed by Johnson (1984) and Littlewood (1984). Both scholars believed that by developing the four communicative skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – communication proficiency can be attained.

There have been many attempts to adopt the CA, including the use of a functional-notional syllabus, a method of task-based learning (TBL), and that of skill-learning (SL). These highlight the significance of structure notions and functions, communicative tasks, and four basic skills respectively in their methods to design language programmes. At the level of procedure, the CA employs many communicative tasks, e.g. group activities, language games, role plays, etc. (Richards and Rogers 1986: 81). At the same time, many traditional instruction techniques, for example, the instruction of isolated grammar items, are not rejected but extended in TA (*ibid.*: 82).

The CA was revolutionary in its language theory because it accepted communication as the primary function of language. This view was supported by well developed linguistic theories. However, the CA theory based on language learning was found to be outdated when SLA research started to investigate the cognitive process of language acquisition. This process was suggested as a range of associative mental stages, during which learners might notice a linguistic item first in input materials (notice), then acquired it when comparing it with, and integrating it into, his existent knowledge (intake). After continuous language exposure and use, he or she would finally be able to produce this item in various means (R. Ellis 1994: 119). The further

study on these cognitive stages has caught the enthusiasm of SLT researchers and thus catalysed the birth of new SLT approaches.

- **The natural approach**

The NA was first proposed by Krashen and Terrell (1983) in North America in the 1980s. This approach contains little about the nature of language or grammar, but has a great novelty in its base in language learning theory contributed mainly by Krashen (1981; 1982; 1985). Krashen's SLA theories distinguish two ways of language development: learning and acquisition. Learning happens in conscious study of explicit language rules, while acquisition is intuitive and develops the implicit knowledge of language needed in actual performance. Krashen believes that acquisition is primary, as it is how language is naturally attained and results in implicit knowledge; whereas learning is secondary because it leads to explicit knowledge that can only act as a monitor to edit a speaker's utterance. However, the formal instruction, which is based upon discrete pre-selected grammar items, is not compatible with the natural acquisition order and thus unnecessary.

Grounded in the above theories, the NA focuses on providing ample comprehensible input (the language that the learner understands based on the context and via meaning-negotiation) in planning languages programmes. Its strategy of instruction relies mainly on meaning-negotiation, the interactional process in which learners acquire grammar items when native speakers modify grammatically wrong use of them to achieve mutual understanding (Krashen 1985). Therefore, in the NA-dominated classrooms, teachers provide little instruction but plenty of linguistic modifications, e.g. gestures, rephrasing, simplification, and clarification, to elicit acquisition.

Despite some notable advantages, such as respecting the natural acquisition sequence, distinguishing acquisition from learning, and explicit from implicit knowledge, the NA has been found problematic. Firstly, it is too reliant on comprehensible input, neglecting other techniques that would result in a more efficient acquisition. Although this input provides rich exposure to language and ample language use opportunities, it cannot guarantee that learners will notice and acquire the forms which they realise meaning through, let alone to produce them. Furthermore, the NA downplays the role

of instruction. As later SLA research has suggested, in many instruction settings, instruction plays a significant role in the language learning process: it facilitates SLA both quantitatively and qualitatively. Finally, the NA is found unsatisfying as it depends on meaning-negotiation and offers little choice of practical instruction techniques. All these problems have been reflected in much NA practice with frustrating outcomes (e.g. immersion projects reported in Selinker, Swain and Dumas 1975; Harley and Swain 1984; Campbell 1984), leading to a review of instruction role in SLT method.

- **The form-focused instruction**

FFI is the hotspot of recent SLT research. It is an approach which adopts a broader view of grammar, regarding it as “any aspect of linguistic form - phonological, graphological, lexical or grammatical”, without excluding its meanings (R. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen 2002: 419). It believes that meaning-negotiation alone cannot result in efficient and systematic acquisition of linguistic forms, and pedagogic intervention can help to achieve that goal. This means in an overall communicative context, learners’ attention can be drawn to forms by various types of instruction. This will increase the possibility of the noticing and intake of those forms, resulting in systematic and accurate grammar acquisition.

FFI research to date has provided many implemental choices. It has identified two main instruction types, namely focus-on-form (FonF) and focus-on-forms (FonFs) which integrate different types of instruction into communication-oriented classroom. Additionally, it has offered various teaching techniques and classroom tasks, e.g. explicit/implicit instruction, recasts and prompts, for use at the procedure level. As a range of options exist based upon the FFI theories, many studies have been undertaken to compare their effectiveness. These studies have shown that instruction types are context-sensitive: how effective they can be depends on the nature of the instruction context. Similarly, no one particular teaching technique is always superior to another; its effects are affected by many other non-instructional factors located in the immediate situation.

The study of FFI as a whole has focused people’s attention to the application of this approach. The contextual features should be considered at the time of applying any

SLT approach to real classrooms; the variables that can influence instructional outcomes should be taken into account when teaching materials are designed and techniques are chosen for on-line classroom instruction.

1.3 Current ELT innovation in China

The development of SLT approaches has impacted on ELT classrooms in China. As the English language has for many years been the main foreign language taught throughout all phases of the Chinese education system, ELT method has remained a key topic in the educational. From the 1940s to 1990s, it was the TA that has dominated ELT classrooms in the country, although some elements of western approaches have been integrated into it (for details see Adamson 2004). However, in the past decade, a great fashion of communication-oriented methods has emerged, challenging the dominant status of conventional ways of English teaching in the country.

This communication trend can be traced to a set of educational policies put forward by the China's Ministry of Education (CME), the official authority of education in the country. Early in 1992, the CME issued a functional-notional syllabus for nation-wide use, and asked teachers to teach for communication purposes. Later in 1999, the CME deepened this communicative movement when starting a national English curriculum reform. In the English Curriculum Standard of High Schools (ECSHS) (CME 1999), the guiding document of this reform, the CME named communication competence as the main target of English courses in schools, and promoted the use of TBL or SL top-down. At the same time, grammar competence has been retained as another goal of English courses for its fundamental status language teaching. However, no method has been suggested to implement the instruction of grammar knowledge within this new situation, or to make it compatible with newly introduced TBL and/or SL.

Since the reform started, a focus on "communication" has become prevalent in both teacher training workshops and newly published texts; the word "communication" accompanied by "task" and "skill", now has an instant attraction, giving the impression of a scientific and advanced approach. Conversely, the discussion and

study of grammar instruction now seem old-fashioned and conservative. Despite this officially promoted enthusiasm of communication-based methods, the traditional way of grammar teaching has seldom, if ever, left the real ELT classrooms in Chinese schools. On closer examination, text input is found to be combined with grammar explanation, and dazzling communicative tasks are spliced with mechanical grammar exercises. Nevertheless, the teachers in these classrooms usually cannot justify their need for grammar instruction, or integrate it into TBL in a harmonious way. Neither can they work out a reasonable procedure to guide their teaching activities from day to day.

Thus, in the current context of Chinese high schools, we can see a need for rationalising a context-appropriate teaching method by grounding it in the latest SLT theory as well as the immediate instruction context. Moreover, an implemental procedure should be designed in harmony with this method to direct classroom instruction and teaching material development.

1.4 Goal and outline of current study

The current study sets out to devise a SLT method appropriate to the context of Chinese high schools, and a compatible procedure to implement this method in this particular setting. The focus of the study is one great challenge facing SLT theory – how to integrate instruction on grammar form into communication-based classrooms. I aim to meet this challenge by drawing up a detailed plan for designing English programmes, and by designing a five-stage procedure to implement this plan, while meeting criteria relating to theory on the one hand, and addressing context and learner factors on the other.

To achieve the above goal, this paper will review FFI study comprehensively at the levels of approach, method, and procedure in section 2, and then assess the instruction environment and learner needs in Chinese high schools in section 3. Based on this analysis, a context-sensitive plan to design English courses for those schools will be presented, and a five-stage procedure designed to fit into this context will be illustrated with a design sample (see Appendix) in section 4.

2 REVIEW OF FFI STUDY

2.1 FFI at level of approach

Before embarking on a comprehensive review of FFI study, it is crucial to examine its definition, theoretical rationale, and effects on grammar acquisition observed in earlier experimental research.

2.1.1 Definition and rationale of FFI

In the FFI studies, there is no consistency in the use of the term “FFI”. In earlier literature, the phrase FFI referred to an instruction type which teaches linguistic forms in isolation (Long 1991; cited in Doughty and William 1998: 4), and/or with consideration given to their meaning and use (Spada 1997: 73). In later research, however, FFI has been understood more as a philosophical approach that holds an individual view of language, and a certain language learning theory. As previously noted, FFI holds a broad view of what constitutes grammar, in which grammar covers any linguistic form, grammatical, phonological, graphological, lexical, etc. (R. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen 2002: 419). Furthermore, in its theory of language acquisition, FFI has recognised the role of consciousness and attention in SLA. It believes that, in a communication-based and classroom, instruction focusing on forms can draw learners’ attention and consciousness about linguistic forms, increase the possibility of the noticing of those forms, and consequently result in acquisition. These essential bases create the theoretical distinctiveness which separates FFI from all other SLT approaches.

A common rationale of FFI offered by R. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002: 422) is based upon the following premise. First of all, to acquire linguistic forms – including using them communicatively and correctly – learners need to engage in meaning-focused communication, but also maintain their focus on forms in order to prevent fossilisation (persistent developmental errors) (ibid.). Given learners’ limited capacity to process a L2 and the difficulty in being mindful of meaning and form at

the same time, learners will concentrate first on meaning and then briefly on forms in a communicative activity (for detailed information refer to Prabhu 1987; Long 1991; VanPatten 1990; Doughty 2001).

2.1.2 Instruction and form acquisition

To what extent instruction focusing on forms contributes to the acquisition grammar competence is a controversial issue: some researchers regard it as peripheral (e.g. Krashen 1985), whilst others see it as facilitative and even essential to SLA (e.g. N. Ellis 2002; cited in R. Ellis 2002: 223). However, across the FFI literature, strong evidence supports the view that instruction focusing on forms has a significant effect on form acquisition, as shown in details below.

Firstly, instruction focusing on forms can make target form (TF) and its relation to function more salient, and consequently increase noticibility (possibility of noticing) of this form at the beginning of the acquisition process. In a review of classroom and laboratory studies, N. Ellis (1995: 142) explains that various techniques employed by FFI, e.g. such as grammatical consciousness raising, corrective feedback, and recasts, can make form-function relations more transparent. Consequently, learners will notice forms relatively easily, increasing their chances to acquire them later. The second finding is that, instruction focusing on forms can magnify the number of acquired linguistic forms. As Norris and Ortega's (2000: 480) synthesis of research on FFI shows, instruction which makes efforts to turn learners' attention onto forms can lead to the acquisition of a larger number of forms, in comparison with other types of instruction without such effort. In addition, the same research also indicates that these advantages for instruction remain robust in post-tests, though they tend to marginally decrease over time (*ibid.*: 500). Finally, the instruction that focused on forms can considerably increased the production of accurate forms and prevented fossilisation, although this effect might be contingent on a number of factors (e.g. learnability, learners' readiness) (William and Doughty 1998: 153). To sum up, via various means, the instruction of FFI approach can facilitate the acquisition of linguistic properties both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In order to achieve the acquisition gains described above, we need to investigate how

the instruction focusing on forms can be accomplished methodologically and procedurally. As we will see in the following, this is not an easy task: a particular instruction type operates differently from setting to setting, and a specific technique interacts with non-instruction factors in a complex manner.

2.2 FFI at level of method

As mentioned earlier, FFI study at method level falls into research under two categories: FonF and FonFs. Many efforts have been made to define and distinguish them, and much experimental research to ascertain which of them is superior.

2.2.1 Definitions of FonF and FonFs

Understanding the terms FonF and FonFs is not easy. Both of them lack consistent definitions across the body of literature which discusses them. Furthermore, although FonF and FonFs were originally treated as instruction types, they have entailed specific methods to design language programmes as indicated in theoretical study and experimental research.

(1) FonF and FonFs as instruction types

• *FonF instruction*

When the term “FonF” first appeared, it was referred as an instruction treatment which “overtly draws student’s attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons” based on communication (ibid.). Later, Long and Robison (1998: 23) explained this term in a more operational way, stating that FonF means any pedagogical efforts which entail “an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features ... triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production”.

The FonF definition given above calls attention to three principles of FonF instruction: 1 when to instruct, 2 how to instruct, and 3 on what forms to instruct, in communication-dominated classrooms. The answer to the first question is self-evident

from the above definition: instruction should be provided when learners struggle with communicating via linguistic forms. To answer the second question – how to give instruction on forms, Long and Robinson (*ibid.*: 24-25) offer two possible instructional techniques: implicit negative feedback (e.g. recasts) and problem-solving tasks. These two strategies, which can guarantee a brief and unobtrusive shift of learners’ attention, have constituted a stereotype of FonF instruction type described across related literature. However, extended explicit grammar instruction is provided only when needed. For the third question – instruct on what forms, these FonF pioneers prefer to teach the forms that can satisfy learners’ communicative needs in understanding and producing.

Nonetheless, within the sub options of FonF proposed by the following researchers, the limitation of these principles were extended to a certain degree. For example, Doughty and William (1998: 197) propose two pedagogical choices of FonF, given as “proactive FonF” and “reactive FonF”, which provide instruction spontaneously or preemptively. According to their definition, the former selects a TF to focus on before proceeding to any communication tasks which require the usage this form, whereas, the latter responds to any incorrectly formed structures created during communicative process (*ibid.*: 198). Obviously, using the proactive FonF approach means that it is necessary to design tasks carefully in order to reveal any problematic uses of pre-determined forms; the reactive FonF, however, requires teachers to be skilled in noticing and handling various on-line grammatical errors.

In another case, R. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002) proposed two other options of FonF treatment with a focus on their task types and instruction intensity: these were so-called “incidental FonF” and “planned FonF”. In incidental FonF, unfocused tasks (eliciting general samples of the language rather than any specific TF) are employed accompanied by extensive instruction (*ibid.*: 420). Alternatively in planned FonF, focused tasks (eliciting the use of a TF in meaning-centered language usage context) are manipulated and intensive instruction is given (*ibid.*).

Despite the different focuses, these two pairs of FonF options (proactive and reactive, planned and incidental) are overlapping rather than being unrelated: they both suggest that FonF treatment can provide instruction on the forms which are either found

baffling during interaction, or are chosen beforehand deliberately. Furthermore, when these forms need to be pre-selected, they all acknowledge that decisions should be made according to the criteria of meaning, rather than that of structure difficulty.

• *FonFs instruction*

In contrast to FonF, another type of instruction called FonFs has been discussed, though developed to a less satisfying degree. It was first defined by Long (1991; cited in Doughty and Willis 1998: 3) as traditional-like (synthetic) instruction on linguistic features which are isolated or extracted from context or communicative activity. In this definition, some principles can also be derived to guide FonFs instruction, answering the questions of: 1 when to instruct, 2 how to instruct, and 3 on what forms to instruct. Initially, it may follow the TA's procedure, giving explicit instruction on language forms (presentation stage) before progressing into communicative tasks (production stage). Secondly, it provides explicit and extended instruction on forms, and employs structure-focused exercises to help learners remember them. Finally, when choosing TFs, FonFs may pre-compose a set of forms and rank them by complexity or difficulty.

However, by looking at a large proportion of further research, it is obvious that FonFs has not been treated as a simple replication of traditional discrete and single-minded grammar instruction. Embraced by the umbrella approach of FFI, FonF is believed to share with FonFs instruction the principle that communicative activity integrated by instruction focusing on forms is the underlying priority of the classroom (Sheen 2002). Furthermore, as Norris and Ortega (2000: 348) indicate, FonFs practitioners can anticipate learners' needs to pre-select their TFs, instead of simply following the TA to pre-set TFs without this consideration. Lastly, though some researchers exclude FonFs from those admired techniques and tasks of the FonF type (e.g. Norris and Ortega 2000: 348), others argue that it is not necessarily so. As Sheen (2003: 226) states, instead of precluding techniques favoured by FonF, FonFs can actually adopt some of them to optimise its instructional effects.

All these arguments for FonFs are reasonable if one admits that FonFs should not be a repetition of the TA, but a new type of instruction embraced by the FFI approach. If so,

FFI researchers need to make further efforts to develop and optimise FonFs type of instruction at any opportunity to achieve substantial acquisition of forms.

(2) FonF and FonFs as methods

As defined earlier, a pedagogical method is a means to design main components of language courses (e.g. objectives, syllabus, teaching and learning activities, teacher and learner roles, and text roles) (Richards and William 1986: 20). In this sense, we can see that, although FonF and FonFs are originally viewed as instruction types, they have been investigated at the method level in recent literatures: both names denote not only their particular instruction types, but also methods to design components of language programme. In related research, the discussion about these components can be discerned as following (Long 1997; Spada 1997; Doughty and William 1998; Norris and Ortega 2000; R. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen 2002; Sheen 2002; Sheen 2003):

Objective: As the primary use of FonF and FonFs is to facilitate SLA in a communication-based setting, it is obvious that they share the same objective of acquiring language competence in a communication-oriented classroom via the means of FonF or FonFs instruction.

Syllabus: In general, FonF advocates the use of a task-based syllabus with a primary focus on the meaning of forms. However, in respect to the nature of different FonF options, such as planned/incidental FonF and proactive/reactive FonF, this syllabus can integrate pre-determined TFs into their task-based syllabus. As for FonFs, it is agreed that a structure-based syllabus should be employed, but TFs could be chosen according to learner needs, and matched with communicative tasks designed to use these forms.

Teaching activities: The FonF treatment organises classroom instruction according to a Task-Teach-Task (TTT) stage. It uses explicit teaching activities, e.g. consciousness raising, input processing, metalinguistic task-essentialness, and rule-oriented FonF; and implicit ones such as flood, enhancement, recasts, etc. FonFs treatment follows PPP stages. It employs explicit teaching activities, e.g. traditional explicit, input

practice, rule-oriented, forms-focused, metalinguistic feedback, and garden path; as well as implicit ones like traditional implicit, corrective model, pre-emptive model, and form-experimental (Norris and Ortega 2000: 464). As discussed previously, FonFs can take an eclectic approach and employing techniques of FonF type as mentioned above.

Learning activities: FonF treatment mainly utilises focused (e.g. comprehension tasks, consciousness-raising tasks, grammar-problem-solving tasks, structure-based production tasks) and unfocused tasks (R. Ellis 2003: 151). FonFs treatment uses both non-communicative and communicative activities, and again does not exclude tasks charactering FonF.

Teacher roles: Both FonFs and FonF need teachers to play basic roles required in task-based classrooms in different capacities. FonF generally requires teachers to perceive unexpected errors and have ready techniques to draw learners' attention to them during classroom interaction. On the other hand, teachers practicing FonFs could be exempt from this demanding requirement, alternatively following pre-decided TFs in classroom activities. However, teachers are often required to take a mixture of these roles, when FonF instruction integrates strategies of FonFs type, or visa versa.

Learner roles: Like teachers, learners involved in FonF and FonFs need to engage in communication as required in TBL, FonF learners depend more on their own initiation: they need to use a number of untaught or unmastered linguistic form for communication purposes, and figure out their rules via brief instruction and implicit feedback. Learners of FonFs can rely more on a pre-organised structured syllabus, give intensive instruction on the pre-set TFs, and design activities to help students remember these forms.

Text roles: The instruction materials of FonF type are task-centered, and have not been deliberately graded according to the forms in them. These can include specially designed task-based texts and other authentic recourses that can trigger communication. The materials of FonFs type, however, are designed with a center of forms and graded according to their difficulty and complexity. Although materials may be authentic, they have been adapted cautiously to demonstrate the use of TFs.

So far the discussion about FonF and FonFs has focused on the up-to-date theory development of the FFI, which offers theoretically accountable options for designing language programmes and conducting classroom instruction. To be able to deduce which option is more practical and effective, a look at the comparative studies is necessary.

2.2.2 Comparative studies of FonF and FonFs

The early FFI research is limited in comparing the teaching effects of meaning focused instruction and FonF instruction focusing on forms. Strong evidence has shown that giving some attention to forms is superior than meaning-negotiation alone in facilitating acquisition of TFs (see Robison 1996; Doughty and William 1998). However, following the increased reorganisation to FonFs instruction, it is now seen as another valuable option subject to the FFI approach. More recent comparative studies have been set up to determine whether FonF or FonFs is more effective, but have not yet reached a conclusive outcome. Although plenty of research has reported that the FonF treatment and its method to design language programmes are superior (e.g. Fotos 1998), there are still a number of contrasting studies that indicate FonFs is more effective than its counterpart (e.g. Spada 1997; Sheen 2003). More confusingly, some synthesis research has shown that FonF and FonFs could be, overall, similar to each other in terms of effectiveness (Norris and Ortega 2000: 482).

There are at least four reasons that can explain these conflicting accounts. Firstly, there exists neither consistent nor complete definitions of FonF and FonFs treatment across the bulk of related literature. For example, according to Fotos (1998: 302), FonF and FonFs are classified to entail implicit and explicit instruction respectively. In Ortega's synthesis research (*ibid.*: 464), however, they can involve both of these opposing techniques. Secondly, as discussed earlier, changing definitions of FonF and FonFs have altered their original meanings as theory develops. FonF developers have considered choosing of specific TFs in advance (planned FonF and pro-active FonF) (e.g. Doughty and William 1998; R. Ellis, Basturkment, and Loewen 2002), and FonFs advocates have planned to employ the techniques and tasks of the FonF type eclectically (e.g. Sheen 2002; 2003). However, so far current research has not taken

into account these new developments. Thirdly, as Sheen (2003) notes, research on FonF and FonFs has not been balanced: the majority of research has been conducted in favour of FonF and excludes FonFs to varying degrees. This can be seen in R. Ellis's (2002) research: among 11 pieces of FFI experiments, only 2 of them trialed on FonFs instruction. In other studies, the advantages of FonF are often over-emphasised, while the merits of FonFs are sometimes ignored (Sheen 2003). Additionally, across a wide range of research, many variables have not been controlled and this may have caused unreliable results (Norris and Ortega 2002). Take measurement instruments as an example. In Norris and Ortega's (ibid.: 483) synthesis study, 90% of 49 studies in related research employed measures that favour explicit treatment, calling on explicit memory-based performance. Only 10% of them required relatively free productive use of L2 language, giving advantages to implicit instruction. More potential variables have remained uncontrolled and investigated, e.g. instruction intensity; form's complexity and abstractness; teacher proficiency and experience; and student learning style, proficiency level, and motivation, etc. For the above reasons, in action, the same instruction type "did indeed vary from study to study" (ibid.: 484), thus rendering the reliability of the research dubious. It should be noted that, in order to justify these FFI options in terms of their up-to-date meaning and scope, further research is needed.

In spite of this, earlier studies on FonF and FonFs are not completely devalued: there are some generally accepted findings throughout research literatures. Primarily, a thorough reading of the literature shows that FonF is more limited by context constraints, being dependent on naturalistic exposure, while FonFs can be effective regardless of whether there is such a context advantage. As shown in the studies of Sheen (2003) and Klapper and Rees (2003), when based upon classroom instruction lacking ample communicative opportunities and authentic input, FonFs was particularly effective in both quality and quantity, leading to systematical grammar acquisition. In the same environment, although FonF improved learners' fluency, it did little in the accurate acquisition of forms. Another finding is that the advantages of FonFs are often short-lived, and need enhancement by subsequent and continuous input to remain over a long period of time (Spada 1997). The effects of FonF treatment are in contrast found to be durable and permanent, beneficial in the long term (ibid.: 77). This is explained by noting that FonFs mainly uses explicit instruction and entails short-term learning of explicit knowledge, while FonF

treatment tends to instruct implicitly thus results in natural acquisition and long-lasting implicit knowledge (R. Ellis 1994; Spada 1997).

Besides the above findings, the research on FonFs and FonF types of instruction is beneficial for its inquiry into the important teaching techniques available for FonF and FonFs, e.g. explicit and implicit instruction, extensive and intensive instruction, and recast and prompts. All these are crucial to give direct and practical advice to those involved in real L2 classroom pedagogy. Accordingly, in the next section we will look into each one in detail.

2.3 FFI at level of procedure

2.3.1 Explicit and implicit instruction

So far we have not defined explicit and implicit instruction, two important techniques that FonF and FonFs can employ at different moments and to varying degrees. In general, explicit instruction involves language rules. It either demonstrates language rules in a straightforward manner, or directs learners to find these rules by themselves (Catherine 2003: 265). Contrastingly, “implicit instruction makes no overt reference to rules” (ibid.). Both explicit and implicit instructional techniques can be used in FonFs treatment, calling learners’ attention to isolated and discrete language forms, or, in FonF, responding to learners’ difficulties in understanding and producing specific forms during classroom communication.

Although the comparative research on FonF and FonFs appears to be problematic, that on explicit and implicit instruction is less controversial. Several discoveries have been continuously verified in related research. Overall, explicit instruction is found to be more effective in terms of quantity, accuracy, and progress rate than implicit instruction is in classroom-based instructional settings. Much research has reported that when L2 learners are given explicit explanation of grammar rules, their rate of using accurate forms is greatly increased (e.g. Sheen 2003; Klapper and Rees 2003). In the absence of explicit instruction, however, they can continuously use incorrect forms (fossilisation) (ibid.). It has also been indicated that explicit treatment leads to

the acquisition of large quantity of linguistic items, no matter whether it is conducted under a FonF or FonFs treatment. In Norris and Ortega's (2000: 465) research, for example, both explicit FonF and explicit FonFs resulted in a larger quantity of acquired linguistic items than their respective implicit counterparts. In another piece of study, Klapper and Rees (2003: 307) report that explicit treatment has increased the acceleration rate of acquisition process. The learners who received explicit FonFs demonstrated higher progress rates in 11 out of 13 selected analysed grammar categories than those who received implicit FonF treatment (*ibid.*: 300). The only 2 categories they made less progress in were missed out in the structure syllabus, and had not been taught formally at all (*ibid.*). On the other hand, learners given only implicit instruction progressed at a slower rate in acquiring new forms from natural input.

Nonetheless, research has shown that although the effectiveness of explicit instruction stays robust in short-term memory, it appears to be weak in the long run (Spada 1997; Klapper and Rees 2003). To allow its benefits to remain long-lived, explicit instruction requires the facilitation of continuous naturalistic exposure issued after the instruction period (Spada 1997: 77). Conversely, although implicit instruction alone functions very slow, and lacks acceptable accuracy, its effects, when they occur, are durable and beneficial in the long term (*ibid.*).

In addition, it has been confirmed that both explicit and implicit instruction cannot change the natural order of acquisition. As Klapper and Rees's (2003: 310) study shows, the L2 learners who were instructed either implicitly or explicitly acquired L2 forms in a relatively similar order, and this order was neither altered by classroom instruction nor naturalistic exposure.

Apart from the above findings, a more complicated picture about effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction has been unfolded as research shows that some non-instructional factors account significantly for instruction effectiveness. These factors range from context factors, learner characteristics, linguistic features, to measurement instruments, all of which will be looked into as following.

(1) Context factors

All the types of instruction we have discussed – FonFs and FonF (incidental/planned, or pro-active/reactive FonF) – are based on an overall communicative context, which has not yet been specified. The settings based on classroom interaction and those with rich naturalistic input can lead to different instructional outcomes. Klapper and Rees's (ibid.) study involving the changes of instructional settings gives a typical example here. In this study, two groups of L2 learners were explicitly (instruction on grammatical and lexical forms following a structural syllabus) or implicitly (content- and meaning-based instruction) instructed throughout a 3-year programme. After the first two years of classroom instruction without the aid from naturalistic input, the explicit group made significantly greater progress on grammar acquisition than the FonF group, even though the latter received enriched input in forms of modified text and meaning-based activities (ibid.: 297-298). However, this situation changed after the learners had received rich naturalistic input from the following year's residence in a native country. The implicit group improved its second-year score by 16.21% without substantial independent grammar studying, "easily outstripping the FonFs group's 9.49% progress" (ibid.). Thus Klapper and Rees (ibid.: 308) concluded that naturalistic exposure, which meant both extensive exposure and naturalistic use, could compensate implicit instruction's lack of systematic and intensive instruction on forms, making it as effective as explicit treatment.

(2) Learner characteristics

Some learner factors emerging in research literature appear to be able to influence the effects of explicit and implicit instruction, too. One learner difference raised by Spada (1997) is age. He reviews two of Harley's studies (1989; 1994) finding that younger learners (the grade 6) had not benefited as much from explicit instruction as the older ones in the second study. Spada (ibid.: 82) explains this by arguing that young learners are less cognitively mature. This explanation is supported by R. Ellis's (2002) review research, in which all young learners involved in implicit instruction were successful in learning their target forms, but not those older ones implicitly instructed. These two studies indicate that implicit instruction can benefit young learners more than mature ones, whereas explicit instruction is likely to operate in the reverse.

The second factor is learners' readiness. It means that, in order for learners to acquire forms via any particular instruction type, they have to be cognitively ready for them. This can be illustrated by William and Jacqueline's (1998: 153) study in which an explicit instruction turned out to be as effective as the subsequent implicit instruction. William and Jacqueline (*ibid.*) conclude that this was a result of the learner readiness. That is, before the explicit instruction, many learners had no previous experience and knowledge about the TFs and thus "appeared to be not yet ready for the instruction of the TF" (*ibid.*: 153). After that, they gained experience about the TF and were "just beginning to notice the form and its use" in the following implicit instruction (*ibid.*). This explanation can be supported by the findings concerning the natural order of acquisition discussed earlier.

Another factor which may have a potential on instructional effect is L2 proficiency level. As R. Ellis (2003) acknowledges, all the research in his review involved only intermediate or high level L2 learners, but no beginners. Due to this lack of testing on beginners, it is not possible to tell whether they can benefit from the FFI approach or prefer any sub type of instructional treatment. However, he predicts that explicit instruction "might not be effective for beginners as acquisition in the early stages is primarily a matter of extracting formulas and low-scope pattern from the input" (*ibid.*: 232).

Some other potential factors have also been noticed, e. g. learning experience (Klapper and Rees 2003) and learning style (Norris and Ortega 2000) Unfortunately, as they have not been examined separately, it is not possible to tell how much they can account for learning outcomes, or how they interact with different instruction types.

(3) Linguistic features

It has been observed that not all linguistic forms are equal in terms of the effectiveness of instruction techniques: some of them are more amenable to a certain instruction technique than others (*ibid.*: 151). Moreover, how instruction works can depend on the nature of TFs (Gass and Torres 2005: 24). This can be in terms of the complexity, abstractness, salience, and frequency of forms.

Strong evidence can be seen in many studies of how the complexity and abstractness of linguistic forms affect instructional effects (DeKeyser 1994, 1995; Spada 1997; William and Evans 1998; R. Ellis 2003; Gass and Torres 2005). For simple forms, implicit instruction can be as good as explicit instruction in short-term learning, or even better in the long run. For forms with great complexity however, implicit instruction has no advantages over explicit instruction at all. This is also the same with structure abstractness: the more abstract the form, the more one needs external explicit instruction; the less abstract the structure, the more he can rely on implicit devices and internally-driven acquisition (Gass and Torres 2005: 24).

There is also an indication that salience and frequency of forms can influence the instructional outcomes (Spada 1997; Klapper and Rees 2003). In Klapper and Rees's (2003: 309) study, it is found that certain grammatical topics did not develop well under implicit instruction. They suggest that this results from the low salience and frequency of these forms, indicating that explicit devices are especially needed to make instruction effective on those less salient and frequent forms (*ibid.*).

To summarise, it is obvious that explicit and implicit instruction both have various advantages and disadvantages. Explicit instruction embedded into a communicative background seems to be the most effective in classroom-based programmes, (Spada 1997: 82) although its effectiveness is susceptible to some non-instructional factors, and can be outstripped by implicit instruction depending on the impact of these factors.

2.3.2 Explicit feedback and implicit feedback

Apart from the explicitness of instruction, the explicitness of negative feedback – “an interlocutor’s interactional move that indicates ... any non-target like feature in the learner’s speech” (Iwashita 2003: 2) – is also explored by FFI study. Like instruction of explicit and implicit type, negative feedback has its own techniques which are more explicit or implicit. Two of these techniques, “recasts” and “prompts”, have been investigated by recent research. A recast is “a well-formed reformulation of a learner’s non-target utterance with the original meaning intact” (Lyster 2004: 403). It gives implicit and corrective feedback to forms but focuses mainly on their meanings.

Prompts withhold correct forms and prompt learners to “self-repair by generating their own modified response”, by means of several types of teacher response – clarification, repetitions, metalinguistic clues, and elicitation (ibid.: 405). They cause more awareness to grammar form and thus are more explicit.

Several pieces of comparative research have indicated the different effects of a variety of feedback treatments (Spada 1997; Iwashita 2003; Lyster 2004). They have observed that instruction armed with negative feedback is more effective than others without such feedback (Iwashita 2003; Lyster 2004). Furthermore, when comparing the effectiveness of explicit and implicit negativeness, they have noted the advantages of prompts over their more implicit opponents – recasts (Lyster 2004). As Lyster (ibid.: 427) found in his study, learners receiving prompts demonstrated greater acquisition than those treated with recasts on both written and oral tasks. Lyster (ibid.: 405) interpreted this as the result of prompts’ capability of enabling students to self-repair by using accurate forms. Recasts, whilst, allow learners to hear TFs repeatedly in input, seldom makes them notice and correct their own mistakes.

A learner factor – proficiency level – has been suggested to be able to influence the effects of feedback treatment. As Ammar (2003) and Lyster (2004) found in their studies, prompts helped lower proficiency learners more than higher proficiency ones, the latter of whom benefited similarly from both recasts and prompts.

2.3.3 Extensive and intensive instruction

Besides the explicitness of instruction and feedback treatment, other dimensions of treatment have also caught the attention of FFI research. R. Ellis (2002) suggests that it is possible the intensity of instruction rather than the type is the crucial factor affecting learning outcomes. In his review study, R. Ellis analysed the outcomes of 6 programmes which involved implicit but extensive treatment. He found that 5 of them were successful. Conversely, most programmes with limited instruction – in this case 3 out of 4 – were unsuccessful, regardless of whether they were implemented in an explicit or implicit way (ibid.). He posits that the more extensive the instruction, the more likely it is to be successful (ibid.).

The interventional result of other factors, such as linguistic complexity, may account for the exceptions. Regrettably, as there has been no separate examination of instructional intensity and grammatical complexity, it is not possible to tell how these two interact with each other.

2.3.4 Measurement instruments

As indicated earlier, the majority of FFI research lacks control in terms of measurement instruments, and thus can give unreliable results. Motivated by this shortcoming, R. Ellis (2005) recently conducted research on a battery of measuring techniques, collecting 5 types of tests which have been commonly used in FFI study: “(a) an oral imitation test involving grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, (b) an oral narration test, (c) a timed grammatical judgment test (GJT), (d) an untimed GJT with the same context, and (e) a metalinguistic knowledge test” (ibid.: 141). R. Ellis (ibid.: 166) found that tests (a) – (c) were advantageous for testing explicit knowledge and thus give favour to explicit instruction. Likewise, (d) and (e) were useful for measuring implicit knowledge and affect the outcome of implicit instruction. This indicates the unreliability of the research that depends on one or two tests of the same group, and so one should study it with caution.

2.4 Summary

To summarise, the FFI research has been valuable. At the approach level, it has reassessed the role of instruction, showing the advantages of instruction which can avoid the hazards of developing language fluency at the cost of grammar competence. At the method level, it has provided operational instruction options and corresponding methods to design language programmes. At the procedural level, it has explored detailed teaching techniques, and identified or suggested a number of non-instructional variables that can influence learning outcomes significantly. All of these have provided valuable suggestions to policy makers, as well as those conducting classroom teaching practice.

However, the FFI research still has a long way to go. At the method level, the theories

of FonF and FonFs need to be developed and optimised in their own rights. The future research should be based upon a communal and complete understanding of these options. Besides, during further laboratory experiments, important variables of all kinds (e.g. learner characteristics, teacher proficiency levels, measurement instruments) should be kept under strict control, or investigated separately, in order to determine which instruction type is most suitable for a specific setting.

At the level of procedure, many questions still remain to be answered. First of all, as mentioned earlier, there is no study of how explicit and implicit instruction can interact with FonF and FonFs treatments. More often than not, a mixture of them is employed both by FonF and FonFs, with FonF relying more on implicit instruction and FonFs on explicit one. Secondly, as only a few studies have been conducted to investigate these non-instructional factors separately, there is no certainty of the extent which they can influence the effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction, either separately or in a combined way. Finally, across the range of research literature, other variables that may have a potential impact on instructional effects have been neglected, such as timing, duration, class size, L1 background, teaching and learning resources, teacher proficiency and experience, and learner motivation, learning experience, and learning style, etc.

Moreover, there is a major absence in all three levels of the FFI research. No discussion has been offered about whether an instruction type/technique functions differently on phonological, lexical, and grammatical forms. As these forms are different from each other in nature, they are also potential influences that can affect the effectiveness of instruction.

3 CHINESE CONTEXT

The above review of research on FFI has revealed that the effects of instruction types and teaching techniques can be influenced by many non-instructional factors, e.g. context types, learner characteristics, and linguistic features. As well as these factors, there are other constraints in real language learning classrooms, which may change pedagogic choice, but cannot be identified in laboratory research. All these factors need to be taken into account to justify a SLT method for use in a particular setting. This can be fulfilled via context assessment and needs analysis, which identify and interpret context factors and learner characteristics respectively. This enables the adoption of any SLT method sensitive to the context and appropriate to the learner.

3.1 Context assessment

The high school education is essential in China because of its unique status in the whole education system. It is the last phase of compulsory education which every student in the country must take part in. In this phase, students must perform well in order to progress into university education, which is recognised as a necessary pathway to a successful career. In this case, contextual features should be regarded with a broad view before a comprehensive assessment can be made. Three levels of context should be taken into consideration: social context, education context, and school and classroom context (Council of Europe 2001). The important context factors at these three levels in China can be identified as follows.

3.1.1 Context factors

(1) Social context

In modern China, the English language possesses a higher status than ever before, now established as an indispensable tool to achieving a successful career in professional fields like politics, business, academe, media, etc. Proper English qualifications not only ensure employment, but also facilitate promotion in the

work place. Even in a person's social life, it is believed English literacy guarantees modernisation as well as internationalisation.

Nevertheless, although deemed desirable, English is seldom used in daily life inside monolingual China. Neither English-native speakers nor authentic English resources are readily available. In an ordinary workplace, certificates of proficiency in English are often required, but practical oral or written skills are rarely checked.

(2) Education context

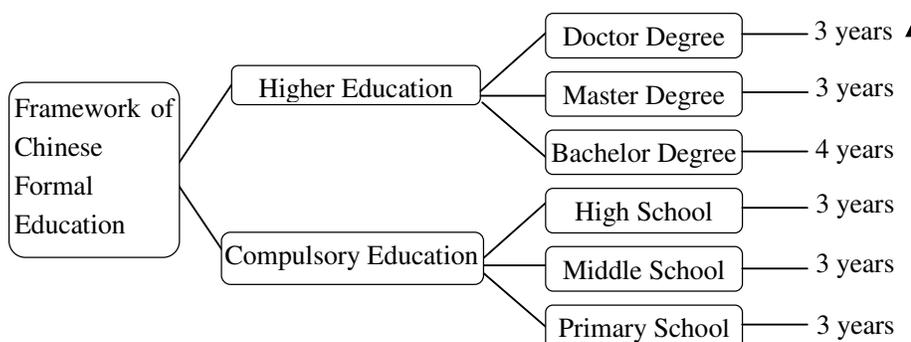
a. Centralised education system and current curriculum reform

China has a centrally controlled education system. As mentioned earlier, the CME is the official authority for setting educational policies, which include: phases of education, curricula, syllabi, course designs, course contents, course materials, teaching methods, public exams, etc. Since 1999, the CME has started a top-down national curriculum reform of English courses in all phases of education. Especially for high schools, it has issued an official document – the ECSHS (CME: 1999) to guide the renewal in this phase.

b. Education system

There are two main phases in the Chinese formal education system: compulsory education (12 years altogether including 6 years in primary school, 3 in middle school, and 3 more in high school), and higher education (10 years in total including 4 years for a bachelors degree, 3 for masters, and another 3 for PH.Ds). Both phases include sub stages (see Table 1), and in all constitute 22 years of education. In this education system, high school phase is the turning point where students finish compulsory education and compete for places in higher education.

Table 1: Framework of Chinese Formal Education



c. English courses

English courses are mandatory in all phases of Chinese education system. As shown in the following framework of English courses in high schools, both compulsory and optional courses in English are offered in this phase. The compulsory ones (Model 1-6) are extensive English courses, which are supposed to provide students with the required linguistic competence and ability to pass compulsory exams. By marked difference, the optional models are either high level extensive English programmes (Model 7-11), or intensive ones targeting personal interests. Thus they are more specialised, developing sub language skills or studying linguistic and cultural content. All extensive models are hierarchically arranged into 4 target language levels – Level 6-9, and each of them equals 2 credits.

Schools often rely on 5 compulsory models (one compulsory model each semester) to finish 10 credits. This is the basic requirement of high school education on which exams and higher education are based. Many schools lack the resources and schedule to run optional courses. However, schools that are in better situations are free to choose two or more optional courses, promoting their students to more prestigious levels.

Table 2: The framework of English courses in high schools

Language Level	Compulsory Courses (extensive)		Optional Courses				
			Sequential (extensive)		Non-sequential (intensive)		
Level 9			Model 11	2 credits	Writing, Grammar and rhetoric, Elementary Speech and debate, translation, Newspaper reading,	English for traveling, English in technology/science,...	Appreciation of literary arts...
			Model 10	2 credits			
Level 8			Model 9	2 credits			
			Model 8	2 credits			
Level 7			Model 7	2 credits			
			Model 6	2 credits			
Level 6	Model 5	2 credits					
	Model 4	2 credits					
	Model 3	2 credits					
	Model 2	2 credits					
	Model 1	2 credits					

(Adapted resource from ECSHS 2003)

d. Syllabus and teaching method

According to the ECSHS (CME 2003), the comprehensive English language

competence is the new goal of ELT in schools. This competence has five sub-categories: communication competence, linguistic competence, learning strategies, affection and attitude, and cultural awareness. These categories consist of a synthesis syllabus, and are described as or divided into 4 target language levels, Level 6-9. The communication competence, for example, is the description of four language skills at Level 6, 7, 8, and 9. The linguistic competence contains concrete sub-components of phonology, lexicon, grammar, function, and topic, all of which have pre-determined contents. There is a grammar-function table in the ECSHS (CME 2003) which combines target grammar and function items. This table has 10 function categories. Each functional category has many sub categories, and they all include groups of structures. In general, these sample sentences are not complex and abstract in nature, and have saliency or frequency of certain degree. Students are supposed to master the structures of each functional group one by one through English lessons in school.

To meet the new goal of ELT, the CME requires school teachers to adopt a TBL or SL to develop students' communicative skills. It even provides some design samples to illustrate these methods in ECSHS (*ibid.*). Even so, little is said about how to teach the various linguistic forms comprising language knowledge. Neither practical method nor detailed strategies have been offered for teachers to integrate the instruction of language knowledge into these communication-orientation lessons. It is this gap that perplexes teachers when they come to practical classroom teaching. In most cases, the TBL is undertaken superficially, and as a consequence traditional ways of teaching still dominate the teachers' method in respect to grammar items.

e. Public exams

In China, students have to pass uniform English tests when they progress from one educational stage to another, no matter what specialties they choose or are majoring. The English tests for high school students are fixed in the High School Graduation Exam as well as the National High Education Entrance Exam. Both exams occur at the end of the last semester of three academic years in high schools, with the former guaranteeing a high school graduate certificate and the latter facilitating application for universities.

The English texts in these two exams are designed at various difficulty levels, but have one thing in common: they contain a high proportion of various linguistic forms of phonology, grammar, and lexicon. In an attempt to include more assessment on language competence, the current curriculum reform has brought with it an on-going innovation of these two tests. Nevertheless these linguistic forms still maintain a significant part of the fundamental language knowledge.

(3) School and classroom context

a. School and classroom facilities

Chinese high schools differ from place to place, but in general, they fall into three categories. The first category is the capital city (*Beijing*), municipalities – (*Tianjing*, *Shanghai*, and *Chongqing*), and province capital cities (e.g. *Nanjing*, *Jinan*, *Dalian*, etc.). In these schools, advanced facilities can be found, such as well-equipped libraries, computer labs, audio language classrooms, TVs, radios, and projectors. The second category may be considered within less advanced cities (e.g. *Hengyang*, *Jiujiang*, etc.), but they still have labs, libraries, and language rooms though these are not well equipped or utilised. The last category is found in rural counties where language teaching is equipped with only chalk and blackboard. These three groups are not always demarked by their locations, but they are satisfactory as examples of high schools in China.

b. Teachers

In schools, most teachers of English are native Chinese. Senior teachers were educated in technical schools. Young teachers often have a bachelor degree in English language, but only the minority are specialised in English teaching. This situation can vary, depending on the overall educational level of their cities, but as a general rule, the majority of teachers do not have high English language ability themselves.

All teachers are supposed to participate in training workshops conducted by local ministries every year. However, the number of workshops and whether teachers can participate depends on the local situation. In the first category of schools mentioned above, teachers have dozens of opportunities to attend in workshops and

programmes of various kinds every year, in the schools of second and third categories, teachers have few or non opportunities in any given year.

Although these teachers are used to a structure-based teaching method, they are busy learning and adopting officially promoted methods (e.g. TBL and SL), as well as managing the switch to new course books brought by the curriculum reform in recent years. Generally speaking, organising their task or skills based teaching, as well as dramatising their lessons to promote communicative situations is difficult (Ng and Tang 1997: 76). Furthermore, they often need to spend a lot of class time on grammar instruction to prepare students for public examinations, leaving little time for conducting tasks or developing skills (ibid.).

c. Instruction recourses

Texts remain the main teaching tool in ELT classes in high schools. The current mainstream texts comprise of are several series published by the large education presses in the country (e.g. People's Education Press, Beijing Education Press, and Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press). They must pass the assessment of the CME before they are promoted for nation-wide use.

These texts are written in response to the syllabus and teaching methods prescribed by the SECHS (CME 2003), and thus have similar aspects. They are usually composed of a structure-based syllabus with components of the contents of topics, functions, structures, tasks, etc. They try to adopt a TBL or SL, but still compromise to the TA to a certain degree. In the design of a teaching unit, a popular way is to adopt the following stages: presentation, instruction, and communication of TFs.

Again, things are different in better equipped schools. They either develop their own textbooks, or import materials with higher language levels (e.g. New Concept English, and New Interchange), in order to get their students to achieve a higher average level than in the mainstream texts.

d. Course time

High schools in China run compulsory English courses throughout all 3 academic years. In an academic year, there are 2 semesters of 18-20 weeks each. Most high

schools have heavy schedules for all subjects, and leave only a 45-minute class for English course everyday of the week.

e. Class size

Chinese high schools usually have large classes with 40-60 students. All students are mixed-gender Chinese teenagers, whose characteristics will be discussed later.

3.1.2 Addressing context factors

Derived from the information collated above, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Neither ample authentic English materials nor plenty of English use opportunities are available in real life in Chinese society.
- The instruction, practice, and tasks focusing on forms are all indispensable in the context of centralised education in China, as both the national standardised syllabus and the public exams contain a significant proportion of formal knowledge.
- The TFs of English courses in high schools have certain simplicity and saliency. They are pre-determined thus not changeable, but they can be freely ordered within each individual function category.
- There are constraints for the free use of communicative tasks in English classrooms in school. Teachers have difficulties in designing tasks, and are further hindered by the big number of students and limited class time.
- Teachers need practical support in various aspects, like designing tasks, planning lessons, classroom management, and material development.
- A single method cannot satisfy the local contexts in different cities and schools. For large-scale use, a set of texts which can provide a wide range of techniques and flexible content needed to be created.

It is obvious that Chinese ELT classes must not count solely on naturalistic input and communicative tasks, as they are limited resources both in and outside of classroom. The FFI approach, which can integrate the instruction focusing on forms into communication-based classrooms, will fit better into this context. Furthermore, among the two types of instruction belonging to the FFI approach, FonFs is superior over FonF in this case. This is because FonFs instruction allows the pre-selecting of TFs, which is a prerequisite of this setting. Besides, it provides sufficient explicit

instruction that is especially effective on simple forms, whilst simplicity is an overall character of TFs of English courses in this situation. Moreover, there is a possibility for FonFs to sequence TFs within each defined functional category, making this order compatible with learnability. However, it should be noted that a flexibility of content and a variety of techniques are needed for teachers to maintain flexible instruction, so that they can meet the specific requirements in different situations.

3.2 Needs analysis

Needs analysis is defined as “seeking and interpreting information about one’s students’ needs so that the course will address them effectively” (Graves 1996: 12). These needs can be divided into two kinds. One is objective needs derived from learners’ factual information such as age, gender, native language, proficiency level in target language, etc. (ibid.: 13). The other one is subjective needs deduced from learners’ cognitive and affective situation such as attitudes, expectations, purposes, and learning styles (ibid.: 13). The information about Chinese high school students in these aspects can be identified as following.

3.2.1 Learner information

(1) Information about objective needs

a. Background information

High schools in China are co-educational and cater mainly to natives. They usually register at the age of 15 and graduate at 17. Students have been educated in the formal education mechanism for 9 years before they come to high school, thus sharing some common features such as their level of proficiency.

b. Proficiency level

High school students have learned English for between 4 and 6 years in their primary schools, and another 3 years in middle schools. Their English is of a near-intermediate level. According to exam reports as well as classroom observation, the majority of students in Chinese high schools are better at receptive skills –

reading and listening, but poor at productive ones – speaking and writing. However, students vary according to the local educational situation. In good circumstances, where students are more often engaged in classroom interactions, have more exposure to authentic materials and access to native speakers, they can be more competent at speaking and listening.

(2) Information about subjective needs

a. Motivation

Good performance in all subject exams is a crucial goal of studying English at high schools. The reason is simple: it can change a student's future career. The exams are crucial in a student's graduation from school, and acceptance into good universities. This can be viewed as a turning point in individual life. Thus, Chinese high school students are always diligent and determined to perform well at exams.

Besides the bias towards examination technique, Chinese students usually have a special ardency for the English subject. They grow up in epoch of increasing internationalisation, witnessing the English language pervade every corner of politics, finance, academia, etc. There is a desire to utilise it in order to learn from, and communicate with the rest of the world and to become elite members of society. Moreover, they long for the entertainment brought by this language, like surfing the internet, shopping, and traveling the world without language barriers.

b. Affection and attitude

Chinese students are characterised by their submissive nature, and unwillingness to communicate in classrooms. Firstly, a recognised tendency in Chinese culture – submission to authority – makes many Chinese students submissive learners (Wen and Clement 2003: 22). They regard teachers as the authority of subject knowledge, passively waiting for them to pass on knowledge and following instructions to do exercises in classrooms. In addition, the idea of the collective society also makes Chinese students reluctant in communication (ibid.: 20). They care about the judgment of others, being afraid of making mistakes and devaluing themselves publicly. Thus they hesitate at expressing personal opinions and in public speech. For these reasons, Chinese students often think that student-centered and

communication-oriented lectures are a waste of time (ibid: 20),impeding them in developing L2 proficiency via oral practice.

Again, various types of learner can be found in different schools. For those who have more opportunities and better skills in communication, both aural and oral communication is not a tedious classroom activity, but one interesting and challenging

c. View of language

Chinese students have an enthusiasm for grammar, regarding it as the “core” of the English language (ibid: 23). For them, every phenomenon in written or spoken language must be based in grammar for its final judgment (ibid.). If they can explain and use these grammar rules, they will have a sense of achievement in leaning the language. As a result, when using the language, they often give a higher priority to grammar accuracy over fluency.

d. Learning style

Most Chinese students in schools expect teachers to present grammatical rules flawlessly, following their instructions completely in all classroom tasks. They usually keep individual notes about grammatical rules, comprehend and analyse them in a given article, consolidate this knowledge by grammar puzzles and drills, and finally use them into oral or written communication when required to. Throughout the process, students prefer work individually rather than in pairs or groups, and expect teachers to correct their grammar mistakes whenever they occur. Of course, “no society has a monopoly on behaviour” (Cortazzi and Jin 1996: 199). Diverse styles, multiple styles, and style switching – all exist among Chinese students.

3.2.2 Analysing learners needs

The above learner characteristics also indicate that, in general, the FonFs treatment fits the ELT situation in Chinese high schools better. This judgment can be formed based on student objective needs. They are maturing in their study of English and on their way to intermediate proficiency. According to the earlier discussion, FonFs

treatment benefits this type of learners more than FonF does. The indication is also supported by the subjective needs of the students. The available cognitive information about them, including motivation, affection and attitude, view of language, and styles of learning, all suggest that they desire a high level of grammar competence and prefer an explicit method of instruction, which is provided by FonFs. To disregard this preference would be undoubtedly counterproductive. However, a variety of techniques and flexible teaching materials would be desirable to meet the needs of different students in the country.

To sum up, both context constraints and learner features support that the FFI approach fits better into the Chinese EFL environment as it provides instruction as well as opportunities of communication to facilitate SLA in classrooms with limited resources. Moreover, a FonFs type of instruction is a better option for this setting because it offers systematical, explicit, and extensive instruction, all of which are needed by the learners.

4 ADOPTING FFI IN CHINA

In order to facilitate the adoption of the FFI approach in the specific context of Chinese high schools, this section presents a meticulous English programme design in which the methodological accounts of FonF are addressed in harmony with realistic constraints in the Chinese setting. Following this design, a procedure which integrates the advantageous techniques of the FonF type into those of FonFs' is designed for large-scale use in this particular context. In addition, some important points are discussed to facilitate the implementation of these designs.

4.1 A FonFs method

As discussed earlier, the FonFs type of instruction entails a particular way of designing language programme components such as: objectives, syllabi, teaching and learning activities, teacher and learner roles, and text roles. In respect to the real situation in China, we can realise this method by planning all these components for English courses in schools, as shown in the following.

- **Objective**

The ECSHC (CME 2003) has prescribed that the English courses in high schools aim at an intermediate level of comprehensive English competence that includes communicative skills and linguistic competence. It requires teachers to utilise communicative tasks and skill-developing activities to fulfill this goal. However, both the FonFs' theories and contextual features have suggested that systematic and intensive instruction on forms is also necessary in this situation. Thus, a comprehensive objective of the English courses in high schools in China should be specified as: to help students to achieve an intermediate level of comprehensive English competence via communicative task, skill-developing activities, as well as instruction focusing on forms.

- **Syllabus**

In the ECSHC (CME 2003), a set of concrete grammar items have been prescribed as the TFs and have been grouped into different function categories. The need for a synthesis syllabus with key components of function and corresponding grammar items is self-evident, nevertheless, this scheme can bring together other components such as the content of the topics.

Having said this, opportunity still presents itself to optimise this synthesis syllabus. There is space for the consideration of sequencing grammar items in each function category: the forms in every function group can be ordered according to learnability to speed up acquisition progress. Therefore, it is possible to conduct a survey about the acquisition sequence of English learners in Chinese high schools, and order TFs in a compatible way. This would allow the instruction on forms to be presented at the most opportune time for those school learners.

- **Teaching and learning activities**

As discussed earlier, FonFs type of instruction will be especially suitable for English classes in Chinese high schools. The techniques of the FonFs type, which are more explicit and time-saving, are a shortcut to achieve explicit and accurate learning of forms via classroom instruction. This therefore buffers the constraints posed by limited class time, low proficiency teachers, and reticent students. These techniques include explicit and intensive instruction of FonFs type (e.g. rule explanation, input practice), explicit negative feedback (e.g. prompt, metalinguistic feedback), grammar-based activities (e.g. rule-oriented exercises, garden path), focused tasks (e.g. consciousness-raising tasks, structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks), etc. All the same, FonF treatment will only be beneficial in long run if it can be integrated in a proper way. FonFs instruction could be supplemented by FonF techniques, beforehand or afterwards, in order to develop implicit knowledge and communicative fluency. These techniques contain implicit and extensive instruction of FonF type (e.g. input-processing, flood, enhancement), implicit negative feedback (e.g. recasts), unfocused tasks, etc.

During extracurricular time, there is more room for, and more long-term benefits of, FonF instruction type. Plentiful resources should be provided for students to

experience language use in a less demanding and time-limited setting. Those resources can be modified reading/listening materials within which the use of TFs is highlighted, or authentic materials of all kinds which students are encouraged to utilise.

- **Teacher roles**

Based upon the above three components, one key role of teachers is as an instructor of the pre-determined target language features. This instructing role is different from that in the TA, because teachers should strive to teach forms in association with their meaning in various contexts. Teachers are also organisers and controllers of the activities and tasks conducted in classroom. They need to design those activities, and prepare and direct students to carry them out in limited class time. During this process, teachers should participate as a communicator too: offering personal opinions and exchanging information with students. When students encounter linguistic or non-linguistic problems during the communication process, teachers should offer useful and timely assistance.

Out of class, teachers should collect authentic materials to facilitate after-class teaching and learning. They can adapt appropriate materials by highlighting multiple instances of TFs, and design tasks of the FonF or FonFs type with them. Students should then work on those tasks independently or collaboratively during extracurricular time. Alternatively, teachers could simply make diversiform materials accessible to students, providing them amply opportunities to explore target language.

- **Learner roles**

The students in this context are required to act differently than they do under the conventional teaching methods. Although they still need to respond to teachers' stimuli when straightforward instruction is given, this is not the only thing, or even the major one, that they are required to do. They would need to engage in communicative tasks, think through exactly what they want to express, and what forms they should use to express it. Moreover, they should act as ardent explorers when they read compulsory and additional materials, spotting new linguistic or non-linguistic topics which they can analyse and use during or after class.

- **Material roles**

As the officially assessed textbooks are what English teaching in schools largely depends on, they should serve as the basic, if not the major, source of input. This means they should fully detail the syllabus, define day-to-day teaching and learning objectives, provide input covering all target content, as well as specify a variety of different activities and tasks for use in or outside of classroom. Again, this is not the only function of textbooks. To facilitate independent learning, they should also provide accesses and links to authentic resources students can get outside classroom, and give advice on how students can benefit from them. Moreover, their contents should allow a flexibility of teaching and learning in respect to various individual contexts.

In summary, we can see an overall plan to design English programmes for the high schools in China. This plan is based on the philosophy of FFI approach, and has put the theory of FonFs instruction into practice. This improves the communication-based methods promoted by the CME in several perspectives: it legitimises the necessity of formal instruction without underplaying communicative tasks, provides practical method to design language programmes according to this tenet, and specifies detailed techniques and strategies to be used in this context. It also identifies the roles of teachers and learners, and maximises the use of limited teaching resources in respect to this new situation.

4.2 A five-stage procedure

So far we have talked about how to design English courses in the particular context of Chinese high schools. To conceptualise this method, a consistent procedure that specifies the ways to operate appropriated moment-to-moment techniques, practices, and behaviours according to this method, is needed.

From the discussion in the earlier section, it can be concluded that the FonFs treatment fits better into the Chinese context. However, it should integrate some techniques of the FonF type to stay beneficial in long term. Thus, a conventional PPP procedure of FonFs instruction centering on grammar instruction is not inclusive and

flexible enough to cover the whole variety of strategies. An extended and optimised procedure has been designed here to meet these challenges. As shown in Table 3, it is a five-stage procedure, the stages being orientation, comprehension, form focus, communication, and exploration. Throughout these stages, a variety of instructional treatment and learning activities is given to raise students' attention to TFs first; elicit their understanding next; present them with explicit knowledge; engage them into communication; and finally direct them to investigate more language features independently in diverse texts. These stages are elaborated one by one in the following, and illustrated by a design sample (see Appendix and Note 2).

Table 3: A framework of a five-stage procedure

Stage	Instructional treatment	Learning activity
Orientation	Introduction & consciousness-raising	Focused tasks (implicit/explicit grammar-problem-solving tasks, etc.)
Comprehension	Implicit instruction & implicit feedback	Focused tasks (comprehension tasks, etc.)
Form Focus	Explicit instruction & explicit feedback	Form-focus activities (mechanical grammar exercises, etc.)
Communication	Explicit feedback & implicit feedback	Focused tasks (structural-based production tasks like dictogloss, task naturalness, task essentialness, tasks usefulness, etc.)
Exploration		Unfocused tasks (project work, etc.)

Stage 1: Orientation

The first stage orientation introduces the topic of a teaching unit and draws previous attention to TFs in this unit. The background material about the topic is given, and students are encouraged to discuss it with their existing knowledge. This is a good activity to trigger students' interests and develop prior familiarity with the content of the topic. Then some data on the TFs is given, and students' attention is directed to these language features by grammar-problem-solving tasks. This can increase the possibility of the notice and intake of these TFs in subsequent stages. During this period, students can use metalanguage or make non-verbal responses. They are not required to produce the TFs or to develop explicit knowledge about them. In general, this stage is advantageous but optional. Omitting it will not damage the integrity of a teaching unit.

In the design sample (see Appendix), the topic of the teaching unit is Chinese culture,

which includes traditional customs and arts such as making tea and constructing kites. The target language feature is infinitive phrases functioning as adverbials. In the orientation stage of this unit, a small article is given to introduce various kinds of Chinese tea and the basic stages in their production. Students are asked to discuss these with their existing knowledge. Subsequently, the use of infinitive phrases is highlighted by grammar-problem-solving tasks, and students' attention is drawn to those forms in relation to their meanings.

Stage 2: Comprehension

The second stage is called comprehension with the purpose of understanding the content of the topics as well as developing the implicit knowledge of the TFs. At this stage, a main text with multiple instances of TFs is provided, and students are required to read it with the aid of knowledge gained from the previous stage. Then some comprehension tasks are given to make the relationship between the TFs and their meanings salient to students. They can facilitate acquisition of TFs, by pushing students to process the meaning of these TFs, reacting or producing them in non-verbal or minimally verbal ways. During this process, teachers mainly give implicit negative feedback to the non-target use of language, providing brief instruction on the TFs when students have difficulties with the tasks. The whole treatment at the stage is FonF-like and implicit, focusing on comprehension of meaning and implicit knowledge of the TFs.

In the design sample, we can see that a long text about how to make *Gongfu* tea is provided as the major input material. Students are required to read and listen to it several times. Then three comprehension tasks are designed to test a student's comprehension at three levels. The first one requires the understanding of the tea-making procedures; the second asks for the understanding of the infinitive phrases used to express these procedures; and the last encourages students to use these phrases to express their own ways of making tea in real life. Although there is no mention of the TFs, learners have to understand, respond, and even use them to complete the tasks.

Stage 3: Form Focus

The form-focus stage aims to develop solid explicit knowledge and accurate use of the

TFs. At this stage, various techniques of explicit instruction are employed to help students further understand the TFs. For example, language rules are explained explicitly, the differences between L1 and L2 are pointed out in a straightforward way, ... Apart from that, students are required to do some form-focused activities which can engage them in the use of the TFs. These activities can take the form of mechanical exercises where the TFs are used in an isolated setting. This gives students a sense of familiarity and safety, setting a moderate learning pace. Later, less mechanical activities are provided to involve students in the use of the TFs in four skills. These activities will make the relationship between the TFs and their meaning transparent, addressing the correct use of the TFs without isolating their meaning. As a result, students should fully understand and familiarise themselves with the use of infinitive phrases, facilitating automatic use of these rules in the coming stage. At the stage of form focus, teachers correct student errors explicitly by means of prompts (e.g. clarification, repetition, metalinguistic clues, and elicitation), pushing them to correct non-target use of language by themselves.

In the form focus part of the design sample, the rules of infinitive phrases are explained explicitly to students. Then a grammar judgment exercise is given to get students to understand these rules. Of course, more skill-developing activities can be offered here to help students strengthen their knowledge of infinitive phrases, but as exercises of this type are already well-known and popular in many other SLT approaches (e.g. SL, TBL), further samples are omitted in this design.

Stage 4: Communication

The fourth stage is called communication, and it sets out to promote automatic use of the TFs, in addition to enhancing the implicit and explicit knowledge of them. This stage can provide plenty of structure-based production tasks to engage students in meaningful interaction where they must both comprehend and produce the TFs. These include dictogloss tasks that require students to reproduce texts with highlighted usage of TFs, as well as other tasks which can entail natural, useful, or essential use of the TFs (R. Ellis 2003: 153-157). Students get feedback from the teacher as well as their peer group. The feedback can be given implicitly and non-obtrusively without interrupting utterance fluency during the interaction process. It can also be provided explicitly with metalanguage in order to strengthen the accurate use of the TFs when

interaction has been completed and evaluation is given.

In the communication part of the design sample, the first two activities are a dictogloss activity that requires students to understand and reproduce a text about making kites. Some fragments of the texts are given in the second task to reduce the task's difficulty. The following tasks are designed to elicit the use of infinitive phrases to different extents. In the task D and C, using infinitive phrases is essential, in the task E it is useful, while in the task F, it becomes natural when students are likely to apply their grammar knowledge while checking each other's written work.

Stage 5: Exploration

The last stage is exploration, and it targets learners' independent learning ability. This stage will provide additional input materials, as well as the links to various authentic resources related to the unit theme. This allows learners to “encounter target language items ... in interaction with other closely related grammatical and discursal elements” (Nunan 1998: 105). Furthermore, through unfocused tasks students are encouraged to explore other language features, comprehending and producing them for a communication purpose. They do not highlight any specific linguistic feature, but provide multiple instances of a range of linguistic forms, allowing the students to acquire any of them naturally. At this stage, instructional treatment of the FonF type is given when necessary to avoid or repair conversational problems. This treatment includes techniques like relinquishing topic control to the learner, selecting salient topics, and treating topics briefly, which can be applied before the carrying of tasks (R. Ellis 2003: 70). Also requesting clarification, confirming comprehension, and tolerating ambiguity are part of the process, all of which are provided during interaction process (ibid.). This stage is beneficial but not necessarily mandatory, allowing teachers to skip it when there is a shortage of materials and class time.

In the design sample, a piece of authentic text about the lantern fair in *Zhoucun* is given in the exploration stage, encouraging students independently to explore other ways of using infinitive phrases in the text. Additional resource materials regarding the unit theme, Chinese culture, are made accessible to the students. These can include books, magazines, and website links, providing a selection of diversiform texts for students to peruse during their extracurricular time. When reports are later

made about their readings, students will in all probability adopt the new ways of using infinitive phrases gained from this exploration.

In summary, the five-stage procedure is an extended and optimised procedure compared with the conventional PPP one. It has distinguished five stages which can be used as the basis for teaching and learning, and harmonises the techniques of FonF type with FonFs strategies in these coherent stages. It facilitates independent learning by offering access to authentic recourses, and allows flexibility for teachers who operate this procedure within contextual constraints.

4.3 Implementation

To implement the above method and procedure in the real ELT classrooms of Chinese high schools, there are some points to bear in mind.

The first is that, to sequence pre-determined TFs according to the learnability is a task that requires a realistic and moderate attitude. This is because it is easier to re-order the TFs prescribed by the CME, as opposed to changing them. Furthermore, as there is a huge and diverse population of students in the country it is only possible to get a general trend of acquisition sequence rather than a uniform order to be applied nation-wide. Thus it would be practical to rank the TFs according to their grammatical difficulty first, and moderately adjust this order in reference to acquisition sequence.

Secondly, a flexible strategy should be employed to suit individual learning and also to tackle on-line problems during classroom instruction. Methods and procedures are flexible, classrooms are dynamic, and students are not homogeneous but different from one to one. As a consequence FonFs or FonF treatment, as well as explicit or implicit techniques can be employed as long as they benefit students on an individual level. Unfortunately the problem remains that many teachers in contemporary China are neither knowledgeable nor capable enough to manage the range of techniques. Great efforts are required to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills.

Last but not least, an input-rich learning environment needs to be cultivated to facilitate extracurricular learning. It is an unchangeable situation that ELT in Chinese

high schools relies on limited uniform texts and class time. It is often the case that teaching resources are spent on solving grammatical puzzles, leaving little for classroom interaction. Thus there is a need to explore teaching and learning in extracurricular time. Policy makers, text designers, school administrators, and in-service teachers should all contribute to create communicative opportunities and offer ample authentic recourses. This will create an input-rich environment within which students can experience the target language in a selection of texts and discourses, enhancing the gains of language acquisition through instruction in the long run.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has comprehensively reviewed FFI study at the levels of approach, method and procedure. It identified FFI as an SLT approach as it is based on its own theories of language and language acquisition. It embraces grammar as linguistic forms in any aspect (e.g. phonology, lexicon, grammar, etc), and believes that instruction focusing on forms can facilitate SLA quantitatively and qualitatively. At the method level, FFI study focused on two general types of instruction – FonF and FonFs. These two differ in the principles of: when to instruct, how to instruct, and on what forms to instruct, and have given rise to certain methods for language programme design. The comparative research on the effectiveness of FonF and FonFs was found to remain inconclusive, due to the absence of developed theories that are consistent and balanced, and the lack of reliable experimental statistics. Nevertheless, on the whole, FonFs instruction was found to be particularly effective in the context with little naturalistic exposure, whilst the effects of FonF, when they occur, tend to be long-lived. At the level of procedure, FFI study has investigated certain techniques and strategies under both instruction types. The effects of explicit and implicit instructions, as well as those of recasts and prompts were observed to be influenced by non-instruction factors deriving from contexts, learners, structure nature and so on. Moreover, both intensity of instruction and instruments for measurements were also suggested to account for instructional outcomes.

Despite the ample findings in the contemporary FFI study, this paper has also found a clear requirement for further studies on FFI. Firstly, the theories of FonF and FonFs instruction need to be developed in a consistent and balanced manner. Thus, based on these theories, more research could be done with a standardised operationalisation to compare their effects. Secondly, further research is required to investigate how explicit and implicit instruction can interact with FonF and FonFs. Thirdly, the variables that discernibly influence the effectiveness of instruction remain to be examined closely, in order to discover to the extent where they can affect or interact with explicit/implicit instruction separately or in combination. All these studies should

take into account the potential roles of other factors, such as class size, L1 background, teachers' proficiency/experience, learner motivation/learning style, etc. Lastly, an interesting direction of future research would look at whether and how linguistic forms in different dimensions (phonology, lexicon, grammar, etc.) could interact with the instruction types discussed across the FFI literature.

This paper also assessed the ELT context in Chinese high schools, and analysed the needs of their learners, in order to find an appropriate method to design English courses. The officially promoted methods – the communication-oriented TBL and SL – were found to adopt a manner that hardly satisfies the needs for grammar instruction in this context. In contrast, FonFs instruction is viewed to fit into this context better, as it provides communication opportunities as well as instruction on forms. As a result, a method deriving from FonFs theory has been used to design English courses critically with reference to realistic situation in China. Furthermore, a procedure in harmony with this method is designed and illustrated to direct classroom instruction and material research. This procedure is comprehensive as it includes a broad spectrum of techniques and tasks of both FonF and FonFs types. It is also flexible, providing optional stages to meet the conditions of various local contexts in the country.

Nevertheless, given that these explorations are still in the earliest stages, the studies conducted in this paper are not entirely thorough. Firstly, a discussion about the detailed regional differences in China is missing, although the overall context and learner information has been observed. Having said this, some clear region-based differences in the country have been found in aspects of classroom behaviours, student quality, and language learning strategies, all of which can affect the choice of pedagogy (Hu 2003: 312). Secondly, the discussions about likely problems during the implementation of this method and procedure have been left out also. For example, the investigation about learnability problem in China, with its huge student population and various regional differences is a challenge calling for cautious handling, especially when its outcome will be applied for large-scale usage. Thirdly, the paper offers little discussion about the measurement instruments when proposing new method and design. As mentioned earlier, some measurement instruments may favour one type of knowledge (explicit/implicit), and correspondingly accounts for different

instructional outcomes.

To ameliorate the first problem, subsequent research should analyse the regional differences with various statistical methods, thus facilitating the appropriate application of the proposed method and procedure. It is possible that the method and procedure presented here need to be fine-tuned for local use. To address the second issue, a small-scale trial on the method and procedure proposed in this paper should be conducted to detect implemental problems and feasible solutions. The third problem seems to be out of the teachers' control, as in China, public exams are designed by the official authority (i.e. the CME). However, as the ELT innovation progresses into a new era, those exams can be gradually optimised to test comprehensive language competence, rather than measure one particular knowledge/instruction type (explicit/implicit). By that time, research is needed to develop new methods and procedures that suit the immediate context.

NOTE

- 1 Foreign languages (FL) and second languages (L2) are generally distinguished by the roles played by the target language in the learner's community (R. Ellis 1994: 11-12). A target language is viewed as an L2 when it "plays an institutional and social role in the community", but as an FL in settings in which it "plays no major role in the community and is primarily learnt only in the classroom" (ibid.).

Similarly, second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language acquisition (FLA) are sometimes identified in relation to this distinction. However, SLA research has explored in-depth as to what extent the FL or L2 settings can affect language acquisition (ibid.). Thus, in accordance with popular usage, this paper will use the term "SLA" to cover both types of learning, and "L2" to both language learning settings unless they are referred to oppositely when necessary (ibid.).

- 2 This sample design highlights structure rules but ignores other linguistic forms in phonology and lexicon. This is because the students have already been taught all basic phonologic forms before this phase. The new target phonologic items are tones and stresses, which are less easily illustrated in written text. Moreover, lexicon items are omitted as they are less complex in nature compared with structure forms. Giving examples on them can hardly provide a blueprint to illustrate all instructional stages.

Moreover, it should be noted that the design sample is not fully developed. The latter should be given the consideration of consistency and integrity, which is also out of the reach of the current study. However, the sample presented here can be used as a basis for teaching material research in subsequent study.

Additionally, this design sample should be viewed as a simple model which can only roughly demonstrate the idea of the five-stage procedure. As focused and unfocused tasks are typical devices of FFI approach, this design sample emphasises the use of those tasks. There are a variety of instruction techniques, communicative and non-communicative tasks that can be used in a five-stage procedure, but they need further research and meticulous design, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

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APPENDIX