

## Article

# The Sustainability of Form-Focused Instruction in Classrooms: Chinese Secondary School EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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**Abstract:** Form-focused instruction occupies an important position in China's secondary schools. However, middle school English teaching has been criticized for the sustainability of form-focused instruction. The new English Curriculum Standards for China's secondary English teaching suggest that grammar teaching should be integrated into communicative activities, but no precise guidance is provided on how to integrate grammar into communicative activities. This study investigates teachers' beliefs and practices about form-focused instruction, as well as the factors influencing their beliefs and practices, in the context of China's secondary schools. Data were collected through 33 classroom observations and interviews with 3 teachers with different levels of experience. The findings reveal that, overall, the teachers preferred form-focused instruction, focus on forms and explicit teaching. The teachers with more teaching experience adopted communicative approaches of form-focused instruction, integrating form and meaning at different times inductively. The teacher with fewer teaching years adopted traditional, isolated, and deductive methods of grammar teaching. The differences between the teachers were found to be influenced by various factors, including teaching and research activities, curriculum standards, examinations, and learning experience. The teachers' beliefs and practices and the gaps and connections between theoretical domains and classroom practices were discussed and implications were provided.

**Keywords:** secondary school; form-focused instruction; grammar teaching; teacher beliefs; teacher practices



**Citation:** Li, C.; Xu, J. The Sustainability of Form-Focused Instruction in Classrooms: Chinese Secondary School EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 6109. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15076109>

Academic Editor: David Manzano Sánchez

Received: 26 February 2023

Revised: 24 March 2023

Accepted: 27 March 2023

Published: 1 April 2023



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## 1. Introduction

Form-focused instruction (FFI) refers to “any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners’ attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly ... within meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction and in which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or predetermined ways” [1] (p. 73). The “form” may consist of phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical, pragmatic, discourse, or orthographical aspects of language. Grammar teaching, as a part of FFI [2], has long been the focus of research in second language acquisition (SLA). However, grammar teaching research still has a relatively limited influence on teachers [3]. This is due to the inconsistency of the research findings and, more importantly, to the overlooking of teachers’ perspectives [2]. Therefore, a growing number of studies have begun to focus on teachers’ beliefs. Investigating teachers’ beliefs is important for improving second language (L2) teaching because teachers’ beliefs directly affect their practices [4,5]. Understanding teachers’ beliefs and the practices and factors that affect their beliefs and practices can help us better understand the discrepancies between research-based theoretical recommendations and classroom practices, and hence explain the insufficient impact of educational innovation on practice [6]. It can also provide insights into teaching, which have various applications for teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers [7].

This study focused on grammar teaching beliefs and practices in an under-investigated context, i.e., English as a foreign language (EFL) secondary education in China [8,9]. Grammar teaching occupies an important position in China's middle schools; it focuses on the basic knowledge of grammar and covers most of English grammar. However, middle school English teaching has been criticized for the sustainability of grammar teaching, as some teachers still adopt the traditional approach to teaching grammar, while some teachers ignore grammar teaching to cater to communicative language teaching. In response to this situation, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued the new *English Curriculum Standards* [10] as a policy guide for secondary English teachers. The document proposed that grammar teaching should be integrated into communicative activities so as to cultivate the sustainable development of students' grammatical competence. Nevertheless, the curriculum standards do not provide precise guidance on how to integrate grammar into communicative activities. In China, teachers' professional development has been institutionalized in school contexts [11]. Teachers receive training from the Teaching Study Group System and Lesson Observation and Evaluating System, wherein teachers who teach the same subject in the same grade plan, design, observe, and evaluate lessons together [12]. In such a context, exploring teachers' beliefs and practices is of special significance, as they reflect how teachers deal with issues that lack consensus and certainties [13]. In view of this, and motivated by the scarcity of research on China's secondary school teachers' beliefs and practices [9], we carried out this study to examine Chinese middle school EFL teachers' grammar teaching beliefs and practices, and the factors that shape these beliefs and practices.

## 2. Literature Review

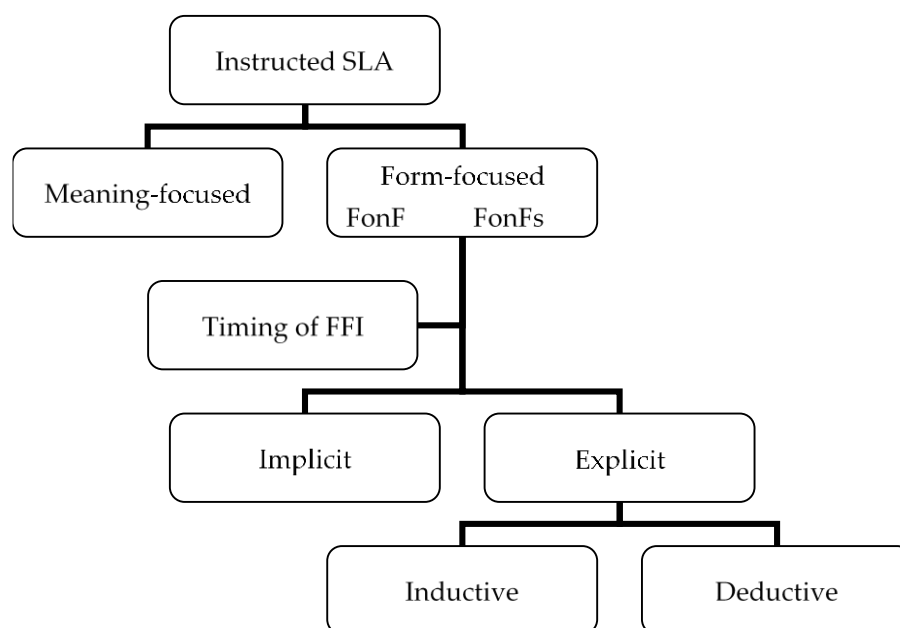
The effectiveness and necessity of FFI have been highlighted by many studies. The study of FFI has moved from early research that explored the effectiveness of FFI to the current research, which examines how and when to implement FFI [14,15]. In China, FFI has attracted limited attention among researchers and teachers. The extant studies are mostly experimental, exploring which type of FFI is more effective. For example, Xu and Li [15] explored the effects of different types of FFI on Chinese secondary school learners and found that different types of FFI have different effects in helping learners to learn difficult and easy grammatical features. Yang and Lyster [16] examined the effects of corrective feedback, a reactive type of FFI, on Chinese university students. Li, Zhu, and Ellis [17] and Fu and Li [18] investigated the ideal time to provide corrective feedback to Chinese middle school learners. Limited studies have examined how FFI is perceived and applied in China's secondary school context. Therefore, this study aimed to examine Chinese secondary school teachers' beliefs about and practices of FFI. In this section, we first review the core constructs of FFI examined in our study; then, we discuss studies related to the effect of teachers' beliefs and practices on those constructs.

### 2.1. Form-Focused Instruction

This study focused on the core constructs of FFI that have received most attention in language pedagogy and SLA research: meaning-focused vs. form-focused instruction, focus on form vs. focus on forms, implicit vs. explicit, inductive vs. deductive instruction [2,13], and the timing of FFI [19]. The target constructs were operationalized based on Graus and Coppen's [2] taxonomy and adapted to the needs of this study (see Figure 1).

Meaning-focused instruction (MFI) emphasizes that the communication of meaning is the primary goal of classroom teaching, and grammar instruction and learning discrete linguistic items are rejected [2,13]. There is ample evidence that MFI is not sufficient for L2 learners [20]. In contrast, FFI, that is, "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" [21] (p.1), is beneficial and necessary for L2 learning [22]. FFI includes both traditional approaches of grammar teaching and communicative approaches, in which form is attended to in meaning-focused activities. It is now generally accepted that combining form and meaning

is most effective for L2 learners [22,23]. However, there is no consensus on the degree of integration between form and meaning and the ways to combine form and meaning [24].



**Figure 1.** A taxonomy of L2 instruction (adapted from Graus and Coppen, 2016, [2] p. 576).

Based on the degree of integration between form-focused and meaning-focused instruction, Long [25] made a distinction between focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs). FonF “overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” [25] (pp. 45–46). In FonF, FFI is part of meaning-focused instruction with incidental focus on form in response to learners’ communicative needs [21]. That is, learners’ attention is briefly attracted to language form and form–meaning connections during a lesson in which the primary focus is on meaning. The brief switch in attention from meaning to form is usually triggered by a communication problem [26]. In contrast, FonFs advocates the systematic teaching of grammatical features with form as the primary teaching objective [21]. In this synthetic approach to language teaching, teachers present grammatical structures linearly and learners practice these structures subsequently. FonFs is associated with traditional discrete point metalinguistic instruction, provided in a context where little or no meaning-based instruction or practice occurs [22].

The effectiveness of FFI is influenced by the timing of FFI: that is, when it is optimal to draw learners’ attention to form in the instructional sequence [19,27]. Research in SLA suggests that teachers can integrate or isolate FFI, drawing learners’ attention to form before, after, or during meaning-focused activities [22]. However, the research results cannot provide conclusive answers regarding the effects of FFI timing.

FFI can be either implicit or explicit. Implicit instruction “is directed at enabling learners to infer rules without awareness. That is, it seeks to provide learners with experience of specific exemplars of a rule or pattern while they are not attempting to learn it” [28] (p. 16). Meanwhile, explicit instruction includes “some sort of rule being thought about during the learning process” [29] (p. 380).

In explicit instruction, teachers provide overt instruction and corrective feedback inductively or deductively. Inductively, teachers assist learners to discover grammatical rules themselves from exemplars; deductively, teachers provide learners with explanations of rules [28].

There are still many disputes regarding the above issues. Although most researchers recommend combining form and meaning, there is considerable disagreement about how and when to implement it [3]. In the case that no unified reference can be made, teachers

develop their own beliefs and practices. Insights into teachers' beliefs and practices can thus extend our current understandings of FFI and help to compare how teachers conceptualize formal theory and practical theory [7].

## 2.2. Teachers' Beliefs and Practices concerning FFI

Some studies have focused on teachers' beliefs and practices of FFI. Graus and Coppen [2] developed a questionnaire to investigate Dutch student teachers' beliefs about English grammar instruction. They found that student teachers generally preferred FFI, FonFs, and explicit and inductive teaching, but higher-year student teachers tended to prefer meaning-focused and implicit teaching. Graus and Coppen [13] also conducted a qualitative study using interviews to investigate student teachers' grammar cognition, and found that student teachers considered explicit, systematic, and isolated grammar teaching a necessity. Graus and Coppen [6] further explored the role that teacher education plays in influencing student teachers' grammar cognition. They found that student teachers held traditional pedagogical grammatical views, which were consolidated in teacher education. Schurz and Coumel [30] compared the types of grammar instruction in Sweden, Austria, and France. Teachers' self-reported practices were obtained through a questionnaire. They found that disparities between teaching practices across the countries subsist, and the educational level and the country's language policies and ideologies may be determining factors. Sun and Zhang [8] investigated university teachers' beliefs about FonF and FonFs in China. They found that teachers preferred FonF but that they shifted from FonF to FonFs in their practices.

In previous studies, research on teachers' beliefs and practices has mainly been approached using questionnaires and interviews [31]. The self-reported beliefs obtained in these ways, especially if they are purely quantitative, are prone to presenting a simplistic picture, illustrating teachers' ideals rather than actual practices [30]. Additionally, quantitative methods can reveal general trends, but cannot provide information about individual differences, nor can they provide explanations for respondents' answers [2]. Borg [32] claimed that teachers' practices should be the basis of the analysis of their beliefs. Sato and Oyanedel [33] also suggested that more classroom observations be included in research, as students are exposed to teachers' practices, not to teachers' beliefs. Furthermore, more research is needed to examine teachers' beliefs and practices in different contexts, as previous studies have mainly focused on student teachers or teachers at the tertiary level [33]. Overall, research on FFI beliefs and practices of EFL teachers in public schools, especially primary and middle school teachers, is limited [34]. Therefore, this study explored middle school EFL teachers' beliefs about and practices of FFI in the Chinese context. This study addressed the following questions: (1) what are Chinese middle school EFL teachers' beliefs and practices regarding FFI? (2) What factors influence their beliefs and practices?

## 3. Methodology

When studying teachers' beliefs, different data collection methods will generate different results [35]. Beliefs obtained from questionnaires tend to reflect teachers' idealistic beliefs, while beliefs elicited from the discussion of teachers' practices are rooted in reality and can reflect teachers' actual teaching beliefs. Therefore, the current study adopted a qualitative case study approach, as this method can reveal contemporary phenomena within a real-life context and, at the same time, retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events [36]. A case study involves multiple sources of information and detailed, in-depth data collection, and can help us better understand the context of the study. The aim of the case study is not to make generalizations about populations, but to generalize theoretical propositions [36]. Therefore, rather than generalizing about how Chinese middle school teachers perceive and practice FFI, this study aims to explore how secondary school teachers perceive and practice FFI in a Chinese middle school.

### 3.1. Participants

The study was conducted in a public middle school in central China. Three EFL teachers took part in this study. They were selected based on three factors: (1) they were willing to participate and allowed the researchers to observe their classes; (2) they had different levels of teaching experience; (3) they taught across different grades, especially the grades with the most intensive grammar teaching. Most extant research operationalizes teaching experience in a dichotomous way, i.e., experienced and inexperienced [37], whereas, in reality, instructors' experience is a continuum. Therefore, this study operationalized teachers' experience as a continuum, including three different periods of teaching years ranging from 1 to 15 years (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Participant information.

Participants	Gender	Age	Education Background	Teaching Years	Student Levels
A	Female	36	BA	10–15	8th grade
B	Female	33	BA	5–10	7th grade
C	Male	26	BA	1–5	8th grade

There are three grades in the middle school: seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. When the study was carried out, the three teachers were teaching the seventh and eighth graders. New grammar is mainly taught in the seventh and eighth grades in the school. Teaching in the ninth grade is primarily related to revision and preparation for the high school entrance examination; thus, the ninth grade was not included in the study. The students had one 45-min English lesson per day, with 50–60 students in each class.

### 3.2. Data Collection

We examined the teachers' FFI practices through classroom observations and investigated their beliefs through interviews based on their practices (see Table 2). The three teachers' classes were observed for four successive weeks. Altogether, 33 lessons were observed and audio-recorded (about 25 h), with 11 lessons for each teacher on average. This is a strength of this study, as multiple observations of each teacher can reduce the possible limitations of one-off observations and can reduce observer paradox effects, as the teachers and students become more accustomed to the visitor in their classrooms [38]. Field notes were taken by the observers to assist with data transcription and analysis (see Section S1 for observation rubrics and transcription conventions). The observation focused on the teachers' grammar teaching practices, which formed the basis for interviews with the teachers.

**Table 2.** Data collection procedures.

Methods	Time for Each Teacher	Total Time
Classroom observation	11 lessons for each teacher, 45 min for each lesson	25 h
Before-class interview	Once for each teacher, lasting 1.5 h	4.5 h
After-class interview	Once for each teacher, lasting 1.5 h	4.5 h

Two rounds of interviews were conducted with each teacher. Before the class observation, interviews were conducted with questions regarding the teachers' beliefs about teaching and grammar instruction in general (see Section S2, adapted from [39]). After the class observation, the teachers were interviewed about their specific beliefs regarding grammar teaching (see Section S3, adapted from [2]). The final interviews included two parts. The first part was presented as a survey that included five tables. Each table presents statements about different views of grammar teaching, including FFI and MFI, FFI timing, FonFs and FonF, explicit and implicit, and deductive and inductive approaches. For each table, the teachers were first asked to finish the survey and then interview questions were



asked based on the result of the survey. The second part concerned the factors that influence teacher's beliefs and practices. The teachers were asked to choose 2–4 of the most important factors that contribute to their beliefs and practice. The interview protocol was piloted with another two teachers from the school and minor revisions regarding expression and clarity were made. Each interview lasted more than one and a half hours and all interviews were audio-recorded with the teachers' consent.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed qualitatively with both cyclical and summative analysis [5]. For the classroom observation data, the analysis was initially formative [40]. The data were analyzed before the final interview to offer guidelines for the design of the interview. The observed recorded lessons were manually transcribed. Episodes related to FFI were elicited and coded with categories derived from the literature review [13]. A tentative categorization was developed based on the codes.

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The data were first coded into the two main categories of teachers' beliefs and influencing factors. The broad categorization was then gradually refined by creating sub-categories. The pre-specified codes of Graus and Coppen [13], with the addition of codes of FFI timing, were used to analyze the teachers' beliefs (see Section S4 for the coding scheme). Salient themes and patterns were then identified and summarized. Excerpts that represent the major themes and patterns were used to illustrate the trends, providing the teachers' perspectives in their own voices.

Finally, the classroom observation data were cyclically analyzed to identify teaching practices. The tentative categorization was reorganized with reference to the themes in the interview data. No quantification or frequency statistics were provided as they "do not generally lead to particular insightful qualitative research" [6] (p. 696). To enhance validity and reliability, the two authors independently coded half of the transcripts and checked inter-rater reliability, with any disagreements resolved through discussions. Then, the first author independently coded all the remaining parts of the transcripts. Member checks were also performed, with the participants asked to verify the transcripts and preliminary data analysis to ensure accuracy (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Data analysis procedures.

Data	Analysis	Categorization
Classroom observation	Transcribed. Episodes of FFI were elicited and coded. A tentative category was formed.	MFI, FFI, timing of FFI, implicit, explicit, inductive, deductive
Interview	Transcribed. Analyzed using thematic analysis.	Beliefs, influencing factors
Classroom observation	The tentative categorization was reorganized to identify teachers' practices.	MFI, FFI, isolated FFI, FFI integrated with MFI, FFI before MFI, FFI after MFI, implicit, explicit, inductive, deductive instruction

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Teachers' Practices

Results from the classroom observations showed that all teachers conducted FFI, but with different teaching patterns. Generally speaking, teachers A and B adopted communicative approaches of FFI, combining grammar teaching with other skills and communicative activities. Teacher C, on the other hand, adopted a traditional approach of FFI, separating grammar teaching from skills work or communicative practice.

Specifically, teachers A and B paid more attention to communication with students, and they guided students to communicate using various strategies including repeating, paraphrasing, or giving examples, and they required students to speak in sentences instead of simple words. They explained grammar explicitly and inductively, and their explanations were usually brief without much elaboration on the language forms. In spite of the

similarities of their teaching patterns, teachers A and B differed in their FFI timing. Teacher A usually conducted communicative activities before focusing on form. For example, during the class observation, the last three units of the eighth-grade teaching plan were about the present perfect tense, which was recognized by all teachers as a difficult structure. Before they started the new unit, the teachers of the eighth grade who shared the same office discussed their teaching plan. Most teachers, including C, claimed that they would first explain the grammatical rules before moving on to other parts of the lesson. A, on the contrary, insisted that students should first perceive the present perfect tense through listening and speaking and then learn the grammatical rules, because these will be covered again in later units. Therefore, at the beginning of the unit, A carried out listening and speaking activities first. She asked students to have a free talk about six pictures of books and movies. During students' interactions, she wrote down present perfect sentences in dialogic forms on the blackboard (Have you watched the movie? Yes, I have. /No, I haven't ...). She then communicated with students about each picture and asked students to have discussions. Finally, the rules of the target feature were explained briefly.

Teacher B focused on form during and after communicative activities. She usually conducted communicative activities that included the target grammatical structure first and briefly explained the structure during communication; finally, she summarized the rules. For example, when teaching the past tense, B first told the students her own experience of yesterday as a demonstration and then asked the students to share their experiences of yesterday. She corrected students' grammatical mistakes and briefly explained the past tense during the communication. After that, B guided students to practice the present and past tense and summarized the rules.

Teacher C, using the traditional approach of FFI, separated grammar teaching from skills work or communicative practice, using drills, exercises, and rule explanation most often. He taught at a fast pace, giving students little time to think and discuss. His interactions with the students were mainly about exercises, authentic communications were rare, and students' answers were usually short. C spent most of the time on grammar. He explained grammar explicitly in a deductive way. He gave extensive explanations of grammatical rules and asked students to take notes. For the same unit on the present perfect tense, teacher C's teaching was quite different from that of A. At the beginning of the class, C asked students to take notes about the present perfect tense. He then explained the rules in a detailed and systematic way, even covering the rules that should be taught in later units. C summarized the usages and rules of the present perfect tense and asked students to memorize the rules. Finally, he led students to practice these rules through exercises and summarized the differences between the present perfect and simple past tense. As C and A were both teaching eighth graders with the same teaching content, the differences between their teaching practices were obvious. Another example concerns comparative and superlative forms, which the students had already learned in the previous semester; A spent only eight minutes leading the students in a review, while C spent a whole class summarizing the rules systematically.

#### 4.2. Teachers' Beliefs

Teachers' beliefs were explored in interviews, which addressed five aspects, including FFI and MFI, FFI timing, FonFs and FonF, explicit and implicit, and deductive and inductive. The results from the interview showed that all teachers preferred FFI. First, they all believed that grammar should be taught, but gave different reasons. For teacher A, grammar is a necessity regardless of examination:

Excerpt 1:

Grammar is the basic framework of a language. Just like the frame structure of a building, grammar is a necessity for language learning regardless of examinations (A: I2).

Meanwhile, for teachers B and C, grammar is necessary only to help students pass exams, as grammar constitutes a major part of exams. If exams were not considered, B and

C were more in favor of MFI, because they believed that students can automatically acquire grammar in MFI:

Excerpt 2:

If exams were not considered, I do not think we need to learn grammar deliberately. We just need to study it when encountering difficulties. I think we can learn grammar through speaking and using it (B: I2).

If exams were not taken into consideration, I would definitely not teach grammar, because I think students can understand grammar during communication. The teachers don't have to spend most of the time teaching grammar. But due to the pressure of exams, I spend a lot of time on grammar in my daily teaching. Without exams, I think communication is more important, and as long as students can communicate, they will naturally acquire grammar (C: I2).

Second, they had different beliefs with regard to FFI timing. A and B thought that FFI should be combined with communicative activities, instead of being conducted in isolation, because:

Excerpt 3:

Isolated grammar teaching is boring and I will feel anxious . . . I prefer to integrate grammar gradually in other activities, because in that way students will not shrink back from grammar learning (A: I1).

When students learn grammar in isolation, it is like a mathematical formula for them; they know how to use it when they see this formula but they cannot really use it (B: I1).

Although A and B shared the view that FFI should be combined with communicative activities, they varied with regard to the specific timing of FFI. A believed that communicative activities should be conducted before grammar teaching, while B thought that grammar teaching should be integrated throughout the whole process of teaching:

Excerpt 4:

I prefer to carry out communicative activities first because it helps students have an overall perception of the form, and the following grammar teaching will be more acceptable to students (A: I2).

I prefer to first introduce the language forms that will be covered in the communicative activities, and then explain the forms briefly during the communicative activities, and finally reinforce them after the communicative activities (B: I2).

Teacher C, however, insisted that FFI should be separated from communicative activities because:

Excerpt 5:

Students' attention will be distracted if grammar is integrated with other skills (C: I1).

Combining grammar instruction with communicative activities is not practical because the class time is limited, and teachers cannot elaborate and expand on the grammatical rules (C: I2).

Third, all the participants acknowledged the importance of FonFs, considering structured and systematic grammar instruction to be very important. They regarded FonF (i.e., focusing on grammar reactively when it arises incidentally or when students have problems with it) as insufficient. Even if students do not make mistakes, teachers still need to explain grammatical rules because:

Excerpt 6:

Not making mistakes does not mean students understand or use the rule well (A: I2).



Whether students have problems was only one of the criteria used to judge whether to teach the rule or not. The more important criterion should be the difficulty of the structure. For easy structures such as the simple present tense, my students learned well . . . But for the simple past tense, many students cannot use it at all . . . (B: I2).

Explaining rules makes me feel reassured. I think the teacher should explain the rules first, and then explain again when the students make mistakes (C: I2).

Fourth, comparing implicit and explicit instruction, all teachers preferred the latter, believing that teachers must explain grammatical rules explicitly and clearly. Implicit instruction was thought to be confusing for learners, while explicit instruction was considered necessary, especially for certain groups of students:

Excerpt 7:

I am used to explaining grammatical rules explicitly. For example, when teaching the present perfect tense, teacher must first clearly explain its rules before students can make sentences. If the teacher shows students example sentences and asks them to learn implicitly, students will not understand why the teacher gave them the sentences (C: I2).

Grammar, like formulas in mathematics, may be more effective for students who do not perform well but still work hard. For these students, when they do not understand, the teacher can give them such a formula and they can use it to practice. After much practice, they may understand and acquire the structure, and may not need the formula any more (B: I2).

Finally, with regard to inductive and deductive instruction, A and B preferred inductive instruction, encouraging students to find grammatical rules by themselves and then helping them summarize the rules. They explained that:

Excerpt 8:

If the teacher explains the rules directly, students will not think and learn by themselves (A: I2).

If the teacher lets students discover rules by themselves first, the students will be more impressed. Even if the rules the students find may be wrong, they will at least have a thinking process and will learn the rules better. Additionally, students' inductive learning abilities can be improved (B: I2).

Teacher C, however, was accustomed to using deductive instruction. However, he said that he would try to use inductive instruction in his future teaching:

Excerpt 9:

I seldom use inductive instruction in my daily teaching, maybe because I am used to explaining grammatical rules by myself. Now I think this method might work: letting the students discover for themselves may promote their thinking. I think I will try that later (C: I2).

#### 4.3. Factors Affecting Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

The teachers' beliefs and practices regarding FFI were influenced by many factors, among which the most salient ones are as follows:

##### 4.3.1. Teaching and Research Activities

All participants mentioned that the teaching and research activity organized by the school helped them greatly. The school organizes this activity once a month. Two teachers demonstrate their lessons in a multimedia classroom, while the other teachers observe the classes and then evaluate the lessons collectively. The multimedia classroom, unlike normal classrooms, has two areas. The front area is the lecture room where students sit around round tables, and there are videos in the corners. The back area is the observation

room, which is separated from the lecture room with glass, through which teachers can observe the class; students cannot see the observation room. The teachers remarked that, through this activity, they learned not only how to teach but also how to evaluate. A and B participated in the activity often and they carried out various activities in their own teaching even when teaching grammar.

Moreover, learning and communication outside of the school also influenced the teachers, especially A. As a teacher with more teaching years, A has more opportunities to go out to study and exchange with teachers from other places. She said:

Excerpt 10:

What I learn from conferences, workshops, and refresher courses has the greatest impact on me because I could learn new teaching methods, especially from excellent teachers in more developed cities ... From these activities, I have learned different ways to combine grammar and skills teaching ... (A: I2)

#### 4.3.2. Curriculum Requirements and Testing System

The curriculum requirements also influenced the teachers, especially B:

Excerpt 11:

The curriculum requirements had the greatest impact on me, because teachers should teach according to the curriculum (B: I2).

Based on her knowledge of the curriculum requirements, she stated that communicative language teaching should be conducted to cultivate students' communicative competence; thus, B was inclined to embrace the communicative approaches of FFI.

The teachers were also influenced by the testing system. The homework assigned by the teachers was heavily exam-oriented. Teachers spent a lot of time checking students' homework after class and explaining it in class. Examination stress made class time so limited that teachers had to race against the clock. Therefore, C adopted isolated grammar teaching to save time, while mixed form-focused, explicit, inductive and integrated FFI approaches can be found in A and B's beliefs and practices:

Excerpt 12:

It is hard for teachers to cater to both exam preparation and the development of students' communicative competence. Teachers can only try to improve students' communicative competence under the premise of focusing on exams (A: I1).

#### 4.3.3. Learning Experience

Learning experience also influenced the teachers' beliefs and practices. The teachers provided students with learning strategies that they found effective when they were studying English, such as reciting texts. In explaining their preferences for FFI, explicit, and inductive teaching, A and B provided examples of their own learning experience.

For C, who has the fewest teaching years, his previous learning experience, especially his experience in middle school, had the greatest impact on him. This was the main reason for the traditional, isolated, and deductive FFI approach reflected in C's beliefs and practices:

Excerpt 13:

My middle school English teacher had the greatest impact on me. I mainly learned grammar in middle school ... My middle school English teacher paid great attention to grammar and adopted the traditional grammar-centered teaching method, which influenced my teaching when I became a teacher (C: I2).

All the results are summarized in Figure 2.

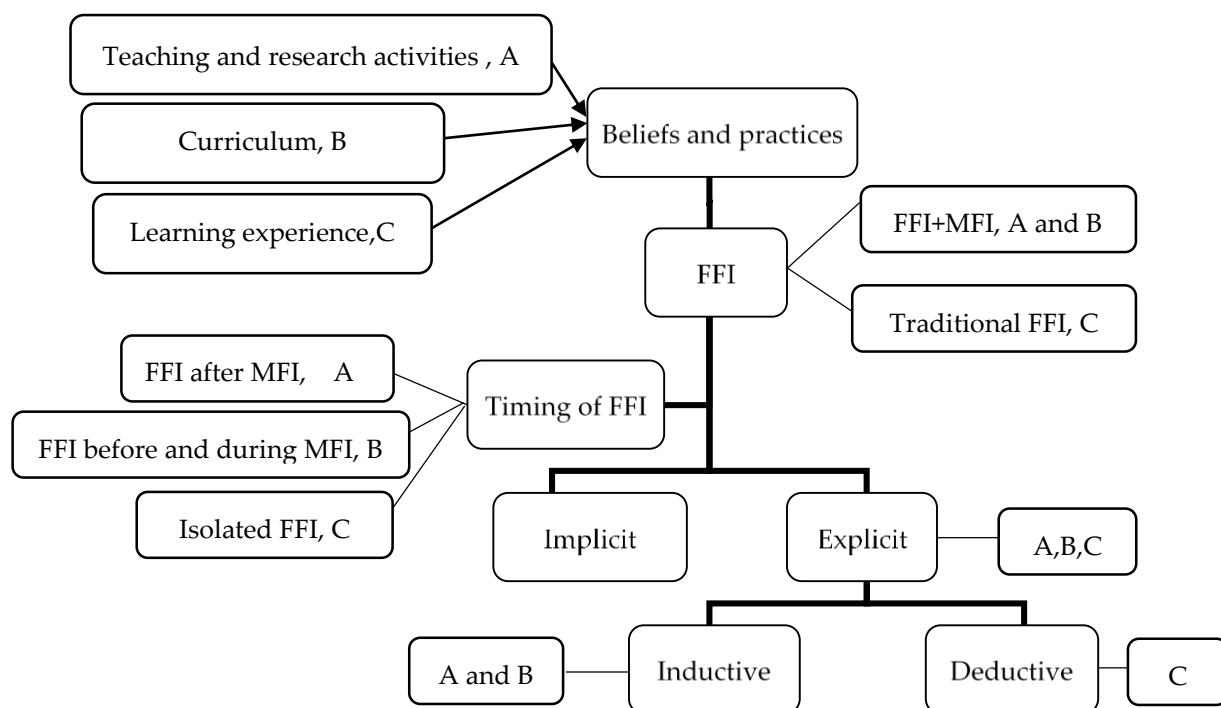


Figure 2. Conceptual model of the indicated results.

## 5. Discussion

This study investigated Chinese middle school EFL teachers' beliefs about and practices of FFI and the factors that influence their beliefs and practices. Overall, the teachers' practices were consistent with their beliefs. Compared to those studies which relate observations of practice to decontextualized expressions of beliefs, the present research design of eliciting teachers' beliefs based on their classroom observations may have prompted "post hoc" explanations and justifications of their practices, thus generating a closer link between practices and beliefs [41]. The consistency between the teachers' beliefs and practices reinforced their beliefs [42].

Consistently with Graus and Coppen's [2,6,13] findings, we found that the teachers preferred FFI, FonFs, and explicit instruction. However, unlike the student teachers' distinct preferences for strong, extensive, and isolated FFI in Graus and Coppen's [2,6,13] studies, we found that the teachers with more teaching experience (A and B) tended to combine grammar with other skills. In practice, they paid more attention to interactions with or between students, and they focused on form briefly and inductively during or after communications. Their beliefs and practices were more in line with the recommendations in the SLA and the new curriculum standard that grammar should be combined with communicative activities. These teachers are very familiar with the teaching process and have entered a renewal and maturation stage [43]. They can better reflect on their teaching and pay attention to the long-term development of students, more effectively cultivating students' communicative competence [44].

The beliefs and practices of C, the teacher with fewer teaching years, resembled the traditional grammar instruction preferences of the student teachers in Graus and Coppen's [2,6,13] studies. C preferred to teach grammar in isolation, and he said he would teach grammatical rules anyway because he felt reassured in doing so. This reflects the psychological reasons for teachers to teach grammar, that is, teachers teach grammar not only because they think it can help students acquire language, but also because it has a positive psychological impact on them. Grammar teaching seems to be 'true' language teaching, which makes both teachers and students feel assured [4]. In practice, he spent a lot of time on grammar, teaching grammar systematically, in isolation, and deductively. This echoes the findings from previous research that teachers with limited teaching experience

are more likely to use the traditional teaching method [44]. Novice teachers are still in the stage of survival and consolidation, and they need to establish their status as a teacher [43]. Traditional teaching methods center on teachers' explanation of their knowledge, which helps teachers to better manage their classrooms and establish authority [44]. Instilling and strengthening knowledge can also allow students to obtain high scores in exams. All of these factors were reflected in C's class.

The teachers' beliefs and practices were found to be influenced by teaching and research activities, curriculum standards, examinations, and learning experience. Specifically, learning experience influenced C the most, as he mentioned in the interview that he mainly learned grammar in middle school and that his middle school English teacher adopted traditional grammar teaching method, which influenced his own teaching. This finding corroborates previous finding that teachers' own learning experiences play a significant role in shaping their beliefs and practices [32,45], especially for novice teachers who are in a period of "apprenticeship of observation" [45]. B mentioned in the interview that the curriculum influenced her the most. China's elementary and secondary education has experienced significant changes in this regard. Research on teacher orientation to the new English curriculum (NEC) for Chinese secondary schools showed that the NEC practices are valuable and have been incorporated into practice to some extent, thus changing teachers' habits [46]. B's beliefs and practices reflected the influence of communicative language teaching advocated in the NEC. For A, learning and communication outside of the school influenced her the most. Research has shown that it is easier for teachers who have a strong network with outside research and teaching institutions to develop their knowledge by reconceptualizing their local knowledge and linking this to broader social contexts [11]. These teachers accept new teaching ideas with relative ease. As a teacher with more teaching experience, A had more opportunities to learn beyond the school. Though we cannot identify whether there were changes in the teachers' beliefs over time, the results indicate that, with the accumulation of teachers' teaching years, contextual factors such as the learning opportunities they are exposed to and the curriculum and evaluation system may gradually shape and even change teachers' beliefs and practices. There will be a stronger two-way link between teachers' teaching experience and beliefs, and teachers' beliefs may be further developed [2]. Teaching experience is obviously an influencing factor here, as teachers with limited teaching experience are more conservative while teachers with more experience are most open to new ideas.

Another notable insight is that gaps as well as possible connections between theoretical domains and classroom practices were revealed. For gaps, the teachers rarely justified their teaching with reference to theory or research. For example, in A's explanation of why FFI is needed, there was no mention of any theory or research. Meanwhile, B and C believed that FFI is only needed for exams and that MFI is sufficient if exams are not considered. However, research has shown that MFI is not enough for L2 learners as they cannot achieve the target level, while FFI can lead to more target-oriented gains and greater fluency and accuracy among L2 learners [20]. Despite the gap, possible connections between theory and practice were also found. Throughout the study, the teachers reported that they undertook more conscious and deeper reflection on their grammar teaching, and they showed interest in related research and theories. For example, C was used to deductive grammar teaching, but he said in the interview that he would try to use inductive teaching in the future. A and B were interested in the research results and researchers' views on grammar teaching. This suggests that the vital contribution of research to practice is that it enables teachers to think differently and to try new practices, and helps them express what is implicit by talking about their practices in new ways [3]. In view of the limited impact of research on practical grammar teaching, researchers need to combine researching and teaching, conduct research based on teachers' questions, convey research findings to teachers in a straightforward and respectful way, and foster a reciprocal relation between research and practices [3].

## 6. Conclusions

This study investigated Chinese middle school EFL teachers' FFI beliefs and practices and the factors shaping their beliefs and practices. The results showed that, overall, the teachers preferred form-focused methods, FonFs, and explicit instructions. The teachers with more teaching experience adopted communicative approaches of FFI, integrating form and meaning inductively at different times, while the teacher with fewer teaching years adopted traditional and deductive methods of grammar teaching. The teachers' beliefs and practices were affected by various factors. The teachers with more teaching years were influenced by teacher education and the prescribed curriculum, while the teacher with fewer teaching years was influenced by his own learning experience.

The study offers some implications. First, teachers need to reflect on their beliefs and practices and learn about related theories and studies to validate their classroom decisions. Second, teacher educators should draw teachers' attention to the gaps between their beliefs and practices and theoretical and curriculum-related ideas, and help them adjust incompatible conceptions. Middle school teachers usually have limited access to current theories and studies, and teacher educators should offer teachers related materials and information. Third, both researchers and policymakers should take teachers' beliefs and practices into consideration, as teachers' beliefs can play an important mediating role in curriculum implementation [9]. Further research is needed to explore the incongruence between teachers' beliefs and practices and curriculum and research and how teachers' beliefs and practices change with time. To form a stronger connection between theory and practice, the collaborative efforts of researchers and teachers are needed.

The limitations of this case study are acknowledged. We cannot make general claims about Chinese middle school English teachers, although we believe many of the issues identified here will resonate in the Chinese context. More research is needed to explore teachers' FFI beliefs and practices in different contexts.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su15076109/s1>.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, C.L. and J.X.; methodology, C.L.; software, C.L.; validation, C.L. and J.X.; formal analysis, C.L.; investigation, C.L.; resources, J.X.; data curation, C.L.; writing—original draft preparation, C.L.; writing—review and editing, C.L. and J.X.; visualization, C.L. and J.X.; supervision, J.X.; project administration, C.L. and J.X.; funding acquisition, C.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the MOE (Ministry of Education in China) Project of Humanities and Social Sciences, grant number 21YJC740025.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Huazhong University of Science and Technology. All participants voluntarily took part in this study and provided their informed consent to participate in this study before their participation.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** We are thankful to the reviewers and editors for their constructive comments and suggestions. Any remaining errors are our own.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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