

Article

Understanding Novice and Experienced Teachers' Cognitions and Practices for Sustainable Teacher Development: The Case of Form-Focused Instruction in English Language Teaching

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Abstract: Framed in Complexity Theory, this paper presents a multi-case study of Chinese university English teachers' cognitions and practices about form-focused instruction in English language teaching. Four teachers, including two novice teachers and two experienced ones, were involved in the study. A triangulation method, including semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews, was used to examine and compare their cognitions and practices. Research findings reveal that all teachers favoured focus on form instruction rather than focus on forms instruction in English teaching in their cognitions; however, the two novice teachers failed to implement focus on form instruction in practices, whereas the two experienced teachers carried it out consistently. The result calls for effective teacher education programmes for sustainable teacher development, particularly in sustaining the development of novice teachers' knowledge about how to implement focus on form instruction in pedagogical practice. The implications arising from this study for L2 teacher education in China and similar L2 contexts are also discussed.

Keywords: teachers' cognitions; Complexity Theory; form-focused instruction; novice teachers; experienced teachers; Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers



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1. Introduction

Despite the importance of sociocultural factors, teaching is predominantly considered as a cognitive, or sociocognitive, activity and studies on language education have revealed that teachers have a complex set of cognitions about their students, teaching methods and classroom decision-making [1–9]. Teachers' cognitions are considered to be the guiding principles for teachers to implement their classroom practices [2,10–12]. Therefore, exploring teachers' cognitions is crucial to understanding their pedagogical practices and expertise in teaching [13–15]. According to complexity theory, teachers' cognitions are complex, dynamic and contextualised [4,6,9]. They are firstly complex, covering multiple areas and inter-related topics such as prior language learning experience [16,17], teacher education programmes [18–20], teaching practices [10,21] and contextual factors [2,22,23]. In addition, teachers' cognitions are dynamic in nature. The dynamism of language teachers' cognitions results from teacher development, which is usually influenced by education or experience. If language teachers receive teacher education training or accumulate teacher experience, they will update their cognitions [6,24,25]. In addition, numerous studies on language teachers' cognitions show that teachers' practices are sometimes at odds with their cognitions, revealing the complexity as well as the dynamic nature of teachers' cognitions [26,27]. For example, Phipps and Borg [3] revealed tensions between language teachers' grammar teaching cognitions and their practices through a longitudinal study on Turkish practising English teachers. They further explained that factors such as students'

expectations and classroom management contributed to the mismatches between teachers' cognitions and practices. This finding signified that teachers tended to change their cognitions in order to satisfy students' needs and respond to contextual factors. Finally, it is also noted that teachers' cognitions are inclined to be influenced by context, which partly justifies the discrepancy between teachers' cognitions and their practices [2,28]. Under such circumstances, teachers usually change their original cognitions and adapt their cognitions to suit the practical classroom setting [4].

Sufficient studies have been reported on either novice teachers' [29–32] or experienced teachers' cognitions [33–35]; yet, research on comparing novice teachers' and experienced teachers' cognitions has not been sufficiently documented. Novice teachers are usually termed as teachers who have just commenced their teaching, with limited (usually less than three years) teaching experience, whereas experienced teachers are defined as teachers who have many years of teaching experience (usually at least five years) [36]. Novice teachers are inclined to have unrealistic teaching cognitions due to insufficient teaching experience, while experienced teachers tend to have practical and stable cognitions owing to their rich and adequate teaching experience [37]. Novice teachers and experienced teachers are distinguished because they lie at two extreme ends of teacher development, if teachers' professional development is viewed as a continuum. Novice teachers are located at the early stages of the continuum, with experienced teachers at the later stages. It is generally believed that experienced teachers' thinking and classroom decisions are steady because they have completed a series of teacher training programmes and are supposed to know how to incorporate new pedagogical knowledge into their own teaching. By contrast, novice teachers are at the initial stage and are still accumulating pedagogical knowledge to deliver their classroom teaching [32]. They have more variable elements in their thinking than do experienced teachers [37].

In order to obtain an understanding about novice teachers and experienced teachers' cognitions and practices about form-focused instruction, particularly a comparison between them, a multi-case study was undertaken and reported within the framework of complexity theory in this paper. Four Chinese university EFL teachers, including two novice and two experienced teachers, were involved. The findings provide insights into L2 teachers' professional development and how Chinese EFL teachers implement L2 teaching. More importantly, comparing novice and experienced teachers' cognitions about English language teaching will enable novice EFL teachers to know the necessity for, and the means of, enhancing their teaching by learning from their experienced counterparts in terms of participating in teacher education programmes, as an effective way of sustainable teacher development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teachers' Cognitions

"Teachers' cognitions" refer to the teaching principles that teachers hold in their mind about teaching and learning that guide their classroom decisions and actions [1,2]. Studies on teachers' cognitions mushroomed as research on teaching changed its focus from a process-product approach to teachers' thinking patterns [38–40]. The new paradigm incorporates teachers' thinking into their behaviour, focusing on cognitive factors that guide their actual classroom teaching. The paradigm posits that teachers' actions or decision-making in classroom teaching displays what they know, believe and think, and teachers' thinking guides their classroom practices [41]. Based on this assumption, research on teachers' thinking has become one of the main strands of teacher research [42]. However, a range of terms such as *cognitions*, *belief*, *knowledge*, *principles*, *maxims*, *schema*, *language awareness*, *personal theories* and so on are used by researchers to define teachers' thinking [2,22]. The present study employs *teachers' cognitions* as a comprehensive term to refer to teachers' thinking. Sometimes, other synonymous terms, such as *belief* and *knowledge*, are used interchangeably. A plethora of literature shows that teachers' cognitions are mediated by various factors,

including teachers' schooling experiences [42–44], their professional coursework [45,46], teaching experiences [47,48] and contextual factors [2,15,40,49].

2.2. Complexity Theory in Understanding Teachers' Cognitions

Derived from multiple different disciplines, such as biology, physics and mathematics, since the mid-20th century, Complexity Theory, also known as Dynamic Systems Theory or Chaos Theory, has been extensively applied in applied linguistics and has particularly been employed to understand the development of language teachers' cognitions [4,6,50].

Firstly, teachers' cognitions are complex, as reflected in two aspects. One is teachers' cognitions that involve multiple areas: prior language learning experience [16,17], teacher education programmes [18,19], teaching practices [10,21] and contextual factors [2,7,22,23]. These multifaceted cognitions are usually interlinked with one another. The other aspect is that teachers' cognitions are composed of many dimensions of cognitions [50]. Among these cognitions, some are core and others are peripheral [49,51,52]. According to Pajares [49], beliefs are distinctive in strength and power, varying along a core–peripheral range. If teachers' beliefs are considered as a system, core beliefs refer to beliefs that are connected with others in the system and peripheral beliefs are beliefs on which other beliefs are not dependent in the system [49]. Peripheral beliefs are easily subjected to change and impact actions unremarkably, while core beliefs are relatively stable and mediate teachers' behaviour greatly. Phipps and Borg [3] examined the mismatches between teachers' beliefs and practices, demonstrating that some teachers' practices were inconsistent with some particular beliefs, called peripheral beliefs, while some teachers' practices were in line with a set of core beliefs about language learning. They further indicated that it was core beliefs that shaped teachers' classroom decisions. In this study, Phipps and Borg [3] speculated that core beliefs were rooted in personal experience, while peripheral beliefs were based upon theories [3].

Secondly, teachers' cognitions are dynamic and might change over time, especially after they receive new teacher education training [19,53] or accumulate more teaching experiences [24]. Ha and Murray [19] examined to what extent Vietnamese English teachers' beliefs about oral corrective feedback (CF) were mediated by a teacher professional development (PD) programme, finding that the PD programmes led to teachers' CF beliefs changing. Freeman [24] carried out a longitudinal study on how a cohort of in-service foreign language teachers changed their teaching cognitions and practices, revealing that these foreign language teachers generated a series of new ideas in their teaching experience and incorporated them into their teaching.

Finally, teachers' cognitions are also contextualised and adaptable [50]. Teachers tend to change their cognitions so as to adapt to new contexts in their actual classroom teaching. Feryok [54] reported how an Armenian EFL teacher changed her cognitions and began to adopt communicative approaches to teach her students after she realised that her students learned English for practical reasons, which was very different from her generation. Since her students faced a new environment, the Armenian EFL teacher needed to make changes in her practice. In summary, it can be said that Complexity Theory provides a theoretical lens to view the diversity of teachers' mental lives and how teachers' cognitions are constructed in the interactions between the components of teachers' cognitions, practices and contexts.

2.3. Form-Focused Instruction

Form-focused instruction refers to any instructional activity whose focus is linguistic form, which includes two approaches, "focus on forms" and "focus on form" instruction, according to their different views on linguistic form [55,56]. Focus on forms instruction generally refers to a teaching approach following a structural syllabus that focuses on language forms, such as word classes, time and tenses, clauses, etc. It emphasises the accuracy of language by directing students' attention to linguistic forms. In contemporary language teaching classrooms, focus on forms instruction is usually operationalised in terms

of PPP (present–practice–produce) and its variants [57]. For example, *produce* is omitted due to limited time and other reasons, which means teachers only start with presenting grammar points and related rules to students and end with asking them to perform some practice either in the form of controlled production exercises or in meaningful activities. Unlike focus on forms instruction, focus on form instruction [55] is defined as a type of instruction that “overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally, in lessons where the overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (pp. 45–46). According to Long [55], focus on form instruction occurs when learners are working at meaningful tasks while their attention is occasionally directed to specific linguistic forms.

Based on Long’s theory, Ellis puts forward two types of focus on form instruction, “incidental focus on form” and “planned focus on form” [58,59]. The former type takes place when learners’ attention is incidentally and spontaneously drawn to linguistic forms in meaning-focused activities or tasks, while the latter type occurs when learners’ attention is initially drawn to preselected language items in communicative activities [58]. The latter type is quite similar to focus on forms instruction, in that it still attends to preselected language forms, but the focus is to communicate. In this study, two approaches, focus on form instruction and focus on forms instruction, are distinguished according to whether teachers’ grammar instruction occurs in meaning-based activities [60–62]. If teachers’ grammar teaching involves communicative and meaningful classroom activities, we regard this as focus on form instruction. If teachers just explain new grammar points by stating grammar rules or language structures and then ask students to carry out some practice in a decontextualised and structural way, we deem it as focus on forms instruction.

Form-focused instruction is widely adopted in L2 language teaching classrooms [63]. In Chinese EFL teaching, focus on forms instruction dominated L2 classrooms for several decades. Under the influence of the traditional Chinese culture of Confucianism and Taoism, and the early grammar-oriented foreign language teaching methodologies, ELT in China is subject to criticism for its grammar-oriented and teacher-centred teaching method [64,65]. Taught by this method, Chinese learners were able to read English well, but failed to speak and write accurately and appropriately in English. As a result, they only learned “deaf and dumb” English. In order to solve this problem, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) has initiated a series of educational reforms to boost the development of ELT in higher education since the end of last century [66,67]. In 2020, MoE of China issued a new document named *College English Curriculum Requirements* to guide university English teaching, which specifies that university English teaching should be directed at cultivating students’ communicative competence and enhancing their comprehensive English skills [68]. A focus on form approach is strongly needed in Chinese EFL higher education. The previous research has shown that although communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have been introduced in Chinese ELT classrooms, they have not yet been widely implemented due to numerous constraints, ranging from socio-cultural factors such as the influence of Confucianism to institutional factors, including the lack of human resources and teaching materials, large size classes and a limited number of instructional hours, classroom management issues, and a memorization-based exam system [69–73]. However, most of these studies were conducted in an old era when old curriculum documents were in effect. In the new social context, how Chinese EFL teachers perceive form-focused instruction remains basically unknown. In order to address this issue, we undertook this study to explore Chinese university English teachers’ cognitions about form-focused instruction after the new education reform was launched in 2020. In particular, two novice teachers’ and two experienced teachers’ cognitions and practices about English language teaching were examined and compared. Specifically, this study is guided by the following questions:

- (1) What are Chinese novice and experienced university English teachers’ cognitions and practices about form-focused instruction?
- (2) Are there differences or similarities between Chinese novice and experienced teachers’ cognitions and practices about form-focused instruction?

- (3) How do we conceptualize Chinese university EFL teachers' beliefs within complexity theory?

3. Methods

In order to explore participants' cognitions and practices about form-focused instruction in English language teaching, this study utilised a multi-case study approach that is exploratory and descriptive in nature to gather data [74,75]. According to Yin [76], case studies do not aim at making generalizations about populations or universes, but rather at generalizing theoretical propositions. Likewise, this study does not aim to generalise how EFL teachers with different teaching experience perceive form-focused instruction in China. Rather, its aim is to explore how EFL teachers perceive form-focused instruction about English teaching in a university of mainland China, and whether the novice teachers and the experienced teachers differ in their views to EFL teaching.

3.1. Context and Participants

Participants were selected from a provincial university in central China. The compulsory English course, commonly known as College English, encompasses all language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary, which means teachers have to involve all language skills in their classes. In terms of classroom time, there are 16 weeks for each semester and for each week there are two sessions. One session focuses on reading and writing, and the other session is listening and speaking.

We adopted convenience sampling to choose participants. Convenience sampling refers to a study of participants taken from a group that researchers obtain easy access to [77]. Based on this principle, two novice teachers, Sun and Tang, and two experienced teachers, Hua and Duan, volunteered to participate in the study after they received the research invitation. All of their names are anonymised. Sun and Tang have been working as university English teachers for 2 years and 3 years, respectively, while Hua and Duan have been teaching in this university for 12 years and 9 years, respectively. All of them obtained university English teaching certificates to teach in a university. Sun, Tang and Hua obtained Master's degrees of English language education from three prominent Chinese universities, while Duan obtained her doctoral degree in the same field from a well-known Chinese university. It is noted that Duan used to teach in a secondary school for 6 years and then pursued her doctoral degree. She was recruited by this university after her graduation with a doctorate and had been working there for 9 years since then. All teachers were teaching the first year university students when the study was conducted. Table 1 shows their demographic information.

Table 1. Four participants' profile.

Participants	Teaching Experience	Teaching Certificate	Academic Qualification	Their Student Grade
Sun	2 years	Yes	Master's degree	Freshman
Tang	3 years	Yes	Master's degree	Freshman
Hua	12 years	Yes	Master's degree	Freshman
Duan	15 years (6 years in secondary school)	Yes	Doctoral degree	Freshman

3.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews, forming a triangulation, were adopted to collect data (see Table 2). Data was collected over one academic semester of 16 weeks, spanning three stages.

Table 2. Data collection methods.

Research Methods	Individual Time	Total Time
Semistructured interview	Once for each participant, lasting 1 h	4 h
Classroom observations	Four times for each participant, lasting 8 h	32 h
Stimulated recall interviews	Four times for each participant, lasting 6 h	24 h

In the first stage, semi-structured interviews were used to elicit participants' cognitions about form-focused instruction in grammar instruction, with each interview lasting about one hour. Participant were asked using a list of prepared questions about their teaching purposes, their teaching methods and their favourite approaches to grammar teaching (see Appendix A). We also raised some extended questions pertinent to the theme, according to the participants' responses. In this way, participants could provide more relevant information about the theme so that researchers could clearly identify participants' cognitions about the theme. We held simple talks with them around the above-mentioned unsophisticated English teaching questions in a relaxed environment, so that they did not have negative emotions when talking with us and presented their natural responses. As a result, we acquired reliable and valid data.

In the second stage, classroom observations were undertaken to observe how participants carried out their classroom teaching in terms of form-focused instruction. All teachers indicated in the interviews that they followed the same teaching procedures for all units featured in textbook-oriented teaching. Based on this, we decided to audit two units' courses (each unit for two sessions, four hours) for each participant. All classroom observations were nonparticipant and nonstructured and were conducted at the convenience of participants when their teaching involved grammar instruction. By "nonparticipant", we meant researchers' role in this study was to observe classroom teaching solely, instead of participating in teaching activities, so that we could collect data in spontaneous classroom environments. We adopted nonstructured, or open-ended, classroom observations because we intended to understand the whole picture of their classroom teaching. We did not video record the classes in order to obey their university's regulations; instead, we audio recorded their teaching and made field notes to maximise data elicitation. In addition, participants' teaching documents, such as their textbooks and handouts, were also gathered so that we were able to ascertain their teaching practices if necessary.

In the third stage, stimulated recall interviews were adopted to seek teachers' cognitions underlying their specific practices. They were completed within a couple of days after the nominated lessons so that participants still remembered their lessons and researchers had time to arrange interviews. However, the time was not too long, in case participants' recall ability were to be impaired. As a result, eight stimulated recall interviews were carried out (two for each participant), with each lasting around one hour and a half. Participants were guided by the questions prepared by researchers, which were based on their particular classroom decisions in their grammar instruction. Novice teachers and experienced teachers were asked different questions because they adopted different approaches in their practices (see Appendix B).

In order to encourage participants to disclose their cognitions about form-focused instruction as much as possible, their mother tongue, Mandarin Chinese, was used in the interviews. All semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews were audio-recorded, and then were transcribed in full, translated verbatim and, finally, were coded. The translated version was returned to participants for confirming whether there were some misunderstandings about them. When all data were collected, a comparison was made between the novice and the experienced teachers.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data in this study were analysed qualitatively. They were coded and analysed in a sequential and recursive manner. In order to improve coding reliability, both authors coded

the data. If there was disagreement on coding, we recoded until we reached consensus. Data analysis was approached according to the sequence of data collection, undergoing three stages. Specifically, data yielded from the first two stages, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, were coded in a deductive way according to the two terms of form-focused instruction, focus on forms or focus on form. As we stated clearly in Section 2.3, if participants' grammar teaching only involved grammar rule explanation and grammar point drilling without practising new grammar points in communicative activities, we categorized them as focus on forms instruction; if participants' grammar instruction was undertaken in communicative contexts, we deemed it as focus on form instruction. Framed by this principle, a bottom-up open-coding approach was used [78]. The coding started with reading through the transcripts. Codes such as "rules presentation", "translation examples", "cloze test", "dialogue", "task-based activities" were used to label teachers' grammar teaching processes and they were further employed to distinguish teachers' teaching methods, a focus on forms approach or focus on form approach. In the last stage, data collected from stimulated recall interviews were coded in an inductive way. Codes such as "English test", "students' factor", "contextual factors" were used to seek teachers' explanations for their classroom practices.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Teachers' Cognitions from Interviews

In the semi-structured interviews, when four participants were asked their views about form-focused instruction in grammar instruction, all of them held the same attitude that they favoured focus on form instruction. They reported that English language teaching, including English grammar instruction in Chinese higher education, should be implemented in meaningful contexts.

One novice teacher, Sun, responded that Chinese university students had been taught by the traditional method defined by the rote learning of vocabulary and structural forms in their primary and secondary school years, which resulted in their poor communication ability in English. He believed that university students should not be taught by the same method. Therefore, university teachers like him should teach grammar items to students in meaning-based contexts that aim at developing students' communicative competence.

The other novice teacher, Tang, held the same belief as Sun. She stated that university teachers should not present grammar rules to students directly and explicitly in grammar instruction as the old traditional grammar translation method did. Instead, teachers should teach grammar points to students in meaningful contexts in order that students understand how to use them in their communicative context. For example, she explained her beliefs about grammar instruction in this way:

Excerpt 1:

Knowing the purpose of learning grammar was important. The purpose of learning grammar lies in the method of using grammar in meaningful activities (such as dialogues, texts, and so on). The fact that students who get the answers to grammar items in the tests such as CET 4 and CET 6 does not mean that they have mastered good grammar skills. If they can use grammar to communicate with others accurately and flexibly and have good marks in their paper tests, they can be said to have solid grammar knowledge. Therefore, I think grammar teaching should be conducted in a meaningful way unlike the traditional way solely focusing on grammar rules and other grammatical forms (Interview, Tang).

In the interview, Tang held the view that grammar teaching should be completed in communicative contexts. In her view, students' solid grammar knowledge meant not only obtaining good marks in discrete-point tests but possessing strong communicative ability. Therefore, she advocated that grammar teaching should occur in meaning-based contexts.

Novice teachers' perceptions about form-focused instruction in grammar teaching are echoed by the experienced teachers. One experienced teacher, Hua, reported that Chinese university students should be taught how to use grammar in practical contexts.

As advanced English learners, they were supposed to possess all-round English skills. However, the old traditional grammar translation method they received in their primary and secondary schools only fostered their reading and listening competence, rather than their speaking and writing competence. Focus on form instruction, compared with focus on forms instruction, could promote students' speaking and writing competence more effectively. The other experienced teacher, Duan, confirmed Hua's views about form-focused instruction, claiming that focus on form instruction should be adopted in order to foster students' speaking competence and meet the new curriculum requirement. For example, Duan said,

Excerpt 2:

I think focus on form instruction is more desirable. As a university lecturer, I should encourage students to use English more in communicative contexts. Chinese students are too weak in their speaking and writing. If I employ focus on formS instruction, students may feel restricted and are not willing to speak. In order to develop their speaking and writing abilities, I support the focus on form instruction. This is also what the new curriculum reform mandates. The new curriculum not only requires university students to develop their reading and listening skills but their speaking and writing skills. Speaking and writing are particularly highlighted (Interview, Duan).

Duan believed that focus on forms instruction, such as the traditional grammar translation method characterised by memorising grammar rules and structures, could not cultivate students' communicative competence and occasionally undermined their communicative competence. Only grammatical structures learned in the communicative context could facilitate students' communication with others. Therefore, Duan believed grammar teaching should be implemented in communicative language teaching, which serves the purpose of English learning and teaching and meets the requirement of the new curriculum better.

To sum up, both the novice teachers and the experienced teachers tended to believe focus on form instruction should be adopted in Chinese university English grammar teaching. Focus on forms instruction is not suitable for university students who are supposed to utilise grammar points flexibly for communicative competence.

4.2. Teachers' Practices from Classroom Observations

Though all teachers responded they had preference on focus on form instruction over focus on forms instruction in the interview, data from classroom observations revealed that they implemented their practical classroom teaching differently. The novice teachers' practices about grammar teaching were still akin to the traditional method, which was actually focus on forms instruction, whereas the experienced teachers indeed actualised the focus on form instruction in classroom teaching.

The two novice teachers were observed to utilize focus on forms instruction in grammar instruction. When they presented grammar instruction, they typically started with introducing the definition or rules of grammar points to students, followed by providing students with some examples that usually took the form of decontextualised sentences. One novice teacher, Sun, not only explained the structure and the rule of a grammar point but gave several examples to students, which seemed to intend to enable students to use this grammar point in their own writing or reading. The following episode illustrates how Sun carried out grammar teaching in his class:

Episode 1:

Background Sun and his students are analysing a text, introducing language points of the text to students sentence by sentence in this class.

...

Teacher (T hereafter): Please note the sentence here. *Many new structures are built with a new type of steel joint, an I-joint, which appears to be the most durable type of joint.* Who can tell me the sentence pattern of this long sentence?

Students (Ss hereafter): . . . (several students said in Chinese softly)

T: Yes, this is an attributive clause, and *which* refers to an *I-joint*. Who can translate this sentence?

Ss: (silent)

T: Are you familiar with attributive clauses?

Ss: (quiet)

T: All right, let's review the grammatical knowledge about attributive clauses. What is an attributive clause?

Ss: (silent)

T: An attributive clause is a subordinate clause that functions as an attribute of a noun or a noun phrase. Attributive clauses refer to and qualify a noun (or a pronoun) in the main clause.

Please look at this sentence in this PPT slide. *The young man cheated his friend of much money, which was disgraceful.* Is this an attributive clause?

Ss: Yes (in chorus).

T: How to interpret this sentence?

Ss: . . . (together).

T: Awesome! *Which* here is traced back to refer to the major sentence *The young man cheated his friend of much money.* The attributive clause is not difficult but important in English reading and writing. Please pay much attention to this grammar point.

Given the importance of attributive clauses in English learning, Sun wanted to test whether his students grasped this point by asking them to identify an attributive clause in a text they were learning, as shown in this episode; however, he did not obtain any response from his students. Being aware that his students might have difficulty in understanding attributive clauses, he decided to help them to review this grammar point which they had learned in their secondary schools. He stated the definition of an attributive clause directly and provided an example of an attributive clause to students. Finally, he ended with teaching this grammar point by asking students to translate the exemplified attributive clause into Chinese. Here, Sun attempted to assist students to learn the attributive clause by presenting grammar rules and examples. His teaching principle was focusing on the structure and accuracy of the attributive clause, not on how to use it in a communicative context. His grammar teaching method was categorised as focus on forms instruction.

Likewise, the other novice teacher, Tang, almost adopted the same teaching method in her grammar instruction. When she presented grammar instruction, she began with introducing the definition of the grammar item directly, and then provided several examples containing that particular grammar item explicitly. She then drilled her students in the grammar item by rewriting sentences. She did not ask students to use this grammar item in a meaningful way. Episode 2 exemplifies how Tang taught the grammar item of an appositive clause in her class:

Episode 2:

Background Tang and her students are working at a grammar section in the after-text exercise. The following is the classroom process:

. . .

T: In this text, *appositive clauses* are widely used. What is an appositive clause?

Ss: (quiet, some students murmured in Chinese)

T: Nobody knows? Well, an appositive is a noun sitting next to another noun to rename it. (She introduces the definition of an appositive clause in Chinese.)

Ss: . . . (some students are still puzzled)

T: All right. Please look at the examples of appositive clauses on Page 103. (On page 103, there are 5 appositive clauses in the list).

Ss: . . . (Students open their textbook and read examples of appositive clauses)

T: Look at the first example *Since it was he who lost the fight, we ought to come again to the **conclusion** that people are powerless in the world.* In this sentence, *conclusion* refers to *people are powerless in the world*. They are the same element. So can you understand an appositive clause?

Ss: Yes. (Confidently this time)

T: Good. Please do the exercise below to consolidate your knowledge about appositive clauses. Please rewrite the following sentences using an appositive clause and the words in brackets.

Ss: . . . (do the exercise)

In this episode, Tang adopted almost the same way as Sun when she explained the grammar point of *appositive clauses* to her students. Therefore, it is concluded that the two novice teachers both employed focus on forms instruction. They followed the traditional grammar teaching, as is typically defined by practices such as presenting definitions or rules of grammar items, providing examples of using grammar items and asking students to drill grammar items in the form of translating or rewriting sentences.

Contrary to the two novice teachers' grammar instructional practices, the two experienced teachers utilised both focus on forms and focus on form instruction in their teaching. Similar to novice teachers, the experienced teachers adopted focus on forms when they presented grammar instruction to students. The difference was they went on to ask students to use grammar items in meaningful contexts by doing some task-based activities. After they presented grammar rules and provided examples to students, they asked their students to use grammar points in their own dialogues or in their writings. The following episode shows how the experienced teacher Hua delivered her grammar teaching:

Episode 3:

Background Hua and her students are working at a grammar section in the after-text exercise.

T: This text uses this grammar construction many times, with+ noun+ preposition phrase/participle/adjective. Look at the examples of using this grammar instruction on Page 49.

Ss: . . . (read the examples on Page 49)

- I like to sleep *with the windows open*.
- He arrived in New York *with only two dollars in his pocket*.
- *With the final exams approaching*, the students are busy reviewing their lessons.

T: Are you familiar with this grammar instruction? With+ noun+ preposition phrase/participle/adjective

Ss: Yes.

T: Great. Let's practise using this grammar construction. Please work in groups and play the roles as instructed below by using this grammar construction . . .

Ss: . . . (Sit in groups and do this activity)

In this episode, after presenting the structure and examples of *with + noun + preposition phrase/participle/adjective*, Hua adopted focus on form instruction to carry out her class teaching. She neither put students in a decontextualised context nor asked them to memorise those sentences and expressions. Instead, she asked them to make a meaningful context by using them. In this way, students not only knew the structure of the grammar construction

but also were able to use this grammar construction in communicative contexts. Likewise, the other experienced teacher also employed both approaches in her grammar teaching. She not only presented the grammatical form of *coordinating conjunctions* to students in a direct way, but asked students to write a summary of the text in which *coordinating conjunctions* should be used. She taught students to use *coordinating conjunctions* in a meaningful context instead of only teaching the grammatical form to students. Compared with the novice teachers, the two experienced teachers added focus on form instruction to their grammar teaching on the basis of adopting focus on forms instruction.

4.3. Teachers' Cognitions about Their Practices from Stimulated Recall Interviews

Stimulated recall interviews were undertaken to elicit teachers' views of their lessons and the rationale for in-class decisions in the classroom observations.

When the novice teachers were asked why they did not implement the focus on form instruction, they offered their reasons. One novice teacher, Sun, seemed to be surprised and responded that he had been thinking that he was implementing the focus on form instruction. He argued that he kept illustrating grammar points in order to enable students to use them in practical contexts. If this could not be called a focus on form instruction, he had no clue about how to actualize focus on form instruction in his practice. Obviously, Sun had misconceptions about focus on form instruction and did not know how to carry it out in his classroom teaching, correspondingly.

Faced with the same question, the other novice teacher Tang explained in a different way. She stated that she wanted to implement focus on form instruction in classroom teaching, but some contextual factors sometimes restricted her from implementing it. The following illustrated how she responded when she was asked to explain the rationale of her grammar teaching.

Though cultivating students' communicative competence was a priority task for me, I also had to assist students to pass two urgent and important English tests, CET 4 and CET 6. I thought focus on formS instruction was more helpful than focus on form instruction in equipping students with sufficient knowledge in preparation for these two crucial exams. Meanwhile, I was worried about students' receptivity to focus on form instruction. As far as I knew, students had got used to the traditional grammar translation method where a large quantity of knowledge had been transmitted by teachers. They just listened to and accepted the knowledge. If they were asked to take part in communicative classroom activities, they would be reluctant to get involved (Stimulated recall interview, Tang).

Tang pointed out that two contextual factors, English tests and student factor, restricted her from executing focus on form instruction. When she was asked whether she knew how to implement focus on form instruction, she was a little hesitant and seemed unconfident. She explained that she did not know how to implement focus on form instruction in the face of two contextual factors.

In contrast, the experienced teachers implemented a kind of "genuine" focus on form instruction in classroom teaching. When Hua was asked whether she was concerned with the contextual factor's influence on her practices, such as an exam's influence, students' receptivity, and classroom management, she responded that she did notice these contextual factors, but those factors' influence could be minimised and even reduced to null. In the stimulated recall interview, when she was asked what factors shaped her classroom teaching practices, she responded:

I indeed have a lot of considerations in my classroom decision making. My final classroom decision making is made based on my own thinking, students' needs, classroom management and other contextual factors. However, these contextual factors do not always handicap my decision. Even though they do, I can change them and get rid of their influence gradually. In my first class, when I asked them to practise the usage of invasion by dividing them into several

groups, some students were overexcited and kept talking and laughing, causing classroom management problems, some students did not speak English but continued talking in Chinese and some students made a lengthy dialogue, taking too much time. I reviewed these problems and made an announcement to them, hoping they avoided these problems in classroom teaching, especially in group discussion, otherwise they would face the severe outcome. They performed much better in the following weeks. So I think contextual factors can be minimised and even to be removed (Stimulated recall interview, Hua).

Hua also stated that sometimes some unexpected contextual factors happened and she had to respond quickly to them and tried to guarantee that her classroom teaching was free from the influence of contextual factors. She had twelve years' teaching experience and was equipped with sufficient knowledge about how to respond to unforeseen situations. In a word, the experienced teacher, Hua, was confident in implementing her classroom teaching with her original intentions and had sufficient expertise to carry out her cognitions. The other experienced teacher, Duan, echoed Hua's thoughts about the consistency between teachers' cognitions and practices. Duan remarked that she attended a workshop about how to implement focus on form instruction. The speaker of the workshop shared his experience of putting focus on form instruction into practice by introducing his methods about using focus on form instruction in Chinese university English teaching. Therefore, she knew how to actualise focus on form instruction in her practical teaching, even though contextual factors might happen unexpectedly.

5. Discussion

Informed by complexity theory, this study was undertaken to explore and compare university English teachers' cognitions and practices about form-focused instruction in grammar teaching by conducting a multicase study on two novice and two experienced teachers in China. The study revealed that all teachers favoured the focus on form instruction; however, when they were observed implementing their classroom teaching, the two novice teachers did not carry out genuine focus on form instruction, while the two experienced teachers were able to actualise focus on form instruction.

A mixture of insights emerged from the data. Firstly, both the novice teachers and experienced teachers held an opinion of supporting focus on form instruction in English language teaching. This signals that all of them were aware of the importance of fostering students' communicative competence in Chinese College English teaching, especially after the new curriculum requirement was published in 2020. This result corresponds with many previous studies, that language teaching should be implemented in accordance with communicative language teaching principles to develop students' ability to use English for communicative purposes [64,69,79–81]. In addition, the similarity of the novice teachers and the experienced teachers' cognitions about form-focused instruction implies that teachers with varied teaching experience have the same attitude toward English teaching in a unified top-down educational system where all teachers have to teach according to a central governing body's mandate. Teachers, guided by the same syllabus and teaching materials, tend to formulate similar teacher cognitions in English teaching [82,83].

The next insight to emerge here was that the novice teachers were not able to actualise their cognitions—focus on form instruction—in their practices, while the experienced teachers were. This displays that the novice teachers' cognitions about focus on form instruction were generally peripheral, while the experienced teachers' were mainly core or central [3,49,52,84]. Teachers' cognitions are a complex system where some cognitions are core and the rest are peripheral [49,52]. Core or central cognitions are resistant to change and play a more crucial role in shaping teachers' behaviours than peripheral cognitions [3,49]. Novice teachers had more peripheral cognitions than the experienced ones because these novice teachers' cognitions were still evolving and subject to change, especially when they were confronted with several contextual factors [3,28,37].

In the stimulated recall interviews of this study, one novice teacher, Tang, argued that two contextual factors, high stakes examinations and students' low English level, prompted her to use focus on forms instruction in her practice. In contrast, experienced teachers' cognitions are relatively stable because they had accumulated adequate pedagogical knowledge and were able to deal with the influence of contextual factors. In this study, the experienced teacher, Hua, responded in the stimulated recall interview that she could properly handle the contextual factors that potentially restricted her from implementing her classroom practices. This demonstrated that, compared with the experienced teachers, the novice teachers lacked the expertise of transforming their cognitions into their practices, especially when a range of contextual factors had to be taken into account.

Thirdly, the way in which the novice teachers implemented focus on forms instruction in their practices reflects that their cognitions about focus on form instruction are dynamic and contextualised, to some degree. When the novice teacher, Tang, was asked why she did not adopt focus on form instruction, she remarked that she adopted focus on forms instruction to help her students prepare for CET band 4. This signified that the novice teacher, Tang, modified her cognitions in order to satisfy students' needs. According to the new *College English Curriculum Requirements*, Chinese university English teachers should give priority to improving students' communicative competence [68]. However, in classroom practices, Tang needed to take the Chinese exam-oriented sociocultural environment into consideration and tailored her belief to the reality, which displays that teachers' cognitions are dynamic and adaptable [4,9].

Finally, it is worthy to note that the novice teachers' cognitions are not as solid as those of the experienced teachers. When the novice teacher, Sun, was asked why he did not adopt focus on form instruction, he explicated that he had been thinking the way he utilised was focus on form instruction. Apparently, he had a misconception of implementing focus on form instruction. He lacked adequate knowledge to make distinctions between the two approaches. In contrast, the two experienced teachers in the study had solid knowledge about form-focused instruction. According to complexity theory, the dynamics of language teachers' cognitions are associated with teacher development, which is usually achieved from teacher education or teaching experience [4]. This means that novice teachers need to renew or update their cognitions and knowledge by attending teacher education programmes, workshops, or other forms of continuing professional development or any other professional learning activities [63].

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study was conducted to explore Chinese university English teachers' cognitions and practices about form-focused instruction in grammar teaching. Two novice teachers and two experienced teachers were the focal participants. The result shows that all participants held cognitions that focus on form instruction should be implemented in Chinese university English teaching with a view to improving university students' communicative competence. These four Chinese teachers' cognitions are consistent with one of the goals in the key university English teaching document, *College English Curriculum Requirements*, according to which university students' communicative ability should be prioritised in English language teaching [68]. Findings also show that the novice teachers failed to carry out their professed focus on form instruction in their practices because they lacked solid pedagogical knowledge and flexible skills to deal with contextual factors, while the experienced teachers indeed implemented focus on form instruction in their actual practices.

The study provides several implications for Chinese EFL teacher education programmes, especially for beginning teachers. Teachers' cognitions are a complex system constructed by core and peripheral cognitions [3,49]. The novice teachers have more peripheral cognitions than the experienced ones, as evidenced in our study. Novice teachers are at the initial stage and are still accumulating pedagogical knowledge to enact their classroom teaching. They have more variable elements in their thinking than experienced teachers. Therefore, novice teachers have to take the initiative to take part in in-service teacher edu-

cation programmes as part of their professional learning, to understand how to implement new pedagogical ideas or skills in their classroom teaching and sustain their professional development. It is suggested that novice teachers actively take part in teacher education seminars and workshops hosted by experienced teachers, where they are able to witness how meaning-focused teaching methods, such as focus on form instruction, are used so that they know how to apply them to their own teaching. Moreover, in these seminars and workshops, experienced teachers can share their personal and effective experiences about how to mediate contextual factors when delivering focus on form instruction and how to approach grammar teaching in communicative contexts [32,85].

The study is also significant for university administrators and EFL teachers at the tertiary level in other contexts similar to China. Given novice teachers have more peripheral cognitions, lack sufficient pedagogical knowledge about innovative teaching methods, and have no rich teaching experience to deal with contextual factors, university administrators in charge of teacher education programmes might need to consider taking effective measures to scaffold and sustain novice teachers' professional development. Such suggestions might need to be related to current thinking on how we can view grammar teaching and learning given the increasing popularity of translanguaging practices in language teaching [86,87] and the divergent differences between the target language and Mandarin Chinese, which is the first language of the majority of these participating EFL teachers [53,88].

It is acknowledged that the study is a qualitative multi-case study that explores in-depth knowledge about teachers' cognitions and practices, and it does not intend to make generalisations of Chinese university English teachers' cognitions and practices across populations or contexts. A mixed-methods approach is suggested in future studies, so as to acquire a general landscape and in-depth knowledge of Chinese University novice and experienced EFL teachers' cognitions and practices about form-focused instruction.

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Appendix A. A Part of Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- Would you like to describe your language education experience?
- What are your purposes of grammar teaching?
- Do you think grammar rules should be covered in grammar teaching?
- How do you teach grammar in class?
- What is your ideal grammar teaching approach?

Appendix B. Examples of Stimulated Recall Interview Questions

For novice teachers:

- In the interview you said presenting grammar rules was unnecessary in the interview, but why did you actually present them in classroom teaching?
- Could you explicate why you did not devise meaningful communicative activities to present grammar points?
- Can you explain why there is inconsistency between what you replied in the interview and what you implemented in your classroom teaching in terms of grammar teaching?

For experienced teachers:

- Are you afraid that contextual factors such as the exam's influence, students' needs, and classroom management might influence your classroom decisions?
- How did you restrict the contextual factors from influencing your cognitions?
- Could you explain why you were so confident to devise meaningful activities to practise grammar points?

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