

# 高校英语教师

语法认知和实践研究 (英文)

孙 强 著

An Exploratory Study of Chinese University  
English as a Foreign Language Teachers'  
Cognitions and Practices about English  
Grammar Teaching



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English

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### 内容提要

本书调查了中国某省大学英语教师对语法教学的认知和实践情况。在 Borg 的理论框架中, 教师认知不仅受其以往的语言学习经验、教师教育课程和课堂经验的影响, 而且受语境因素的影响。本书采用了一种连续的探索性混合方法, 分两个阶段实施。

本书对教师认知和教师教育研究有重要的作用。它增加了不同教育背景下教师对语言教学的认知并对语言教学认知的方法论进行了深入的探讨。本书可作为高校英语教学者的参考用书。

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## 高校英语教师语法认知和实践研究

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## List of abbreviations

EFL	English as a Foreign Language
MoE	Ministry of Education
ELT	English Language Teaching
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
TBLT	Task-based Language Teaching
FFI	Form-focused Instruction
L1	First Language
L2	Second/foreign Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
FLT	Foreign Language Teaching
CET	College English Test
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
CSC	Chinese Scholarship Council
CSC	Chinese Scholarship Council

## Abstract

This book reports on Chinese EFL teachers' cognitions and practices about grammar teaching in university English classrooms in China. Teachers' cognitions are personal and situated teaching principles including their beliefs and knowledge through which teachers enact their practices in classroom teaching. Despite much research conducted on language teachers' cognitions and practices about language teaching, little has been reported on Chinese university EFL teachers' cognitions about grammar teaching in a context where teachers' thinking and decision-making in the classroom are influenced by a range of psychological and socio-cultural factors. These factors range from deep-rooted Confucian teaching principles, a highly centralized education system, high-stakes examinations, to little exposure to any English language environment. This is especially true when the new *College English Curriculum Requirement* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007) was established, which was intended to develop university students' ability to use English, in particular their ability to listen and speak in English.

In order to address this issue, this study investigated Chinese EFL teachers' cognitions and practices about grammar teaching, as a response to the new English curriculum

development, in a province of China. Framed in Borg's theoretical framework that teachers' cognitions are not only mediated by their previous language learning experience, teacher education programs and classroom experience, but also by contextual factors, a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach was adopted and implemented in two phases. In Phase One, a large scale questionnaire survey of 314 university teachers provided an overview of Chinese university EFL teachers' cognitions and practices about grammar teaching. In Phase Two, an in-depth study was conducted on 10 teachers selected from the participants in the first phase. The purpose of Phase Two was to explore teachers' cognitions and practices qualitatively and examine the relationship between their cognitions and practices as well as the reasons for any incongruence between them.

The research findings reveal that, in general, Chinese university EFL teachers embraced the focus on form instruction and perceived that grammar teaching should be completed in a communicative context so that students knew how to use grammar in their speaking and writing activities. However, with regard to their practices in the classrooms, the in-depth study showed that most of the 10 teachers still adopted the focus on forms instruction in their grammar teaching. Subsequent interviews indicated that teachers' insufficient knowledge of using the focus on form instruction and multiple contextual factors such as institutional issues, especially national examinations that are closely related to their students' needs restricted their classroom practices.

This study makes several significant contributions to teacher cognition research. Firstly, it adds an understanding of teachers' cognitions about language teaching and teacher professional development in different educational contexts, such as EFL environments in one Chinese province. Secondly, it provides further insight into the research methodology that can be used in investigating teachers' cognitions about language teaching. The mixed-methods approach not only provides insights into teachers' cognitions that can be generalized

in similar and related contexts but also sheds light on individual teacher's deep, personal, and situated understanding of language teaching, especially in relation to teaching English grammar. Finally, the study confirms that Borg's theory about teachers' cognitions provides a suitable framework for such research. Similar studies are suggested to adopt this theory to interpret their research findings.

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# **Chapter 1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter provides background and contextual information pertinent to the current study. It starts with making my research interest explicit, followed by defining the purpose of the study and the specific research questions that this study is going to address. Then, contextual information, including the Chinese educational system, in particular, the role of English in this system is briefly introduced to facilitate an understanding of Chinese university English teachers' cognitions and practices. Finally, an overview of the book is presented.

## **1.2 Background of The Study**

As a Chinese university English lecturer for several years, I was always bewildered by a strange phenomenon that many Chinese university students frequently made grammatical errors in both their written assignments and their oral English, but seldom made the same mistakes in the grammar test of College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 (CET-4 and CET-6). A puzzling question arose in my mind:

why are there different levels of competence demonstrated by Chinese students in different contexts. I questioned this may not be a problem of grammatical competence but grammar teaching methods.

In China, the traditional grammar-translation method has dominated English teaching for decades. It is characterized by systematic and detailed grammar instruction, substantial memorisation of grammar rules and sentence structures, rote learning of vocabulary, and extensive use of translation (Wen, 2012). Within this approach, grammar is prioritized and taught deductively, that is, by presentation of grammatical rules and structures which are then practised through translation exercises in the form of decontextualized and discrete sentences (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Chinese, together with simple English, is usually the medium of grammar instruction. One of the drawbacks of this method is that it overemphasizes learners' reading and writing, without adequate attention to their speaking and listening.

However, with the rapid economic and social development in China, more qualified foreign language speakers with strong communicative competence are needed (Cheng & Wang, 2012). In response to this demand, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE), as the central authority for managing Chinese education, has made several comprehensive top-down English language educational reforms. In a recent reform, the MoE (2007) established the *College English Curriculum Requirements* to guide College English teaching in 2007. In comparison with previous syllabi, the new syllabus accords importance to listening and speaking English (MoE, 2007). It stipulates that College English teaching should focus on cultivating students' communicative competence and enhancing their ability to study independently to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges. The new syllabus requires College English teachers to change from using traditional teaching

methods such as grammar-translation teaching solely to including new methods such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching, which enable teachers not only to teach linguistic knowledge to students but also to develop their communicative competence.

In the field of second language acquisition, many researchers argued that explicit grammar teaching should be excluded from CLT (Thompson, 1996). Krashen (1985), for example, claimed that language was not learned from knowing a set of grammar rules but was acquired unconsciously through the exposure to the language environment. However, this claim sparked robust counter arguments from other researchers who emphasize that grammar attention should be involved as an important part of CLT (Ellis, 1992; Thompson, 1996). They argued that focusing on communication, without attention to grammar, impairs communication. Ellis (1992) also argued that explicit grammar knowledge might not lead to immediate language learning, but facilitate language learning with positive effects at a later stage. Therefore, grammar teaching should not be disregarded in CLT; instead, an appropriate amount of class time should be dedicated to grammar. This calls for a new approach to teach grammar, not a simple return to traditional grammar teaching with grammar rules presented explicitly.

Influenced and guided by the new syllabus and second language (L2) development, Chinese university English teachers and English Language Teaching researchers are endeavouring to adopt new communicative approaches in their instruction. However, due to complex reasons, it is controversial whether CLT is successfully being implemented in Chinese English language classrooms (Butler, 2011; cf. Zhang, 2010; 2015). The successful implementation of new communicative language teaching methods into Chinese ELT classrooms and the efficacy of the

new curriculum reform appear to depend upon teachers' attitudes or perceptions to a great extent (Borg, 2006). The literature on educational innovations ascribes the gap between a new curriculum being introduced and an implemented curriculum to the complexity of teaching, which involves a variety of complex psychological and sociological processes (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Complex teaching is shaped by what teachers know, believe and think (Borg, 2006); that is, teachers need to incorporate new ideas into their belief systems before they are able to make changes in their language teaching practices.

Meanwhile, since the 1980s, with the development of second language acquisition approaches and the rise of cognitive psychology, researchers in the field of both mainstream education and language teaching tend to believe that teaching is a cognitive activity, and teachers have their own beliefs about L2 and English as a Foreign Language teaching (Borg, 2003b; Ellis, 2012; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Woods, 1996). As active participants and decision-makers in classroom teaching, teachers play a critical role in language teaching. To understand the process of language teaching, it is necessary to explore language teachers' cognitions—their thinking, beliefs, assumptions, and their relationships with classroom practices. Therefore, research on language teaching has shifted from studying teachers' pedagogical actions to exploring teachers' cognitions about their teaching (Clark & Yinger, 1977). Foreign language teaching methods adopted by teachers are generally influenced by their approach to grammar teaching. Therefore, in order to explore teachers' attitudes toward new language teaching approaches and the new ELT educational reform, it is essential to examine teachers' cognitions about grammar teaching.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

As the above section states, this study investigated Chinese university English teachers' cognitions about grammar teaching when a new curriculum was implemented. The education research paradigm has shifted its focus from teachers' pedagogical actions to teachers' thinking, which is variously defined as teachers' knowledge, teachers' beliefs, and teacher conceptions (Calderhead, 1996; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Kagan, 1992). These concepts all acknowledge that teachers have some mental thoughts toward their teaching which affect their actual classroom practices. For the consistency of concepts about teachers' thinking, this study adopts Borg's (2003) umbrella term teacher cognition which refers to "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching—what teachers know, believe and think".

Studying teachers' cognitions enables us to understand teachers' teaching processes and their justifications when making decisions in their actual classroom teaching. Teachers' cognitions inform teachers' practices, including class planning, decision-making and post-class reflection. In turn, teachers' classroom practices arouse and reinforce teachers' cognitions; that is, the relationship is dialectical (Richards, 2008). Thus, studying teachers' cognitions is usually accompanied by examining teachers' practices. Although there is a large body of the literature documenting research findings in this area, little is known about how Chinese EFL teachers conceptualise teaching and how their thinking is related to their classroom practices. The current study was conducted to fill this research gap. It explored a group of Chinese university English teachers' cognitions and practices about grammar teaching with a mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2011). It is hoped that the present research contributes to the established research on language

teachers' cognitions and practices. The study attempts to address the following questions:

- (1) What are Chinese English teachers' cognitions and practices about grammar teaching in Chinese universities when a new curriculum was implemented?
- (2) Are there significant differences in their cognitions about grammar teaching in terms of their ages, academic qualifications, years of teaching, and research interest?
- (3) What are sources of Chinese university English teachers' cognitions?
- (4) What are the relationships between Chinese university English teachers' cognitions and their grammar teaching practices when a new curriculum was implemented?
- (5) What factors contribute to the incongruence between teachers' cognitions and their practices?

## **1.4 The Context of The Study**

The study of teachers' cognitions and practices in isolation from the context where they occur is unable to provide a whole picture of them, as context plays an important role in understanding teachers' thoughts and actions (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Borg (2006) said that "The social, institutional, instructional and physical settings in which teachers work have a major impact on their cognitions and practices". Therefore, an introduction to the context of the study is provided here. The current study is conducted in a context of teaching EFL in Chinese universities. An understanding of the Chinese educational system, especially the position of

English language education in this system, is useful to understand Chinese EFL teachers' cognitions and their practices. This section, therefore, introduces the Chinese educational system, in particular, the higher education system, with its emphasis on English teaching and learning in China, including English teaching methods, English textbooks, teachers' professional development, the evaluation of students and the recent educational reform in ELT.

### **1.4.1 A brief introduction to the Chinese educational system**

Like many countries in this globe, the Chinese educational system is highly centralized (Hu, 2005a; Pepper, 2000). As the supreme education administration body in China, the MoE plays a leading role in the whole educational system ranging from kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools to universities. It is accountable for all education policies, curriculum, teacher recruitment, teacher education and development, textbooks, school infrastructure, school and teacher supervision, school governance, public examinations, and academic accreditation. From 1990s onward, substantial structural reform has been undertaken throughout the whole country. Though the MoE, formerly known as State Education Commission (SEdC) from 1985 until 1998, is still responsible for the overall policy, macro-guidance and administration, education administration authoritative departments at every government level, such as province, municipality, and county, have been granted authority to plan local education development, including making policies with local characteristics, setting goals for local education sectors and integrating central reform programme with their local reform.

Regarding Chinese students' education periods, Chinese students go through several schooling stages before enrolling as university students. Specifically, they