



Incidental Focus on form in meaning-focused classes of Chinese as a foreign language

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Abstract. Little research on how incidental Focus on form (FonF) has investigated Chinese speaking classes and explored factors that can contribute to uptake. To bridge the research gap, this study adopted observationresearch method to investigate whether the Chinese-speaking teacher would place emphasis on incidental FonF and differences of uptake between FonF of student type and that of teacher type and differences of uptake among linguistic foci. A total of 16 participants were selected from an introductory Chinese speaking class. This study found that teacher paid moderate attention to incidental FonF. The proportion test showed that student-initiated FonF could have better uptake, but no significant difference was found in facilitating uptake among different linguistic foci. The study can inform provision of effective incidental FonF.

Keywords: incidental Focus on Form, Chinese as a foreign language, speaking class

1 Introduction

Incidental Focus on form (FonF) refers to occasional attention to linguistic forms that language learners use during meaning-oriented communication, which is, in essence, the organic coalescence between the meaning-focused and form-focused language education pedagogies (Ellis, 2001)^[1]. With the prevalence of communicative language teaching (CLT), an ever-higher share of instructors stresses communicating, downplaying the role of language forms such as grammar, pronunciation, and lexis. Nonetheless, successful language learning relies not only on speaking fluently but also accurately. Incidental FonF places great importance on the form produced in speaking while paying enough attention to the meaning^[2-3].

Incidental FonF has become more and more crucial in advancing the accuracy of speeches (Loewen, 2005) and has gained traction in second language courses (Doughty & Williams, 1998)^[4-5]. Incidental FonF can be seen as one of the integral parts of language classes. The teacher works as a guide that usually does the tutee a favor by providing corrective feedback (CF)^[6]. In addition, research has, for about three decades, constantly found some upsides of incidental FonF. A growing number of

scholars have verified students' favorable attitudes toward form-focused feedback since such feedback can boost their ability to uptake and push them to produce better output later. By the same token, such practice reduces students' negative emotions in foreign language learning. The development of language ability is an ever-evolving process, from receiving instructions to automatizing the language process, which can also be called "the restructuring of a language"^[7]. Many scholars approve that learners' attention to language forms can better help them automatize and internalize language knowledge.

Precious research has examined how incidental FonF helps learners to uptake the correct language forms after uttering some wrong. Nassaji (2013) enunciated two types of incidental FonF: reactive incidental FonF and preemptive incidental FonF^[8]. In a more recent thematic analysis, Tajik et al. (2020) highlighted the interplay between teachers and students that might influence how incidental FonF produces a marked effect. Incidental FonF in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) classrooms, nevertheless, has not been explored holistically^[9]. However, applying successful incidental FonF practice is crucial to CFL classrooms to remind future Chinese language policy and practice since it can improve existing Chinese teaching efficacy to a large extent.

The present study examines whether local Chinese teachers performed incidental FonF in class. Simultaneously, this research also explores what kind of incidental FonF can be effective for Chinese learners' uptake. This research can further expand the application for incidental FonF in local Chinese classes. What is more, this research can also enrich the utilization scope for incidental FonF. Chinese local classes are a different context to take incidental FonF than English as a foreign language class, as the learner comes from more than two or three countries, breaking the limitation that the subject comes from a single country in previous research. Therefore, the local Chinese class in effect intertwines with multi-cultures and multi-languages; in turn, the realization form for incidental FonF also gets new expressions.

2 Literature review

2.1 Incidental FonF as a language teaching strategy

Educational psychologists generally maintain that incidental FonF can be a pedagogical method to direct L2 learners' attention to language forms, including grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Simultaneously, incidental fonF still admits the status of meaning as the center^[10]. For the past few decades, what constantly dominates the mainstream CLT is that teachers and researchers all hold the viewpoint that the aim of learning a language is to express one's thoughts to communicate with native speakers smoothly^[11]. Therefore, the importance of forms has yet to be noticed by instructors to some degree^[12]. Nowadays, however, a growing number of scholars think that meaning-focused teaching could improve learners' fluency, but forms should also be valued to boost learners' language accuracy^[13]. Incidental FonF intends to strike a balance between forms and communication, which helps learners to attend to forms when communicating. When learners produce inaccurate forms, teachers might use

feedback, such as recast, repetition, and metalinguistic feedback, to assist speakers in repairing ^[14]. As such, learners may notice the gaps in utilizing a certain language and initially correct them.

2.2 Integrated parts of incidental FonF

Incidental FonF can be categorized into two types: reactive and preemptive^[1]. Reactive incidental FonF traditionally refers to those occurring after errors, if teachers incidentally notice errors in students' speech, teachers might give out corrective, brief feedback to draw speakers' attention to their errors and therefore speakers could repair these mistakes with minimal disruption of the communication flow. In recent SLA research, feedback in reactive incidental FonF can also be provided by students. Once noticing errors, they usually immediately give their interlocutors feedback, helping the interlocutors reach a higher level of language accuracy. Preemptive incidental FonF refers to those without an error, teachers and students will specifically raise some questions about forms that might be utilized in the following speech production. It can be separated into two types: student-initiated and teacher-initiated. According to Ellis, student-initiated FonF refers to that in a conversation, students put forward some queries about the form. Based on this, we expand its implication in our research by including feedback provided by peers for a student's query^[1]. Teacher-initiated FonF indicates that in a conversation, the teacher perceives what kind of errors students may make or what kind of obstacles they can face in the next talking and then the teacher takes the initiative to ask students for specific knowledge about forms or teachers directly make some comments on some forms. Teachers habitually suddenly think of some tips for forms and ask or test students' master capacity to let students be aware of potential language structure barriers in the following speech production. Of note, both reactive incidental FonF preemptive incidental FonF can be put forward by either teachers or students. Previous research shows that incidental FonF aroused by students can have a better intake and uptake compared to that made by teachers ^[15].

2.3 Uptake, focused analytic approach, and cognitive psychology

Uptake refers to that after uttering incorrect language forms, learners' reaction towards the teacher's feedback, which is a standard to test the effectiveness of the incidental FonF^[4]. Loewen put that uptake can be divided into successful uptake and unsuccessful uptake^[4]. Successful uptake can be referred to that learners can understand and correct teachers' or peers' feedback. However, the positive uptake process would be continued if a speaker's response still holds some errors and then teacher needs to provide another new round of feedback to the speaker. Facing teachers' another round of corrective feedback, the speaker may either ignore teachers' feedback and continues talking or keeps up consolidating and polishing language expression, while unsuccessful uptake happens when the speaker misses or refuses teachers' feedback and goes on speaking.

There have been lots of theories concerned about incidental FonF, among which Focused Analytic Approach (FAA) can be a representative one. According to Horwitz, language study must be strictly controlled under the standard rules, one of the

most crucial principles of the FAA^[16]. His idea got support from Hellebrandt and Ellis^[17-18]. Hellebrandt said that SLA must involve two respects: conversational function and didactic function^[17]. Incidental FonF is born out of didactic function since it repairs communication gaps in an episode of talking or speaking. Ellis also argued that although the monitoring hypothesis entailed lots of spotlights, the most impeding question was how to take an appreciative way to monitor. Given this, Ellis considered incidental FonF as a natural choice to effectively monitor gaps.

Cognitive psychology systematically illustrates the working principle of incidental FonF. According to Daughy, cognitive psychology first demonstrates the incidental FonF operational process^[19]. Cognitive psychology holds the notification that the basic distinction among FonF, CLT and FonFs is that incidental FonF realizes an ordered integration between meaning and forms, enabling learners to attend to forms when they mistake and does not disrupt their pace of speaking. Moreover, it allows speakers to correct their errors in real time or utilize these forms in the next phase of talking. Therefore, cognitive mapping by degree can be reformulated in speakers' minds so as to help them better master a language fluently and accurately. Second, cognitive psychology explores the necessity of incidental FonF. It believes that in learning a second language, there are always permanent, pervasive, rigid errors that can be found in both advanced speakers and preliminary speakers. Hence, incidental FonF can be an obtrusive alternative to help learners to supervise and correct in time, or otherwise they need to rely on their knowledge to mark and repair in some days. Finally, cognitive psychology points to three key cognitive construct requirements in incidental FonF: the locus of incidental FonF is the focus on some forms rather than others; incidental FonF must need effective feedback or otherwise incidental FonF may lose its original intended effects, the bottom line for incidental FonF is that its main aim remains on communication rather than one certain form or otherwise it will become FonFs.

The noticing hypothesis is a brand of cognitive psychology, which denotes the cognitive micro process of incidental FonF. It can be concluded that no noticing would lead to no uptake. Conscious noticing can help learners to recognize the gaps in their capacities to use language. Thereof, it is a must to specifically note language forms, which is in tune with the concept of "comprehensible output."

2.4 The application of incidental FonF in EFL and CFL classes

The past two decades witnessed a series of experiments and practices on incidental FonF. Loewen conducted a large-scale observational study in Auckland, New Zealand, which involved 12 classes, 118 students, and 12 teachers. The aim of the research was to carefully observe the relation between incidental FonF and SLA^[4]. Findings showed that incidental FonF could strengthen the L2 learners' language uptake. Besides, Loewen innovatively claimed that the uptake effect can be measured by response time and it was divided into two parts: immediate and deferred response. After the experiment, immediate response was found to have a better language uptake rate (47.6%) compared to the deferred response (39.3%). Ahmadvand and Nejadansari expanded the usage scope of incidental FonF by observing whether incidental FonF could help students achieve a higher rate of lexical retention. Learners

who received incidental FonF were revealed to have a better vocabulary retention^[20]. This experiment included a comparison group and an experiment group, in which students had similar baseline scores before formal experiment. The experiment group carefully learned the form of the words while the other only learned some of the implicit and explicit meanings of a word, along with synonymous and antonymous. After a period of studying, two teachers organized an exam, the result of which showed that the experiment group outperformed the comparison group. Without a doubt, Ahmavand and Nejadansair made a successful trial, which not only further evidenced the effectiveness of incidental FonF but also broke through the utilization limitation of the incidental FonF. Tajik et al. studied a more inspiring phenomenon in incidental FonF. They found that compared with males, females were more likely to accept incidental FonF^[9].

There has not been much more research designed specifically for incidental FonF in CFL practice, but two studies probed into the effectiveness of FonF in CFL classroom. As a novice teacher, Yang, based on three other novice teachers, explored the preferences of form among adult Hungarian Chinese learners with a wide range of ages^[21]. Through observation, Yang found that although reactive incidental FonF dominates the mainstream, learners preferred teacher-initiated preemptive incidental FonF in primary course while the student-initiated type was more prevailing in mediate course. Cao and Zhu creatively turned their focus to whether the teacher would lead their students to focus on forms in a comprehensive Chinese class and how many methods the teacher leveraged to grip learners' focus on forms^[22]. They observed four teachers with a Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) Master degree, conducting a quantitative analysis using the If OLS charter designed by Simard and Jean. The four teachers all paid much attention to forms with average time of roughly one-third of the whole class on FonF. Simultaneously, they found that targeted query was the most favored. However, less consistent with the previous research on EFL practice is that corrective feedback was less frequently utilized. Nevertheless, among corrective feedback, recast still ranked the top.

In general, research on FonF in the CFL context/field/classroom is still warranted, as incidental FonF research in this field is sparse. Previous studies mainly concentrate on the incidental FonF in EFL courses but rarely involve in CFL incidental FonF. Against the backdrop, the present study explores incidental FonF in a CFL class. Specific research questions are as follow.

1. How frequently does the CFL teacher incidentally focus on form across linguistic foci in speaking class?
2. Can student-initiated FonF better promote uptake than teacher-initiated one?
3. Does successful uptake differ among linguistic foci of FonF?

3 Method

3.1 Participants

The participants were 16 international CFL students attending a Chinese oral course at Tianjin University, China. The teacher of this course has taught Chinese for over 15

years and has obtained some professional teaching qualifications, such as the Certificate in Chinese Language Teaching for Adults and Master of Literature in Applied Linguistics. Informed consent was gained from the students and the teacher.

3.2 Data collection

A total of four classes were observed and audio-recorded within one month. The researcher as a nonparticipant observed the classes and wrote observation memos. As such, this study only recorded teacher-learner interactions. A total of 6 hours (360 minutes) were recorded.

3.3 Data analysis

3.3.1 Coding of Focus on form episodes (FFE)

FFE were recognized transcribed specifically and coded with various characteristics (see Table 1) based on Loewen^[4].

Table 1. Characteristics of FFEs

Characteristics	Definitions	Categories
Type	Kinds of Incidental FonF	Student-initiated: Feedback provided by peers and instigated by a student error, or feedback provided by the teacher and instigated by a student query Teacher-initiated: Error corrective feedback or queries raised by the teacher
Linguistic focus	Linguistic target	Grammar Vocabulary Pronunciation
Uptake	Student response to feedback	Uptake: L produces a response No uptake: L does not produce a response
Successful uptake	Uptake Quality	Successful uptake: the integration of correct feedback into immediately following production Unsuccessful uptake: no integration of correct feedback into immediately following production

3.3.2 Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted utilizing using the R (Version 4.2.3). The independent variables were type and linguistic focus. The dependent variables were uptake and successful uptake. To address research question 1, we calculated the frequency of incidental FonF in CFL speaking class, frequency and proportion of every linguistic focus of all errors. To answer research question 2 (whether there is a significant effect between teacher-initiated and student-initiated in respect of uptake effect), we deployed the test of proportion test. The proportion test can clearly check if there is an obvious distinction in uptake transferring rate between the student-initiated and teacher-initiated

groups. To answer question three, we chose the Chi-square test to learn whether there is a significant difference among linguistic foci.

4 Results

4.1 Frequency of CFL teacher's incidental focus on form

Table 2. Frequency of CFL teacher's incidental focus on form across linguistic foci

Linguistic foci	Original frequency	Percent	Standardized frequency
Grammar	5	9%	0.08
Pronunciation	4	7%	0.06
Vocabulary	47	84%	0.86
Total	56	100%	1.00

According to Table 2, the CFL teacher paid moderate attention to forms. Altogether 56 incidental FonF episodes were spotted in the preliminary speaking class. Every 6.5 minutes included one incidental FonF episode. There are five FonF episodes on pronunciation (7%), four incidental focus on vocabulary (84%), and 47 incidental focus on grammar (9%). To eliminate different variants differences, the standardized frequency is essential, which is calculated as observational frequencies/overall frequencies \times 1000. Results showed that the frequency of grammar and pronunciation remained at a low level of 0.08 and 0.06 respectively. The standardized frequency of vocabulary-focused ones dominated definite mainstream, being 0.86.

4.2 Differences of uptake between student type FonF and teacher type FonF

Table 3. 2-sample proportion test for comparing the uptake distinctions between student type and teacher type

	Proportion 1	Proportion 2
Sample estimates	1.00	0.81
χ -squared=3.41	df=1	p =0.03

As the outcomes of the proportion test in Table 2 indicate, the proportion test was conducted to check the differential effect between student type and teacher type. There is a significant difference in uptake between the student group and the teacher group. As shown in Table 3, the uptake rate in the student group reached a full percentage whereas that in the teacher group only reached 81%. It clearly illustrated that where χ -squared=3.41, df=1, and p <.05, there is a significant difference in the uptake achievements between the FonF of student group and that of the teacher group. Incidental FonF aroused by the student group entailed higher uptake than those initiated by the teacher group.

4.3 Difference among linguistic focus performance

Table 4. Successful uptake rate and unsuccessful uptake rate in three linguistic foci

Linguistic Focus	Grammar	Pronunciation	Vocabulary
Successful Uptake rate	80%	50%	78%
Unsuccessful Uptake rate	20%	50%	22%

There is a significant difference in successful uptake rate between grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. As shown in Table 4, the successful uptake rate in grammar reached a prominent 80%, followed by vocabulary at 78%, while the successful uptake rate in pronunciation featured the lowest (50%). The unsuccessful uptake rate of these two only accounted for roughly one-fifth respectively. There is no significant difference among the three linguistic foci ($\chi^2=1.7$, $df=2$, $p>.05$), although descriptive statistics showed a notable difference in successful uptake rate among three linguistic foci.

5 Discussion

5.1 Attention to incidental FonF by the teacher

In a total of 360 minutes speaking classes occur 56 times incidental FonF with an average of 6.5 minutes per minute. Of note, The Chinese preliminary speaking class shows less incidental FonF, compared to the results in Loewen's study, which showed that every minute included an incidental FonF episode. It can be illustrated by three reasons^[23]. One is that the teacher was convinced under the impression that those beginning CFL learners had limited knowledge about how to express their thoughts. Hence, in an effort to spur their drives to recount ideas and negotiate with others, the teacher would not give more feedback when students had the desire to talk.

Furthermore, the frequency of the teacher-initiated type was relatively small, since the teacher utilized more planned FonF in class to provide as much possible lexical and grammar knowledge so that students can communicate more fluently and smoothly. Finally, different from some language training institutes or primary and middle school education in Loewen's study, higher education itself habitually owns a set of more strict, complex teaching syllabi, notably for major language students^[23]. The university department will arrange abundant language courses to tackle every targeted possible question. In this study, students took classes with specific purposes, such as pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, CFL-speaking course teachers naturally put more stress on students' output, intentionally ignoring trifle errors that did not influence overall communication. Unless students' errors influenced the teacher's understanding, the teacher would try not to intervene in students' speech.

Nonetheless, we found two insightful phenomena. First, the term "beginning students" is just a mark the university labels. However, these students had all passed the HSK-4 level exam, corresponding to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)-B2 level. As for the CEFR-B2 standard, speaking ability can be defined as having the competence to talk with native speakers in a fluent

way and clearly illuminate one's own thoughts. Maybe the teacher had some wrong judgment that students were just shy away from uttering their opinions in front of the class rather than not having abilities to do so. Another intriguing finding is that even though students were having specifically designed FonFs speaking classes, they were still devoid of skills to express one idea in an accurate way. All in all, combining students' real language ability and performance in speaking classes, we could conclude that it is essential for the teacher to adopt incidental FonF.

5.2 Differences of incidental FonF between student type and teacher type

That the students' group can spur better uptake is in tune with previous research^[23]. One potential illustration is that peer feedback can further stimulates one's urge to provide more feedback. Feedback intervention theory (FIT) believes that when people's faces are threatened, they will be quicker to adopt face-saving strategies^[24]. Goffman argued that each desires to show an ideal self-image to others when interacting and communicating with them^[25]. Amiryousefi expanded that ideal self-image in a language class can be defined as 'the need to be respected.' When a teacher offers feedback, most students will not treat it as a threat. Rather, they can be more likely to believe teachers' parlance^[26]. In this way, students may not like to give their feedback since they are convinced under the impression that the teacher's answer is the best, not having any necessity to correct themselves further. However, when peers offer similar feedback on one's errors, one will immediately feel that their dignity may be challenged. In an effort not to continue losing their face in front of other peers, the person who makes errors will correct them at an alarming rate.

5.3 Differences of incidental FonF across linguistic foci

It is astonishing that there is no significant difference in uptake quality between linguistic foci. This finding is a precedent in CFL speaking class. Briefly, the correction to vocabulary and grammar apparently spikes more successful uptake than pronunciation, while the imbalance proportion fails to surface significant differences among the three linguistic foci. It is well known to all that Chinese is a tone language. Therefore, non-tone language native speakers usually find it tricky for them to produce completely accurate characters and words as well as provide successful uptake upon teachers' corrections. To be more specific, due to the influence of non-tone language long-time influence, learners may find it very hard to distinguish the gap between the teacher's pronunciation and their own. If the teacher forces them to repeat a certain pronunciation once and again, it may bring students a sense of frustration and loss of confidence and therefore cause a communication breakdown. All in all, all linguistic elements can have the same uptake effect in incidental FonF.

6 Conclusions

This study explored incidental FonF in CFL speaking classes, including teacher's attention, uptake rate between teacher-initiated and student-initiated FonF, and successful uptake rate among distinguished linguistic foci.

CFL teachers devote one's attention to form in an incidental way; nonetheless, the incidental FonF rate was higher if the FonF episodes were initiated by students. Furthermore, there is no difference in the successful uptake among the three language foci. For Chinese learners and teachers to put enough emphasis on language forms as incidental FonF can greatly improve learners' accuracy in speech.

Based on the research outcomes, some implications of taking effective incidental FonF in CFL speaking class are listed as follows. First, the teacher can use more implicit ways to conduct FonF, changing "please do not use or speak 'to' can you try a little bit to...." Second, teachers are supposed to spike students' initiative as much possible to find more errors made by other peers. Third, to maximize the uptake effect of pronunciation, teachers can build up a long-effective mechanism to supervise learners' accents.

Several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. First, the sample in this study is relatively small, which might inevitably lead to certain bias in statistical analysis. In future research of incidental FonF practice in CFL or CSL classes, researchers should choose a larger sample to improve the consistency and validity. Second, the research did not explore the correlation between uptake and learning. Nassaji announced that even if learners provide classroom uptake, they may not internalize it. Therefore, future research is supposed to explore the relationship between uptake and learning^[27].

All in all, this study tried to examine the uptake rate differences between teacher type and student type, and the uptake rate differences among distinct language foci. Findings, both for and against some of the previous explorations on incidental FonF, can shed light on future CFL teaching, learning and research.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Chenrui Miao: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing. Jinyu Liu: Conceptualization, Writing. Na Yang: Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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