An analysis of grammar instruction in beginner-level foreign language Chinese textbooks

Gloria GABBIANELLI

University of Urbino

Abstract: *This study investigates how current teaching perspectives are reflected in four textbooks for Chinese as a foreign language used in Italy, where increasing interest in the study of Chinese has generated the publication of new textbooks. It seeks to answer the following questions: What are the approaches to grammar teaching in the current materials for teaching Chinese? To what extent do grammar instructions and exercises focus on the relationship between form and meaning, and do they provide contextualized practice of the foreign language? The study examined four foreign language Chinese beginner level textbooks: two are destined for university students, and two for high school students. Grammar instruction, type and quantity of activities to teach grammar are analysed in three selected lessons of each textbooks. Findings show that the adopted approach to grammar teaching is still traditional and mainly production-oriented. However minimal indications, which reflect second language research perspectives on grammar instruction, were found in the most recently published textbook. This modest signal of innovation represents the first step of a long process toward the updating of teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language based on the newest second language acquisition perspectives.*

Keywords: *Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL), grammar teaching, foreign language acquisition, foreign language textbooks.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to current action-oriented approaches to language teaching, the purpose of teaching a foreign language (FL) is to enable students to use the FL correctly in real-life contexts. This is the guiding principle behind the development of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) and is included in the *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education* (Office of Chinese Language Council International, 2008), where in the section *Strategies* the communicative objectives are described.

Based on this principle, second language teaching research suggests that language teaching should be contextualised and meaningful-use focused. The role of grammar and the methods for grammar teaching have also been debated in the field of language research. During the early phase of the spread of communicative language teaching, the role of grammar lost importance, but it was later reintroduced as an important element. According to current teaching approaches, grammar is not anymore considered as the objective of language teaching but it represents an important tool for language use. Many scholars support the efficacy of explicit grammar instruction and form focused instruction (Long, 1983; Ellis, 2006); teaching practice and teaching materials generally incorporate specific sections where grammar is explicitly presented. The question researchers are focusing on, is not whether or not to present grammar, but how to incorporate formal aspects, such as grammar structures, in a communicative teaching context. Given the fact that language instruction should follow meaningful-focused approaches and occur in communicative contexts, scholars are debating which techniques and methods are more effective to guide learners in their process to grammar acquisition.

Research in second language acquisition (SLA) has provided fundamental elements contributing to the debate on this issue. SLA research emphasises the importance of the role of input (Krashen, 1985; VanPatten, 1996, 2003), in order to enable learners to link form and meaning and accomplish the acquisition process. Researchers stated that just being exposed to a comprehensible input is not enough; instruction should draw students' attention to formal aspects in order acquire those aspects (Swain, 1985).

With reference to the importance of input processing to achieve language proficiency, Nassaji & Fotos assert: "It is necessary for learners to notice the target forms in the input; otherwise they process input for meaning only and do not attend to specific forms, and consequently fail to process and acquire them" (2004: 128). To this purpose teaching instruction should, on the one hand, provide form-meaning connections activities, on the other hand, guide students' attention to the grammar structures presented through the input. According to these indications, language acquisition research also suggests a contextualised, meaning-focused and input-based approach to grammar instruction (Leaver, 2005; Ellis, 2006).

Differently from the traditional deductive and production-oriented way of teaching grammar, which uses mechanical drills, decontextualized and highly structured activities to teach grammar, grammar forms should be introduced using input-based and inductive-based activities, in order to enable learners to make form-meaning connections and process a meaningful input.

However, results of empirical studies investigating the effectiveness of teaching methods and techniques for grammar instructions are varied. Some studies reported that input-based exercises seem to be more effective for grammar

acquisition, while production-based instruction appear to be more effective for vocabulary acquisition (Ellis, 2012). In accordance with what is stated by Ellis: "Whatever effect instruction has on learning is dependent on the interactions that arise in the instruction" (2012: 298), we believe the research should focus on the interactions that occur in teaching and learning context, involving teachers, students and teaching materials.

Previous studies have shown that teachers consider textbooks very important resources for teaching grammar in the FL classroom (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Brown, 2014). Therefore, it is essential that new perspectives on teaching methods be included in FL textbooks.

The aim of this study is to investigate how current teaching perspectives are reflected in the textbooks for learning Chinese as a foreign language used in Italy, where increasing interest in the study of Chinese has generated the publication of new textbooks. The study examined four foreign language Chinese beginner level textbooks: two are destined for university students, and two for high school students. The study analysed grammar instruction, type and quantity of activities to teach grammar in three selected lessons of each textbooks. The latest editions of four Italian textbooks of beginning Chinese were selected, with the purpose to open a discussion on the current publishing products for teaching Chinese as a foreign language and promote the development of new perspectives of research on language acquisition in textbooks publication.

1.1 Previous studies on grammar instruction in FL textbooks

In recent years, the investigation of foreign language textbooks has become an increasingly studied topic (Blanco Canales, 2014; Tomlinson, 2010). Investigating how the input is presented in textbooks is extremely important for research on language teaching and learning. Some studies have reported that teachers consider teaching materials a fundamental guideline for classroom practices and curriculum development (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Brown 2014). Thus, textbooks design plays a very important role in teaching and learning process.

It is important that textbooks be updated on the basis of indications of SLA; research findings have revealed that communication and meaning-oriented approaches, which include inductive instruction and input-based activities, are more effective for grammar teaching (Ellis, 2012). Nevertheless, previous studies have noted a discrepancy between textbooks design and second language acquisition perspectives on grammar instruction. In particular some studies have shown that textbooks tend not to incorporate teaching methods and techniques that reflect research on grammar acquisition (Ellis, 2002; Aski, 2003; Maijala and Tammenga-Helmantel, 2017). Other studies have revealed only a partial tendency also to include contextualised and meaning-focused

grammar exercises (Fernández, 2011; Vold, 2017, Tammenga-Helmantel & Maijala, 2018).

Ellis (2002) investigated grammar activities in English second language textbooks; he observed that although some input-based techniques were included in the textbooks analysed, two types of exercises were predominant: controlled production-based activities and explicit description. He concluded that those textbooks didn't include new suggestions of second language research and were similar to English second language textbooks published earlier.

Aski (2003) carried out an analysis of elementary FL Italian textbooks. She analysed different types of production activities. She reported that textbooks presented a prevalence of highly structured activities, such as mechanical drills; activities that require to process and negotiate meaning were also included, such as meaningful and communicative drills. However, free communicative practice activities were rare and she didn't find any input-based activities. She concluded that textbooks heavily relied on traditional method to grammar teaching, not considering any indication of SLA research for teaching techniques.

Similar results were found in two studies on introductory Spanish language textbooks. Rubio, Passey, & Campbell (2004) investigated the role of input and communicative practice in Spanish and German foreign language textbooks. They reported that traditional grammar instructions focusing on output productions were prominent. Their results showed that textbooks provided mechanical drills, meaningful drills and communicative drills. However, they noted that non-drills activities, promoting communication language practice, were included more than in the past.

A later work by Fernández (2011) confirmed that introductory Spanish textbooks still relied on traditional approach to grammar teaching and included a prevalence of production-based activities. She also found evidences that textbooks incorporate input-based activities, which indicate that they try to reflect SLA perspectives.

Promising results are reported in some recent studies, which revealed innovations in techniques and approaches to grammar instruction and indicated that textbooks are beginning to incorporate types of instruction reflecting the research principles for grammar teaching.

Vold (2017) explored methods and types of activities offered in grammar exercises of French as a foreign language textbooks, published in Norway. The analysis included lower and upper secondary textbooks. Results showed more traces of language research indications in the lower secondary textbooks, which included more input-based activities and discovery instruction than the upper secondary textbooks. However, the upper secondary textbooks presented grammar tasks based on authentic material and continuous text. She

concluded that teaching materials are finally beginning to reflect research perspectives, providing meaningful and contextualised grammar.

The study of Tammenga-Helmantel & Maijala (2018), investigated German foreign language textbooks; although textbooks showed a traditional prominent position of grammar, they revealed innovative aspects in the presentation of grammar such as inductive grammar teaching and self-evaluation.

The present analysis aims to contribute to the research on FL textbooks for teaching and learning Chinese as a foreign language.

2. Purpose of the research

The aim of this study is to investigate the approach to grammar instruction in four Italian textbooks for learning Chinese as a foreign language. In recent years in Italy the number of published textbooks to teach Chinese as a foreign language has been incremented. In particular, textbooks for high school students have become available. Given this new publishing trend, our objective is to analyse textbooks' approach to grammar instruction and investigate whether new published textbooks integrate suggestions of second language research or there are no differences with textbooks published earlier.

2.1 Research questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

(1) What are the approaches to grammar teaching in the current materials for teaching Chinese?

(2) To what extent do grammar instructions and exercises focus on the relationship between form and meaning, and do they provide contextualized practice of the FL?

3. Method

3.1 Analysed textbooks

The study examined four beginner-level textbooks for Chinese as a foreign language published in Italy: two are destined for university students, and two for high school students. We chose to analyse the latest edition of four widely used textbooks to learn Chinese, produced for the Italian market. Furthermore, since the two textbooks for high school students have been recently published (2016, 2018), while the other two textbooks have been published considerably earlier (2010), results allow observing differences and similarities in their approach to grammar instruction. The analysed textbooks are: *Dialogare in cinese. Corso di lingua colloquiale* (Abbiati & Zheng, 2010); *Il cinese per gli italiani. Corso elementare* (Masini, Zhang, Bai, Di Toro & Liang, 2010); *Parla e scrivi in cinese* (Ambrosini et al., 2016), *Parliamo cinese* (Masini, Gabbianelli, Zhang & Wang, 2018). Only one textbook, *Dialogare in cinese,* declares to use

a communicative approach; only the two textbooks for high school learners include a clear specification of their target. All textbooks indicate to include language content up to the HSK level 2 and present a set of units between 20 and 24. All four students' textbooks come with supplementary materials: they all include CDs with audio files. The two textbooks for high school also include an eBook version and divide the activities of each lesson in two sections, classroom activities and exercises. All the activities were considered in the present analysis. *Parliamo cinese* also includes a separated book, *The teachers' guide*, which provides indications suggested by authors for lesson planning and development and suggests techniques and tasks for lesson practice. The instruction included in this additional material is also examined in this analysis, since such indications are relevant for the present study.

3.2 Procedures

In order to answer the research questions the analysis developed several phases. A qualitative analysis, first, identified and classified the types of grammar instruction in each textbook. This classification of grammar instruction and types of technique, on one hand, offers indications on methods and reveals signs of approach to grammar teaching, providing answer to the first research question; on the other hand, the identification of the type of exercises shows whether or not they focus on the form-meaning relationship, providing information for the research question number two. Then a quantitative analysis provides a quantification of the activities for each type, in order to observe which kind of exercises are more used. This data will also provide information to confirm results of the qualitative analysis by clarifying the approach used in the textbooks.

The author first read the whole content of each textbook to verify that the same structure of lesson and the same approach to teach grammar were maintained in all lessons of the textbook; there were no textbooks that presented differences in term of structure of lesson and methodological options for grammar activities.

Three lessons of each textbook were selected and analysed as a sample to examine their approaches to grammar instruction. Since intro lessons of beginner-level FL Chinese textbooks are usually dedicated to the presentation of phonetics and writing system, we chose to analyse lessons in the central part of each textbook, where their structures become more regular and uniform. We chose to analyse lessons, which introduce the same grammatical features, in order to not find different activities due to the different grammatical item to be taught, and presented at a similar stage in the textbooks analysed. However, in the four textbooks the progression of grammatical items was found not to be homogeneous. The only grammatical item placed at the same point of grammar sequence in the four textbooks was the modal verb xiang 想. This lesson was chosen as a sample in all textbooks; then, the lesson before and the

one after the lesson introducing xiang were included in the analysis, for a total of three lessons for each textbook. The lessons analysed in each textbook are: lessons 8-9-10 in Dialogare in cinese. *Corso di lingua colloquial*, lessons 11-12-13 in *Il cinese per gli italiani*, lessons 9-10-11 in *Parla e scrivi in cinese*, lessons 8-9-10 in *Parliamo cinese*.

In order to examine textbooks' approach to grammar instruction, only instructional types to teach grammar and grammar activities were analysed. Since only one textbook (*Il cinese per gli italiani*) explicitly marks grammar exercises, it was necessary to choose criteria for identifying and selecting the exercises for the analysis. According to Tammenga-Helmantel's (2012) definition: "an exercise is regarded a grammatical exercise when it is language-oriented and practices a morph-syntactic feature (from Tammenga & Maijala, 2018: 7). However, due to the characteristics of Chinese language, these criteria are not enough to identify grammar exercises. Li & Chen (2008) claim:

"Grammar is one of the elements of a language. Foreigners learning modern Chinese must have a good understanding of the characteristics of its grammar, in addition to the command of pronunciation, Chinese characters (the written symbols of Chinese) and vocabulary, before they can acquire a mastery of the rules of sentence making and word usage" (2008: 2).

Grammar is described as a competence different from pronunciation and vocabulary. According to this definition, activities for teaching vocabulary should be excluded from the analysis. However, in Chinese grammar it is well known the important role of the lexical class of function words (xuci虚词), which do not have actual meaning but grammatical function. (Romagnoli, 2012; Lu, 1980). As Zan, Zhang, Zhu & Yu (2011) state: "In comparison with other languages, for example English, Chinese function words play a more important role in text semantic understanding and grammatical analysis." (2011: 185). Function words, as well as other grammar features (verbs, complements, syntactical structures) have an important role in grammatical analysis of Chinese.

In view of these considerations all the "activities" that students have to do for acquiring the target grammar forms and the function words, such as completion (fill in the blank, complete the sentence), combination, translation and transformation, were identified as grammar exercises. Vocabulary completion activities, including function words were also analysed.

Furthermore, communicative activities, which clearly include or refer to grammar form in their description, were also included in the study. Communicative practice exercises, which use an explanation that not explicitly mention a grammar point, were not analysed. In line with Vold (2017) we believe that in this case the textbook "is not supporting teacher in terms of grammatical instruction and he/she is responsible for using the exercise to teach grammar" (2017: 8). Considering these criteria, in order to identify grammar

exercises, we read all the exercises of each lessons and selected those that clearly teach grammar or explicitly mention grammar item in the explanation. Were excluded from the present analysis all exercises for oral production and reception (listening and speaking), written production (writing character) and reception (reading and comprehension activities, matching character-pinyin-meaning, radical recognition, text comprehension exercises). Communicative practice activities, which don't mention the grammar items in their description, were also excluded.

The analysis procedure for the identification of the instructional types and exercises followed that of Ellis (2002). This typology examines the instruction used to teach grammar, grammar explanation and exercises, and provides an overall view of the approach to grammar teaching of each textbook. Following Ellis's typology grammar activities are identified according to a three set of options of general aspects, and subcategories (Figure 1). The three main categories considered are: *explicit description, data*, and *operations*.
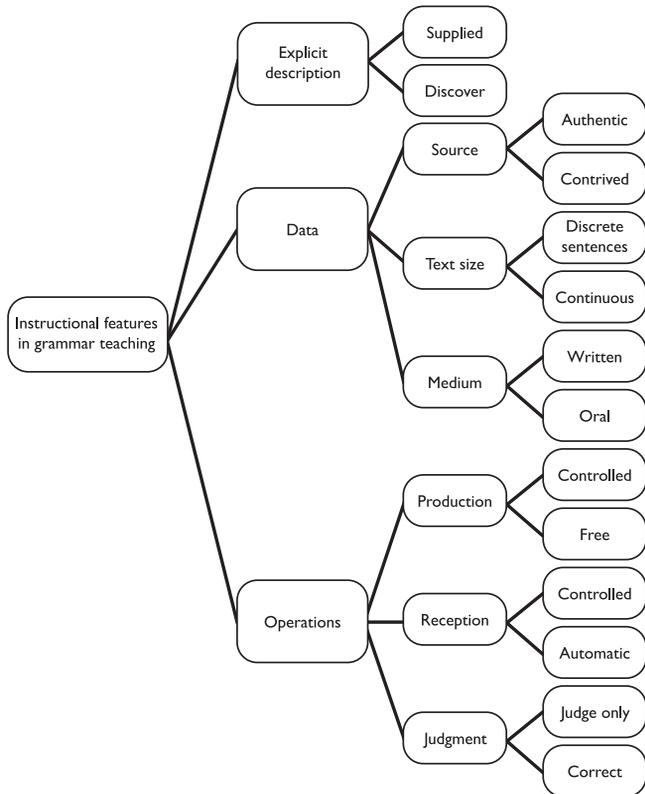

Figure 1. Ellis's Typology of grammar instructions employed in the analysed FL Chinese textbooks.

As the author describes, *Explicit description* refers to the explanation of the grammar item or structure and how is used in the target language. *Explicit description* is classified as *supplied,* when explicit descriptions of grammar rules

are provided (deductive), and *discover,* when it stimulates learners to develop the grammar rules (inductive). A further distinction of the materials in the *supplied* classification is made between *verbal* and *diagrammatic* descriptions of grammar points.

The category of *data* refers to "text containing exemplars of the target structure" (Ellis, 2002: 161). These are independent samples of the target language (Fernández, 2011), and provided to illustrate the use of the target language; none activities or reflection about the grammar point are requested. *Data* category can be divided in subcategories as: *source, text size,* and *medium*. *Source* may consist of *authentic* material, originally derived from real life context, or *contrived*, entirely created or modified by teacher for the purpose of teaching, and to illustrate a specific grammar point. *Text size* refers to whether the data consists of *discrete sentences* or *continuous,* such as texts or paragraphs. The *medium* refers to whether data are *written* or *oral*.

The category of *operations* refers to the activities that students have to do; they are categorized as *reception* and *production. Reception* indicates activities in which students have to perform something to demonstrate that they comprehend the target structure, or to show they have noticed the grammar item without producing any form of the target language. *Production* indicates activities in which students have to produce the target form, saying, writing or doing something producing the target form as an output. Fernández (2011) named the reception category as *input-based*, as this indicates input-processing activities, without involving learners in any output production; while production is included in *production-based* category. In this research *input-based* and *production-based* categories are also considered.

Production activities can be *controlled,* when students have to complete a provided text producing the target form, for example completing sentences with provided or non-provided verbs/words. Or *free,* when student have to use the target form producing output (looking an image and write a sentence, write a text based on a given a title). In free production activities students may not use the form of the target language when this is not clearly requested in the exercise explanation. *Reception* activities are *controlled* when students can choose the time to process the language, for example reading sentences; and they are *automatic* whether students have to process the target language without controlling the speed, such as listening sentences.

Ellis's typology also includes the category of *judgment* activities; students have to identify whether a sentence including the target item is grammatically correct. These categories can be divided in subcategories: *judge only* or *judgment to be corrected. Judgment* operations are considered *input-based*, since they require learners to reflect on the target structure but not produce output using the target language.

In order to examine to what extent grammar instructions and exercises focus on the relationship between form and meaning and provide contextualised practice, we analysed production-based activities using Aski's typology (2003), which classifies activities according to their meaning and use-focus (Paulston 1972). Production based activities are divided in drills and non-drills. Drills are highly structured exercises, which have been classified on the basis of the sort of answer, that could be one or many and known or unknown to students, and the need for students to or not understand meaning to complete the exercise. Differently, non-drill production-activities do not present any pattern and request students to focus on the link between form and meaning to produce the target form. Drills productions include three categories. *Mechanical drills,* which do not involve the role of meaning at all and comprises only one correct output; to complete these type of exercises students don't need to understand the meaning but only replicate a given pattern and control forms without negotiation of meaning. Examples of mechanical drills are transformation and substitution exercises. *Meaningful drills* are structured exercises in which students are required to comprehend the meaning to complete the drill. There is only one correct answer and students don't need to negotiate the meaning. Examples of meaningful drills are completion exercises, such as completing with the correct verb or words among those provided, question answering, combining words to make sentences, complete with the correct word, translation into target language and sentence making. *Communicative drills* are activities that present communicative situations of real-life context. Students need to pay attention to both meaning and form. For example, given a question students have to produce an answer between variables but cannot change the pattern. This type of drills consents more than one answer and response is unknown to students. Finally, *Communicative language practice* indicates non-drills activities. This output activity "requires (….) attention to meaning to generate form. It is not possible to answer randomly and there is no pattern to follow" (Aski, 2003: 61). Students have the opportunity to produce their own output using the target structure without any provided pattern and negotiate the meaning. Examples of *Communicative language practice* are role-plays, task-based communication exercises. Only those activities that clearly indicate the target structures in their explanation or include the target structures in the exercise text were considered in this category.

4. RESULTS

Results of the analysis of grammar instruction and activities are presented according to the set of three options (Appendix A). Results show that the four textbooks present similar choices in the presentation of grammar.

The four textbooks provide *supplied explicit description* of grammar structures, which are presented in the learners' L1. All textbooks use deductive method offering grammar explanation and none of the analysed textbooks

present the category of discover, thus no opportunities are offered to learners to discover grammar rules. All the textbooks provide verbal descriptions of grammar, giving few examples of the target language in grammar explanation. Three textbooks (Dialogare in cinese, Il cinese per gli italiani, and Parliamo cinese) include a diagrammatic way to present grammar (tables and arrows). This option wasn't found in each lesson but was quite common in textbooks' design, even though verbal option is the most used choice.

The category of data was represented by contrived source of the target language in the four textbooks; language samples are introduced with decontextualized discrete sentences, or part of sentences only consisting of the grammar structure. Some textbooks use samples derived from the lesson text, some textbooks present new sentences created for the purpose of illustrating the grammar structure. Samples of the target form are limited and concise, and never included in paragraphs or short texts. The four textbooks provided written options of grammar explanations and samples of the target language. However two textbooks (Dialogare in cinese and Parliamo Cinese) include a "key sentences" sections, which occur in both oral and written form, without including pinyin. These model sentences are presented in a different section, just before in Parliamo Cinese (句型,), and just after in *Dialogare in cinese* (重点句) the grammar explanation. Since key sentences provided in each section are representative of the grammar items described in grammar explanation, we considered them as a sample of the target language within the category of oral data.

Some differences among the four textbooks may be seen from results of the operations category. Although all textbooks include controlled production-based activities, *Parliamo Cinese*, one of the most recently published textbook, presents free production operations; these activities, such as role plays and communicative task exercises, allow students to produce a free output and require to use some specific grammar structures.

Results of the qualitative analysis show that input-based activities are included in three of the analysed textbooks. Dialogare in cinese includes judgment operations activities, of both categories judgment only (reading two sentences, a correct one and a wrong one, and notice differences), and judgment to be corrected (read sentences, find and correct errors). The two textbooks for high school include controlled reception operations. These activities require learners to do something to prove their comprehension of the target structure without producing any output; in the two textbooks these activities consist of question/answers matching exercises.

Since we verified that each textbook maintains the same way to present grammar, results of *explicit description* and *data* categories provided by the qualitative analysis are firmly representative. Differently, results of the category

operations show whether a type of activities of a certain category occur in the analysed lessons, without considering the number of each type.

With reference to the category of *operations* quantitative analysis reveals a clearer picture, showing the number of each type of activity. Results of quantity and types of activities are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Quantity of activities per type.

Operations								
	Input-based				Production-based		Total of grammar activities	Total of activities
Textbook	Reception		Judgment		Production			
	Controlled	Automatic	Judgment only	Judgment to be correct	Controlled	Free		
Dialogare in cinese 2010			1	1	18		20 40%	50
Il cinese per gli italiani 2010					17		17 44%	39
Parla e scrivi in cinese 2016	1				17		18 30%	60
Parliamo cinese 2018	3				20	2	25 31%	79
Total	3		1	1	72	2		

Findings show that in all textbooks production-based activities are largely prevailing comparing to input-based activities. Reception and judgment activities included in only three textbooks are very limited in quantity compared to the total amount of grammar activities of each textbook.

In particular, *controlled production* activities are the only type of production-based exercise that occur in three of the analysed textbook, while *Parliamo cinese* is the only textbook that includes exercises of *free production*.

Furthermore, the number of activities related to grammar teaching is considerable compared to the total of activities of each lesson. However, findings show that the two more recent textbooks have reduced the quantity of grammar activities (30% and 31%) compared to the earlier published textbooks (40% and 44%), where grammar instruction and exercises still play an impor-

tant part. Since the majority of activities observed in the four textbooks were found in the category of production-oriented activities, which includes many types of different exercises, we used Aski's (2003) typology to examine what kind of activities were mostly used. This analysis divides activities in a set of four categories on the basis of their meaning and use focus, from more structured drills, that don't consider the link between form and meaning (*mechanical drills*), to more free activities, that require learners to reflect on form in order to produce meaning (*communicative language practice*).

Results in Table 2 show that there are not many differences in three of the textbooks analysed (*Dialogare in cinese, Il cinese per gli italiani,* and *Parla e scrivi cinese*). These three textbooks include mechanical drills, while communicative language practice is not comprised. The most recently published textbook presents some differences. In *Parliamo cinese* no mechanical   drills were found, while communicative drills and communicative practice exercises are systematically incorporated in each lesson.

However, results indicate that in all textbooks the majority of activities consist of *meaningful drills,* which are highly structured activities with provided pattern and not request processing of meaning.

Table 2. Classification of production-oriented activities.

Textbook	Controlled			Free	Total
	mechanical drills	meaningful drills	communicative drills	communicative language practice	
Dialogare in cinese 2010	6	10	2	-	18
Il cinese per gli italiani 2010	2	11	4	-	17
Parla e scrivi in cinese 2016	3	13	1	-	17
Parliamo cinese 2018	-	16	4	2	22
Total	11	50	11	2	

5. Discussion

With reference to the research question number one, findings of the qualitative analysis have shown that the approach to grammar teaching still relies on the traditional production-based approach and is very similar in the four textbooks. The all textbooks use deductive method and explicit description to explain grammar, providing explicit rules without encouraging learners to any

reflection on forms and their use. Grammar samples are provided trough supplied and decontextualized discrete sentences that do not support the reception of grammar items through the context.

In addition, the four textbooks present high prevalence of controlled production-based activities; on the contrary free production activities, as well as input-based activities, are extremely rare, and their number is worthless compared to production-based activities. In all textbooks there is a general tendency to not present grammar in contextualised and input-related activities and descriptions. These results clearly indicate that, in the textbooks analysed, the approach to grammar teaching doesn't consider suggestions of SLA research, which has demonstrated the important role of input processing and noticing for language acquisition. Our findings demonstrate that the approach adopted is still highly representative of the traditional deductive-based and production-oriented way of teaching. These results are similar to those of previous studies on grammar instruction in FL textbooks (Ellis, 2002; Aski, 2003; Maijala and Tammenga-Helmantel, 2017).

However, it has to be noted that the newest textbooks partially show some changing. According to current approach to languages pedagogy (CEFR 2001), grammar is not the objective of language teaching, despite it plays an important part in the process of language acquisition. This principle is partially confirmed by results of the quantitative analysis. Results have revealed that the two textbooks for high school have reduced the quantity of grammar exercises, which mainly consist of controlled-production activities.

These new perspectives may be also seen in the suggestions provided by authors in *The Teachers' guide* of the latest published textbook. Authors offer indications for presenting grammar forms using inductive method, noticing and input-processing activities. These suggestions show authors' intent to consider second language research findings and their effort to integrate teaching techniques with input-based activities. These features may be seen as an attempt to support teachers' practice, and update teaching method, suggesting new techniques that could be successively integrated as actual exercises in the students' textbook. Additionally, *Parliamo cinese* presents a *model sentences* section before explicit grammar instruction, providing an attempt to help teacher for introducing grammar through noticing and form-meaning connection. However this method is not supported by exercises in the textbook, where the introduction of grammar structures providing explicit information is still the most used teaching method.

With reference to the research question number two, findings have shown that all textbooks follow a similar trend, focusing more on form than on meaning and no notable difference in terms of activities were found. In all textbooks the quantity of meaningful drills highly prevails; the rigid structure of meaningful drills doesn't allow any negotiation of meaning, and do not support learn-

ers to pay attention to meaning in order to manipulate forms. Compared to meaningful drills, the number of other types of drill and non-drill activities is extremely minor and insignificant. These findings reveal that the majority of activities provided in textbooks analysed do not focus on contextualised exercises, neither on promotion of form and meaning relationship.

However, some traces of the suggestions of language research findings can be found in the newest textbook. This, on one hand, doesn't include any mechanical drills; on the other hand, provides opportunities to use the target form in a meaningful and communicative way, by including few communication practice activities. These activities prepare students to use the language in a real-life context and require the use of grammar form in a meaningful way for a communicative purpose.

These results have revealed that the textbooks analysed do not consider indications of SLA for grammar instruction. Language acquisition research suggests approaches that encourage techniques of noticing and processing the input before producing output. In the textbooks analysed input-based activities are extremely rare. The approach to grammar instruction remains mostly decontextualized e production-oriented. Nevertheless, the most recently published textbook introduces some innovative techniques, such as meaningful focused, communicative and contextualised practice activities and offers indications for teachers suggesting input-based activities for grammar teaching. This may suggest that teaching material is changing.

Is has to be considered that, only in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in publishing textbooks for teaching and learning Chinese language in Italy. None curriculum design for teaching and learning Chinese was available before 2016, there were no national training courses for teachers of Chinese as a foreign language before 2012 (Langé, 2018). Studies on Chinese as a foreign language and Chinese language teaching methods are still limited and in their early stages, making authors' work greatly challenging. Surely, further researches and interactions among teachers and scholars will improve Chinese teaching investigation and develop updated teaching materials.

6. Conclusions and limitations

In order to observe whether the new published textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language reflect the indications suggested by research in the field of language acquisition and incorporate the revised grammar teaching techniques, this study analysed four beginner-level textbooks for Chinese as a foreign language.

The teaching techniques for grammar teaching examined in the four textbooks still heavily reflect the production-oriented approach. Textbooks analysed are quite far from the suggestions of current research in language teach-

ing and do not integrate activities according to the new teaching perspectives, such as the central role of the input and input-based activities. However, the findings have shown that the newest published textbook, destined for high school students, introduces few activities which are based on the theories of the action-oriented approach, providing contextualized, communicative and meaning-focus activities. This innovative position may represent an attempt to consider current perspectives of grammar instruction.

Although there still is much work to be done by textbooks' authors and scholars, the study has shown modest signal of innovation in the approach to grammar teaching. It also offers a first opportunity to authors of teaching materials to reflect on innovative FL teaching methods and techniques to be incorporated in future publications.

The study also has some limitations. Although these results highlight some issues of the current teaching material for Chinese as a second language, the research is not sufficiently comprehensive since it analysed textbooks published in only one country. The analysis of FL Chinese textbooks published in other countries would provide more evident information on the updated situation of the approach to grammar teaching instruction in the FL classroom of other authors and researchers. Another limitation is that the present research doesn't include intermediate and advanced level textbooks; it is possible that quantity of input based and communicative practice activities increase in higher-level teaching material. Further research should consider including all levels of FL textbooks.

References

Aski, J. (2003). Foreign Language Textbook Activities: Keeping Pace with Second Language Acquisition Research. Foreign Language Annals 36(1), 57–65.

Blanco Canales A. (2014), Criterios para el análisis, la valoración y la elaboración de materiales didácticos de español como lengua extranjera/segunda lengua para niños y jóvenes. *Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada*, 23, 71-91.

Brown, D. (2014). The power and authority of materials in the classroom ecology. *The Modern Language Journal* 98, 658–661.

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment.* Cambridge, U.K: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

Ellis, R. (2002). Methodological options in grammar teaching materials. In E. Hinkel & S. Fotos (Eds.), *New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*, (pp. 155–179). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Ellis, R. (2006). Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective. *TESOL Quarterly* 40, 83–107.

Ellis, R. (2012). *Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy. West Sussex*, UK: *Wiley-Blackwell.*

Fernández, C. (2011). Approaches to grammar instruction in teaching materials: A study in current L2 beginning-level Spanish textbooks. *Hispania 94* (1), 155–170.

Guerrettaz, A.M., & Johnston, B. (2013). Materials in the classroom ecology. *The Modern Language Journal 97*, 779–796.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis*. London: Longman. Print.

Langé, G. (2018). L'insegnamento di lingua e cultura cinese nelle scuole italiane. In A. Brezzi & T. Lioi (Eds.), *La didattica del cinese nella scuola secondaria di secondo grado*, (pp. 21-34). Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice.

Leaver, B. (2005). *Achieving success in second language acquisition*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Li, D, & Cheng, M. (2008). *A practical Chinese Grammar for foreigners*. (外国人实用汉语语法). Beijing, China: Beijing language and culture university press.

Long, M.H. (1983). Does second language instruction make a difference? A review of research. TESOL Quarterly 17, 359-382.

Lü, S. (Ed.). (1980). *Xiàndài hānyü bābāicí [Eight hundred words of modern Mandarin]*. Beijing, China: Shangwu.

Maijala, M., & Tammenga-Helmantel, M. (2017). Grammar exercises in Dutch, Finnish and global textbooks for teaching German as a foreign language. *The Language Learning Journal.* Electronic publication ahead of print version.

Nassaji, H., & Fotos, S. (2004). Current Developments in Research on the Teaching of grammar. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 24, 126–45.

Office of Chinese Language Council International. (2008). *International curriculum for Chinese language education*. 国际汉语教学通用课程大纲. Beijing, China: Foreign language teaching and research press, 北京：外语教学与研究出版社.

Paulston, C.B. (1972). Structural patterns drills: A classification. In H. Allen & R.Campbell (Eds.), *Theaching English as a foreign language* (pp. 129-138). In New York, Usa: McGraw-Hill.

Romagnoli, C. (2012). *Grammatica cinese. Le parole vuote del cinese moderno*. Milano Italy: Hoepli.

Rubio, F., Passey, A., & Campbell, S. (2004). Grammar in Disguise: The Hidden Agenda of Communicative Language Teaching Textbooks. *RAEL Revista electrónica de lingüística aplicada* 3, 158–76.

Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass, & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235-253). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Tammenga-Helmantel, M. & Maijala, M. (2018). The position of grammar in Finnish, Dutch, and global course books for German as a foreign language. *Language Teaching Research*, 1 –22.

Tomlinson, B. (2010) "Principles of effective materials development". In E. Harwood (Ed.), *English language teaching materials: Theory and practice* (pp. 81-108). New York, Usa: Cambridge University Press.

VanPatten, B. (1996). *Input Processing and Grammar Instruction.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

VanPatten, B. (2003). *Processing Instruction Theory, Research.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Vold, E.T. (2017). Meaningful and contextualised grammar instruction: what can foreign language textbooks offer?. *The Language Learning Journal*, 1-15.

Yoon, J. (2019). Teaching and Learning Vocabulary as L2: Approaches in Spanish Textbooks. *Language Teaching and Educational Research*, 2 (2), 114-131.

Zan, H., Zhang, K., Zhu, X. & Yu, S. (2011). Research on the Chinese Function Word Usage Knowledge Base. *International Journal on Asian Language Processing*, 21(4), 185– 198.

ANALYSED TEXTBOOKS:

Abbiati, M., & Zheng, R. (2010), *Dialogare in cinese. Corso di lingua colloquiale,* Vol. 1. Venezia, Italy: Cafoscarina.

Ambrosini, C., Casarin, E., Colombo, G., Dolci, S., Enea, S., Mangia. P., Marzi, D., Salodini, E. & Tolu, C. (2016), *Parla e scrivi in cinese,* Vol. 1. Bologna, Italy: Zanichelli.

Masini, F., Zhang, T., Bai, H., Di Toro, A. & Liang, D. (2010). *Il cinese per gli italiani. Corso elementare.* Milano, Italy: Hoepli.

Masini, F., Gabbianelli, G., Zhang, T. & Wang, R. (2018). *Parliamo cinese,* Vol. 1. Milano, Italy: Hoepli.

APPENDIX A

Types of grammar instruction and activities in four beginner-level FL Chinese Textbooks.

Textbook	*Dialogare in cinese 2010*	*Il cinese per gli italiani 2010*	*Parla e scrivi in Cinese 2016*	*Parliamo cinese 2018*
Explicit description				
supplied/deductive	√	√	√	√
discover/inductive	-	-	-	-
verbal	√	√	√	√
diagrammatic	√	√	√	√
Data				
source				
authentic	-	-	-	-
contrived,	√	√	√	√
text size				
discrete sentences	√	√	√	√
continuous	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**
medium				
written	√	√	√	√
oral	√	-	-	√
Operations				
input-based				
reception				
controlled	-	-	√	√
automatic				
judgment				
judgment only	√	-	-	-
judgment to be corrected	√	-	-	-
product-based				
production				
controlled	√	√	√	√
free	-	-	-	√