

Evaluation of English Textbooks Taught in Iranian Secondary High Schools: Processability Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Pienemann's Process ability (PT) Theory is on the assumption that there is a limit on the human's short-term memory and processing capacity. On the one hand, it means that those language structures which need higher processing should only be produced in the later stages of second language acquisition. On the other hand, it means that what is presented to second language learners has to be in line with their current level of proficiency. The present paper was an attempt to see if the English textbooks (Vision 1, 2, 3) taught in Iranian secondary high schools follow the developmental stages offered by PT. It also aimed to see if there was a smooth pedagogical progression from the first grade to the third grade in these textbooks. The findings showed that they only were successful at stage 1 of PT. In other words, they were more concerned with presenting words and phrases but when it came to other stages of the PT three major deviations were noticed: A) the early presentation of question forms before SVO structure is well-established, B) mixing the stages of PT, and C) omission of some intermediate stages. With regard to the second purpose, no smooth progression was seen from grade one to grade three. For example, while Vision 1 introduces subordinate clauses, surprisingly, a year later Vision 2 presents countable/uncountable words like "some, many, a few, a little..." which, according to PT, are a lot easier to process than complex sentences containing subordinate clauses.

Keywords: The Processability Theory, Teachability hypothesis, book evaluation, pedagogical progression

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks play an indispensable role in English Language teaching (ELT). In fact, most teachers just proceed with what has been incorporated in the textbooks without daring to add some creative activities in their classes partly because they are not familiar with the principles of material design and development. It shows that ELT material developers have to take into account the theories of second language acquisition as

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much as possible to benefit language learners. One very important theory of second language acquisition in which is most often overlooked by ELT material developers is Pienemann's Processability Theory (PT). In what follows first ELT in Iran along its problems is briefly introduced, then the Processability Theory is explained.

TEFL in Iranian public schools

In Iran, public education lasts 12 years: six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, and three years of high

school. The formal instruction of English begins at the first year of junior high school and continues for six years. During junior high school, English is offered for four hours a week, and in high school for two hours a week. In addition to these public schools, there are some private language centers where English is taught as a foreign language. Although students attending these private institutions have much better language abilities, a large number of language learners cannot afford them and are consequently deprived of a better education.

The instructional materials are mainly a series of books prepared by some university instructors and approved by the Ministry of Education. English teachers are trained in both universities and teacher training centers.

Problems with TEFL in Iran

Stressing the importance of program evaluation, Ross (1992) claims that most long-term programs are not frequently evaluated and suggested that regular evaluations be carried out at school levels. On the other hand, Genesee (2001) holds that evaluation can focus on different aspects of teaching and learning including “textbooks and instructional materials, student achievement, and whole programs of instruction” (p.144). Accordingly, in evaluating programs, it is necessary to take into account teachers, learners, as well as those who are involved in the process of education in one way or another (Farhady, 2006). Considering all these claims, the problems with ELT in Iran could be categorized into three categories of unqualified language teachers, out-of-date instructional materials, and lack of instructional facilities. Below each is discussed:

Unqualified language teachers

Farhady (2006) is of the opinion that language teachers should, in fact, enjoy three qualities: “they should a) possess a reasonable command of the language he teaches, b) have an understanding of the process of learning, and c) obtain comprehensive information as possible about his students” (p. 430). Most language teachers teaching in the educational system of Iran hold a BA degree in TEFL, English literature, or English Translation. Some, of course, hold

MAs as well. These teachers are either trained in teacher training centers or in universities.

The most important problem with English teachers in Iran is the fact that a good number of them do not have the necessary command of English. In other words, most of them are not qualified. This is partly due to the fact that the only qualification required is a university degree.

This problem is also well-attested by some recent studies; (Pishghadam and Mirzaee, 2008; Amimni 1991; Kandi; 1995 among others). Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008) claim that: “Considering Iran, we witness that due to the centralized educational system teachers are not autonomous to take decisions or do any type of classroom-orientated action research, and, in most cases, they are not even familiar with the ABCs of reflective teaching” (p. 56). Yet, another problem is the lack of supervision on teachers. Teachers are rarely monitored; nor is there any supervision on how teachers are chosen, how they are trained, how they have to be tested periodically, and on what criteria they can get a promotion

Out-of-date instructional materials

ELT textbooks play such an invaluable role in any language program that Sheldon (1988) refers to them as “the visible heart of any ELT program” (p.237). In selecting textbooks, Cunningsworth (1995) suggests that care be exercised so that a good selection is made and “the materials selected closely reflect [the needs of the learners and the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program” (p.7). Although English textbooks used in Iranian public schools are written by experts in the field of ELT, rarely do they conform to the new developments in TEFL. For instance, in his study of ELT textbooks produced locally in Iran, Taki (2008) concluded that: the preparation of high school books appears to have been influenced by post-revolution norms and standards. In another study, Jahangard (2007) evaluated four EFL textbooks being used in Iranian high schools. Using 13 common criteria extracted from different materials evaluation checklists, he concluded that “although the reading skill, among others, looks to be of first priority in the design of the books, a big share of the lessons

is devoted to grammar drills and the various forms of grammatical exercises throughout B1, B2, and B3” (p.9).

Yet in another study of English textbooks used in Iranian public schools, Riazi and Mosalanejad using Bloom’s taxonomy of learning objectives (2010) found that in all grades lower-order cognitive skills were more prevalent than higher-order ones. In investigating the English teachers’ opinions of ELT textbooks, Gholami (2013) contends that most teachers regard the textbooks as boring, out-of-date, grammar-based, and insufficient to develop students’ speaking ability. Solaimani (2013) evaluated the current ELT textbooks in Iran based on Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and concluded that they are not benefiting from the theory.

Lack of instructional facilities

The third problem having to do with the dissatisfying situation of ELT in Iranian public high schools has to do with the lack of educational facilities. Most classes, for example, are very crowded and most schools lack computer centers. In the last decade, however, a great deal of money has been spent to equip schools with computer centers and language laboratories. Today more schools have access to the internet so that both students and teachers can catch up with the new developments in the fast-changing world. The point, however, is that a lot of language teachers do not have even a rudimentary knowledge of how to use computers; consequently, computers and language laboratories have, in fact, contributed nothing to TEFL in Iranian public high schools.

Processability Theory

Pienemann (1998; 2015) introduced the Processability Theory (hence after PT) to account for the sequences of development in second language acquisition. It aimed to explain both how second language learners acquire a language via the input they are exposed to and the different patterns in the course of second language acquisition (Ellis, R. 2008).

PT claims that both a theory of grammar and a processing component are needed in order to understand L2 acquisition. The theory; however,

places emphasis on the acquisition of the procedural skills which are required for processing the formal properties of second language learning. The theory of grammar which is used in the theory is Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG).

As a psychological approach, PT makes the following claims: language acquisition depends on the acquisition of a set of procedural skills; these language acquisition procedures pass through different stages; each of these stages processes specific structures; learners can only produce and comprehend those specific structures which are relevant to their present stage of language acquisition; transition to the next stage necessitates that the previous stages be processed.

Pienemann (1998a) was of the opinion that English morphology and syntax develop in six stages starting with Word/lemma and developing further through Category procedure, Noun phrase procedure, Verb phrase procedure, Sentence procedure, and Subordinate clause procedure, respectively at higher stages. In this hierarchical procedure, the element in a lower stage is a prerequisite for the other elements in the higher stages. In addition, the stages cannot be skipped.

He then specifies these procedural skills which are needed in order for the production and comprehension of utterances in a second language to be processed. In the first stage, learners develop lexicons which are the basics to all language processing in later stages. In the second stage, learners utilize bound morphemes in order to produce free morphemes. Later in the third stage, they are able to produce disconnected phrases by bringing together the intraphrasal components such as conjunctions. At this stage, learners; however, do not possess the knowledge of syntactic structures and word order necessary for producing meaningful sentences. In the fourth and fifth stages, syntactic knowledge emerges by which learners can gradually provide lexical features to produce phrases. The final stage contains the emergence of the automatic use of subordinate clauses.

Pienemann (1988, 2005) also asserts that language learners are able to produce and comprehend only those L2 linguistic forms which

can be handled by the current state of the language processor. Accordingly, learners are able to acquire new linguistic features only if the prerequisites have been provided for them. This helps predict the course of development of L2 linguistic features in language production and comprehension across languages (Kessler, 2008; Pienemann & Kessler 2007).

The idea that languages are learned systematically is not new. Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974) for instance, suggested an order for L2 acquisition. Some other researchers such as Swain, (2005); Tarone, (1997) asserted that, except for some amount of variation, language is learned in sequences. The problem with these studies is that they are descriptive and do not provide any answer to the question of why there is a systematicity in L2 acquisition. PT presented by Pienemann (1998a) taking an explanatory-adequacy perspective addresses the problem of SLA from a processing viewpoint.

PT, according to Pienemann (1998b), asserts that there are specific obligatory procedural skills for processing and production of utterances in a second language. In the first stage, language learners have to develop a lexicon which is necessary for all language processing in subsequent stages. To produce free morphemes which occur in the second stage, they make use of bound morphemes. In the third stage, they are able to combine disconnected phrases by intra-phrasal components like conjunctions. However, learners at this stage are not equipped with syntactic-structures knowledge to line lexicon; instead, they rely on pragmatics to order words.

Gradually in the fourth and fifth stages, syntactic knowledge appears which they use to provide lexical features to phrases. Only in the last stage can learners automatically use subordinate clauses. At any stage of development, Pienemann (1988, 2005) states, language learners can acquire new linguistic information only if they are provided with the prerequisites. In this way, the course for the development of L2 linguistic forms in both production and comprehension can be predicted. When the path of second language development is identified, light is shed on what L2 learners are prepared to acquire at any given point of time. Thus, second

language learning can be supported both in instructional and natural settings (Kessler, 2008; Pienemann & Kessler 2007).

Lexical Functional Grammar

Processability Theory is partly based on Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) as a grammatical theory. LFG which is within the frame of generative grammar (Pienemann & Håkansson, 1999), and feature unification is the main characteristic of this type of grammar. Simply put, the process of feature unification guarantees that the various parts constituting a sentence fit together (Pienemann, 1998a). The original version published by Kaplan and Bresnan in 1982 had three components. The first component was a constituent structure (c-structure) component which generates 'surface structure' constituents and c-structure relationships. The second component was a lexicon, the entries of which have syntactic and other information relevant to the sentence generation. The third one was a functional component which compiles for every sentence with all the grammatical information necessary for the semantic interpretation of the sentence.

This original framework was later revised by Bresnan in 2001 and was composed of extra features necessary to preserve the principle of typological plausibility. The original version only dealt with the constituent structure; however, Bresnan added an argument and functional structure (a- and f- structure). These added structures, of course, only appear in the extended version of PT. It is because the original version (1998a) was based on the early LFG. Pienemann opted for Lexical Functional Grammar for a host of reasons. Most importantly, the processability hierarchy of PT rests on the concept of feature unification which is central in LFG. The feature unification concept encompasses a psychologically plausible process involving the identification of grammatical information in the lexical entry, the temporal storage of that information, and its use at another point in the constituent structure. This concept; therefore, is of top importance to PT.

Lexical Functional Grammar is in conformity with PT since this grammar is typologically plausible. According to Pienemann (1998a), PT

could be applied to any given language. Last but not least, according to LFG language acquisition is a process which is heavily lexically driven; thus, it presents a lexical approach to grammar. More specifically, in a grammar which is primarily based on the lexicon, lexical items can also have grammatical information which means that the words of a language are viewed as the building blocks of the syntactic structure (Fabri, 2008; Pienemann & Hakansson, 1999).

Research Questions

In his studies in 1998, Pienemann offered a hierarchy of language processability by which learners' current states of second language development can be diagnosed. Simply put, the theory assumes a series of inter-languages and tries to account for developmental sequences in terms of the grammar processes involved in the production of a sentence; second-language learners at each inter-language stage are able to process a limited amount of grammar. It is a well-supported theory which attempts to shed light on the sequences of development in second language learning (Pienemann, 1998a). The theory is also an empirical framework supported by a sufficient body of research (e.g. Keßler 2007; Lenzing, 2008; Pienemann and Keßler, 2007; Wang, 2011). Although there are some studies critical of PT (Peker & Toprak, Celen, 2020) which suggest some amendments to this theory, still, PT is a well-supported theory which offers implications for the field of ELT.

One implication of PT is the need for knowing learners' current state of proficiency that it provides teachers with insights into what they are ready to acquire in the second (L2) or foreign language (FL) at a specific time. Providing materials to learners in accordance with their developmental stage is of great importance, and the design and development of textbooks require sequencing lexical and grammatical items (Guo, 2018). This is also in line with the "i+1 principle" of Krashen (1982) because it implies that sequences in learning should be known so that they can be ordered depending on the order of acquisition. These suggestions in the literature provide implications for material design and the language a teacher uses in the class.

Many ELT developers; however, have not paid due attention to the guidelines suggested by the PT. Cook (2008), for instance, claims that PT has not been fully applied to many ELT textbooks and they never allow language learners to progress along the path determined by PT. All these points to the fact that there is a scarcity or even lack of ELT textbook analysis from the PT perspective especially those developed for beginners. As a matter of fact, to date, none of the ELT books which are taught in Iranian public schools have ever been analyzed from the PT perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is two-fold. On the one hand, it attempts to analyze the three ELT textbooks used in Iranian secondary high schools in terms of the morpho-syntactic acquisition sequence specified in PT. On the other hand, it tries to see whether these textbooks represent a smooth pedagogical movement from the beginning to the advanced level. Accordingly, two research questions are investigated in the present study:

***RQ1.** Do the morpho-syntactic structures in Iranian ELT textbooks used in the secondary high school level conform to the morpho-syntactic sequence in PT?*

***RQ2.** Is there a smooth pedagogical progression from beginning to advanced level in Iranian EFL textbooks used in the secondary high school level?*

Review of the Literature

PT is on the assumption that there is a limit on the human's short-term memory and processing capacity. This means that those language structures which need higher processing can only be produced in the later stages of second language acquisition. For instance, when it comes to the plural marker "-s", it seemingly needs the addition of the plural marker to a noun, but the processing cost to correctly produce such a construction in a sentence which contains subordinate clauses is high because one has to take into account person markers, argument structure, number, auxiliaries, and so on (Pienemann et al. 2005). The processability hierarchy which was predicted for the development of morphology in L2 English is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1
Developmental Hierarchy of Processability Theory

Stage	Processing procedures	Target structures		
		Interrogatives	Negation	
6	Subordinate clause			
5	Sentence procedure	Aux-2 nd	Do-2 nd	
4	Verb phrase procedure	Pseudo-Inversion/Yes/no-Inversion		
3	Noun phrase procedure	Do-Fronting/WH Fronting	Adverb-fronting	Don't +V
2	Category procedure	SVO	SVO	No/No+X
1	No procedure(word or lemma access)	Words	Words	Words

1. No procedure (word or lemma access): learners at this stage are capable of producing words as the structural outcome.

2. Category procedure: learners are expected to produce lexical morphemes such as -ed or -s plural at this stage.

3. Noun phrase procedure: learners gain the ability to match the acquired lexical morphemes to words within the phrase.

4. Verb phrase procedure: learners can arrange the syntactic functions (subject, object,...) of a phrase.

5. Sentence procedure: learners can arrange the syntactic functions of a sentence.

6. Subordinate clause procedure: learners can make a distinction between the main clause and the subordinate clause attached to it.

Learners are only able to produce one word at a time, say, "book" or "wall", or formulas such as "How are you?" The learner has no idea of grammatical structure. Next, the learner acquires the typical word order of the language which in English is the SVO or Subject-Verb-Object order. S/he does not have any alternative word order based on movement such as questions. In the next stages, the language learner learns how to move elements about, especially to the beginning and end of the sentence.

The important point in this hierarchy is the fact that the order of acquisition is resistant to instruction. In other words, the teacher is helpless to do much about these sequences; if all learners need to go through more or less the same sequence, the teacher can only fit in with this. This hierarchy, for example, implies that the "-s" ending of verbs must not be taught at early stages since it inevitably shows up late. Or in the early stages an effort must be made to teach the subject-verb-object order and language

learners must not be expected to learn the word order of questions at early stages. Furthermore, teachers should introduce sentence-initial adverbials as a way into the movement used in questions.

Empirical Studies

PT has been an area of research in the field of second language acquisition and a number of attempts have been made to investigate its validity for different languages: (Ågren, 2009, Hakansson, 2006 for Swedish; Husseinalli, 2006, Mansouri, 2000, 2005 for Arabic; Bettoni et al., 2009 for Italian; Glahn et al., 2001 for Scandinavian; Zhang, 2004, 2005 for Chinese; Di Biase & Kawaguchi, 2002 for Japanese; Mohammadkhani et al., 2011; Taki & Hamzehian, 2016; Khansir & Zaab, 2015 for Farsi). Despite this plethora of research for the validity of PT, there have been very few L2/FL studies analyzing textbooks from a PT perspective (Flyman Mattson, 2019; Tang, 2016, 2019; Zipser, 2012; Wang, 2011; Lenzing, 2008; Keßler, 2007) and with regard to Iranian EFL textbooks, no single PT study has yet been carried out. Below some of the studies done in other countries are mentioned:

A seminal study was done by Lenzing (2008) which investigated the development of morpho-syntactic structure in two ELT textbooks in Germany. The findings showed that they went against some aspects of the order predicted by PT. Adopting Lenzing's approach, Tang (2016; 2019) investigated English textbooks taught in China in terms of PT. The results demonstrated that they were partially compatible with the order suggested in PT. More specifically it was shown that the books in question closely followed stages 1 and 2

in the PT hierarchy but in intermediate and advanced levels some deviations from the PT order appeared. Tang; however, attributed these observed deviations to the theme-based syllables in the textbooks.

Atar (2021) investigated the 5 ELT textbooks in Turkey from the PT perspective and found that in general, they followed the stages specified by the PT; however, some incompatibilities were also observed.

METHOD

Three English textbooks (Vision 1, 2, 3 by Kheirandish, et al, 2019) which are currently taught in Iranian Secondary high schools were selected to be analyzed from the perspective of PT. The units in these textbooks are organized by the following sections: Get Ready, Conversation, New Words and Expressions, Reading, Vocabulary Development, Grammar, Listening and Speaking, Writing, and What You Learned. The beginning section-Get Ready- presents the topic covered in each unit and makes language learners prepared by some quotes and pictures.

The Conversation section includes a long dialogue in which the grammar points are scattered.

The next part introduces some new words and expressions through pictures as a preparation for the reading part. The Reading section is composed of a text followed by some comprehension questions. What comes next is the Vocabulary Development part through which some English prefixes, roots, and suffixes along with examples are presented. In the Grammar

part, two grammar points are presented of which the first grammar point is elaborated and the second one is only brought to the attention of the students. The Listening and Speaking part includes one listening passage followed by some guidelines on how the grammar points of

the units are used in performing some speech acts. The Writing part moves from teaching part of speech to simple sentences and finally to developing a short paragraph. Finally What You Learned summarizes the points covered in each unit.

The textbook analysis was carried out in three phases. First, the morpho-syntactic structures of each textbook were extracted. Next, their sequences were compared to those

of developmental stages (Table 1) suggested in PT. Eventually, the resulted comparison of each textbook was reported.

Results

Below, Table 2 shows the analysis of each individual textbook in relation with the stages of morphological development predicted in PT.

Table 2
Morpho-syntactic content of Vision 1

Unit	Morpho-syntax	Stage
1	Future with “will” and “be going to”	3, 5
2	Comparative and superlative adjectives	2
3	Past progressive and reflexives	3, 3
4	Modals and prepositions	4, 3

Unit 1 of Vision 1 starts with introducing some phrases related to nature such as “putting out the fire” and some animal names like “leopard” and “elephant”. No formulaic expression is presented here. Thus it starts with phrases rather than words, which is a violation from stage 1 in the processability model. Later the unit plunges into future tense with “will” and “be going to” where its statement, yes/no, and wh-question forms are presented. In terms of the processability model, these ought to appear in stages 3 and 5 and should not be attempted until the learners have the main SVO structure of English fixed in their minds. Certainly, this early introduction of question forms is a major difference from the processability model.

Unit 2 of Vision 1 again consists of words followed by some phrases which are in conformity with stage 1 of the PT. Later, it presents comparative and superlative adjectives through simple sentences like “I am taller than you” which is specified in the second stage of morphology development in the PT. Thus it can be said that this order of morpho-syntactic presentation is in line with Pinemann’s theory.

Unit 3 of Vision 1 introduces past progressive tense embedded with subordinate clauses – “He found a new medicine when he was working on antibiotics”. It is far in advance of its position in the processability model sequence at stage 6. It clearly collapses two L2 stages into one. These stages in the processability model

are scattered across stages 3 to 6. Apparently, subordinate clauses are not seen as particularly difficult; the processability model; however, insists that they are mastered last of all. The other grammar point covered in unit 3 is the reflexives which has no obvious connection to any L2 learning sequence.

Unit 4 of Vision 1 presents modals and prepositions of times and places which are dealt with in stages 4 and 3 of the processability model respectively. It seems that the unit omits adverb-fronting in stage 3 which facilitates auxiliary and Wh-fronting for language learners.

As a whole, it seems that, except for Unit 2, Vision 1 does not conform to the developmental stages in the processability model because it sometimes presents later stages of the PT too early (unit 3), and sometimes mixes the stages (unit 3) and sometimes omits some intermediate stages (unit 4).

Below, Table 3 shows the analysis of Vision 2 in relation with the stages of morpho-syntactic development predicted in PT.

Table 3
Morpho-syntactic content of Vision 2

Unit	Morpho-syntax	Stage
1	Countable-uncountable nouns, simple sentences	1, 2
2	Present perfect, gerunds	2, 5
3	Conditional type 1, infinitives	6,5

In Unit 1 of Vision 2, some countable and uncountable nouns are introduced to students and then they are instructed on how to write simple sentences like “The teacher is hard-working”. This is; therefore, conforms to stages 1 and 2 specified in PT.

Unit 2 of Vision 2 begins with the present perfect tense along with its statement, yes/no, and wh-question forms. With regard to PT, they normally appear in stages 3 and 5 and should not be taught until the students get a command of the SVO structure of English. This haphazard introduction of questions is a clear deviation from the processability model.

Unit 3 of Vision 2 commences with conditional type 1 which is very much ahead of its position in the processability model sequence at stage 6. Students, we are told by the PT model, should attempt using subordinate clause at the

last stage of language acquisition, but conditional sentences which contain a main and a subordinate clause is introduced to the students too early here. Later “infinitives” are presented in the unit, a grammatical construction which appears in the fifth stage of PT but it shows up after conditional sentences.

In general, it seems that with the exception of unit 1, Vision 2 is not in line with the developmental stages in the processability model in that it sometimes presents the last stage of the PT too early or re-orders the stages mentioned in PT (unit 3). It also omits some intermediate stages (unit 2).

Below, Table 4 shows the analysis of Vision 3 in relation with the stages of morpho-syntactic development predicted in PT.

Table 4
Morpho-syntactic content of Vision 3

Unit	Morpho-syntax	Stage
1	Passive voice- tag questions	3, 5
2	Relative clauses – conditional sentences type 2	6, 6
3	Passive voice with modals- past perfect	3, 2

Unit 1 of Vision 3 begins with presenting some statements related to the main topic of the unit followed by some incomplete noun phrases which students are supposed to complete. Thus it starts with statements rather than words, which is a clear violation from stage 1 in the processability model. Later the unit introduces present, past, and present perfect passives along with tag questions. This seems a bit strange in that these structures are not inherently connected. This again shows a mixture of stages in that passives and tag questions are respectively in the third and fifth stages of the PT.

Unit 2 of Vision 3 begins with some phrases with regard to different types of dictionaries. This could be regarded to be in line with the first stage in PT. Then it introduces subordinate clauses through adjective and adverb clauses. This is a giant leap from stage one to stage six which clearly demonstrates that the authors of the textbook did not have PT in mind when they started developing the textbook.

Unit 3 of Vision 3 once again begins with some words dealing with energy saving which

is in conformity with the first stage of PT. What comes next is the introduction of passives with modals and subordinate clauses through past perfect statements, like “the bill must be paid” or “she had never seen a bear before she went to the zoo”. Once again the apparent gap between the stages of PT is observed here.

In general, the analysis of Vision 3 shows that most of the morpho-syntactic structures provided in this textbook do not conform to the stages of PT. Many complex structures are introduced without due attention to the intermediate stages (unit 1). Furthermore, it also re-orders some stages of PT (units 1 and 3).

DISCUSSION

This paper had a two-fold purpose: firstly it set out to evaluate the three ELT textbooks taught in Iranian secondary high schools with regard to the Processability Theory. Secondly, an attempt was made to see whether there is a smooth pedagogical progression in these textbooks. To answer the first question the findings showed that they were fairly successful at stage 1 of PT. In other words, they were more concerned with presenting words and phrases but when it came to other stages of the PT three major deviations were seen. Below these deviations are mentioned and discussed.

The first kind of deviation from the developmental sequence stipulated by PT is the early presentation of question forms before the SVO structure is established. This is especially observed in Vision 1 wherein presenting future tense a great deal of emphasis is placed on question formation. Obviously, it is an overt deviation from the principles of PT according to which textbooks must concentrate on the main word order of subject-verb-object (SVO) in the early stages. That is to say structures like “birds like worms” has to be taught and language learners should not be expected to learn the word order of questions, “What do birds like?” etc., until much later. This is because question formation in English necessitates movement of the question words which is a lot more difficult to process than mere statements.

A possible justification for this early introduction of question forms has been offered by Vivian Cook (2001). He argues that “when

people tried postponing questions for the first year of teaching, this created enormous practical problems in the classroom, where questions are the life blood” (p.32). Similarly, Swain and Lapkin (2002) suggested that learners be exposed to structures which are a little beyond their present processing capacity because of their frequency in the input. In other words, some structures, they argue, are so prevalent in the input that students need to become familiar with them even at the early stages of language development.

The second obvious deviation from PT seen in Vision Series is mixing the stages of PT. Vision 2, for example, in presenting subordinate clauses collapses two L2 stages into one. These stages in PT are scattered across stages 3 to 6. In other words, although the PT emphatically asserts that subordinate clauses are mastered last of all, the authors of Vision 2 have thought, wrongly of course, that these structures are not particularly difficult and we see that an entire grammar section of Vision 2 is devoted to subordinate clauses, especially time clauses. Considering the processing capacity of language learners, these complex structures are by far the hardest of all which are acquired at stage 6. To the despair of EFL students, in English the word order in subordinate clauses are sometimes different from that of the main clause, making it enormously difficult to process. For example, the question order is “will she come?” but the reported question is “Nick asked if she would come” not “*Nick asked if would she come”.

DeKeyser’s reasoning (2015) might be used here to justify this kind of deviation from PT. He suggested automaticity as a factor leading material developers to deviations from the guidelines of PT. He proposed that some structures might appear at earlier stages because they could lead to automaticity. Gerunds, for instance, seem quite complicated for beginners; nevertheless, they are basic structures in sentences like “I like swimming”. If students, it is argued, are frequently exposed to such structures, they can use and understand them more easily in later stages. It should be noted that the need for these early introductions of structures has been allowed in PT by letting formulas appear at stage one.

The third deviation from PT in the Vision series is the omission of some intermediate stages. This is mostly seen in Unit 1 of Vision 1 and Unit 2 of Vision 2. As an example, one way to facilitate question formation by language learners is introducing sentence-initial adverbials before presenting question forms which involve the movement of some elements to the beginning of the initial position of sentences. Sentences containing adverbs like “In the summer I play tennis”, it is argued, pave the way to help students grasp the concept of movement involved in questions, and had the authors of the Vision series used them, they might have gained better.

With regard to the second question of the present study, it can be said that the above textbooks do not show a smooth pedagogical progression from the beginning to the advanced level. This is because, in these EFL textbooks, we cannot see a slow and consistent move from the early stages of morphological and syntactic development to the higher stages in the PT. At times some intermediate stages are introduced too early and therefore a giant gap is felt in the order of presentation. For example, unit 2 of Vision 1 introduces subordinate clauses when the language learners are not developmentally ready for it. Students at that level are not supposed to be able to process such an enormous amount of data. It is surprising that a year later these students in Vision 2 are presented with some countable/uncountable words like “some, many, a lot of, a few, a little ...” which, according to PT, are a lot easier to process than sentences containing complex subordinate.

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