

# An Evaluation of Grammar Settings in Textbooks—Take Junior High School English Textbooks Published by FLTRP for Example

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## Abstract

Under the background of the new curriculum standard, grammar is still an important part of English basic education, which lays a solid foundation for the improvement of students' core literacy. Many second language acquisition researchers have proposed that there is a relatively fixed natural route for second foreign language learners, but textbook editors and in-service teachers in China often ignore this sequence. Based on the natural order hypothesis and the input and output hypothesis, it is found in this thesis that English textbooks published by Foreign Language Teaching Research Press for junior high school students do not intend to follow the natural order but maintain a good balance in the design of grammar input-output activities.

**Keywords:** grammar setting, natural order, input and output

## 1. Introduction

The 21st century is an era of closer contact, better mutual understanding, and more peaceful interaction between people in the context of globalization. This issue has caused a majority of people, organizations, and nations from different cultures and languages to coordinate and communicate with each other (Amerian & Tajabadi, 2020). Under this background, foreign language teaching is becoming more and more important, and grammar teaching is an indispensable part of it. As a guide and supporting tool for both teachers and learners, textbooks are well worth studying. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), the textbook is viewed as a resource, a trainer, and an authority. As a resource, the textbook contains a set of materials

and activities available to the teacher from which one can choose. It can also be a trainer for novice teachers who need valuable instructions, support, and guidance. As an authority, a textbook is seen as valid and reliable, written by experts and authorized by important publishers or ministries of education (Gedik Bal, 2020).

Therefore, the research object of this paper is the first three junior high school English textbooks published by Foreign Language Teaching Research Press (FLTRP), from grade seven volume 1-2 to grade eight volume 1. The reason for the choice is that, on the one hand, this version of textbooks is broadly applied over the country and has been widely recognized; On the other hand, it is because the date of publication is relatively close, which is more in line with the

learning level and age characteristics of current junior high school students. In addition, textbooks for two grades are chosen because several typical grammatical morphemes mentioned in Krashen's theory run through the three textbooks. Only in this way can the research be more comprehensive.

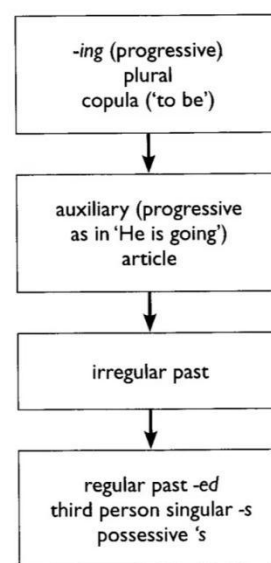
To sum up, this paper will focus on the grammar design of textbooks, comparing the grammar acquisition order of second language learners and the order of textbooks, analyzing the proportion of input and output activities to analyze whether the grammar setting is reasonable, to provide suggestions for textbook compilation and teachers' endeavor to teach grammar in the classroom.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

### 2.1 The Natural Order Hypothesis

Under the framework of interlanguage theory proposed by Selinker in 1972, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers pointed out that there is a *natural route* in second language acquisition, that is, the overall acquisition of language rules follows a set of basically fixed acquisition sequences. Based on the natural route theory, Krashen (1982) proposed the *natural order hypothesis*, which holds that for both the native language and second language learners, the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a "natural order" which is predictable. For a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early while others are late. The language rules that are easiest to state are not necessarily the first to be acquired. This order seemed to be independent of the learners' age, first language background, and conditions of exposure.

Most studies showed a higher degree of accuracy for plural -s than for possessive -s', and for -ing than for regular past (-ed). Stephen Krashen summarized the order of second language learners learning English as shown in Figure 1 (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).



**Figure 1.** Krashen's summary of second language grammatical morpheme acquisition sequence

### 2.2 The Input and Output Hypothesis

Krashen (1985) also tried to explain how second language acquisition works through the *comprehensible input hypothesis*. It believes that acquisition occurs when one is exposed to language that is comprehensible and contains "i+1". The "i" represents the level of language already acquired, and the "1" is a comprehensible metaphor for language that is just a step beyond that level. Swain (1985) argues that output can facilitate SLA and that students should be given more opportunities to use their writing and speaking skills (Alobaid, 2017).

Based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, this paper will transfer this framework into grammar analysis, defining grammar input in the form of presentation in texts, reading and listening materials, and grammar output in the form of oral practice, writing, and translation, so that the author can analyze the proportion of input and output design in the textbook to judge whether students can receive enough knowledge input and have enough opportunities for output to internalize grammar knowledge.

## 3. Analysis

As mentioned above, this paper chooses the first three textbooks of junior high school published by FLTRP for analysis. Textbook of each grade

has two volumes, and each volume has 10 units; each unit involves one or two grammatical morphemes, but only morphemes that coincide with Krashen's theory are mentioned here. Detailed analysis can be seen in Table 1 (Among them, *G* refers to Grade, *V* refers to Volume, and *M* refers to Module.)

**Table 1.**

Developmental sequence	Order in textbooks
①-ing (progressive)	③Present simple <i>be</i> (G7 V1 M1)
②plural	⑨Apostrophe to show possessive (G7 V1 M2)
③copula ('to be')	②Plural nouns (G7 V1 M4)
④auxiliary	⑧The third person singular (G7 V1 M6)
⑤article	①④Present continuous +auxiliary (G7 V1 M9)
⑥irregular past	⑦Past simple regular verbs (G7 V2 M8)
⑦regular past -ed	⑥Past simple irregular verbs (G7 V2 M9)
⑧third person singular -s	⑤articles (G8 V1 M9)
⑨Possessive 's	

From the Table, we can see that the sequence of grammar in textbooks differs greatly from that of second language acquisition found in studies. Especially *the apostrophe to show possessive of nouns*, which is considered the most difficult to understand, appears very early in the textbook; and *regular verbs* are learned earlier than *irregular verbs* in the past simple tense, which is contrary to the developmental sequence.

For the textbook writers, one of the objective basis can be followed is the teaching syllabus, but the current domestic teaching syllabus does not specify the order of grammar teaching. According to the survey, the order of grammar rules in textbooks depends on the content of discourses which are centered on the theme of unit. Unit topics are set according to the cognitive development rules of junior high school students and gradually expand from the expressions in daily life. For example, unit topics in volume one of grade seven are *My classmates*, *My family*, *My school*, *Healthy food*, *My school day*,

etc. Grammar accordingly begins with the most frequently used morphemes, from personal pronouns introducing you and me, to describing possession and quantity. What's more, the grammatical order of the textbook is dominated by the tense. As a general rule, the present tense is introduced first, the past perfect continuous last, and the order of other language rules is subordinate to this main line (Jiang, 1995).

However, at the micro level, some order reversals do not conform to the frequency or natural order of use, such as past simple regular verbs and irregular verbs. Textbook editors may want learners to master general rules before noticing special verbs to practice deductive reasoning. However, in the actual process of SLA, the acquisition of irregular verbs is much earlier than the regular one. Irregular verbs such as go, sit, and eat are more commonly used in daily conversation, and thus easier to be acquired. Therefore, the grammatical order of this set of textbooks published by FLTRP is somewhat arbitrary. Instead of following the developmental acquisition sequence, it is structured around modular topics related to students' school and daily life. If the complexity of the topic and the grammar rules can be both taken into account, it may have a better teaching effect. For example, it may be more reasonable to advance the knowledge of *articles*, and put the *possessive* afterward, so that students can learn how to define nouns before moving on to expressing belonging. Teachers, textbooks, and teaching methods should adapt to learners and acquisition rules, rather than ignore or even violate them.

Counting reading and listening materials as grammar input, while speaking and writing activities as output, results can be shown in Table 2. In textbooks, the typical input materials include texts, listening exercises, extended reading materials, *a Guide to language use*, and *Irregular verb list* in the appendix, while the output activities mainly include fill-in-the-blank exercises, oral activities with partners, and sentence writing, etc.

It can be seen that the difference in the amount of input and output is small, with the input slightly higher than the output. Swain argued that it is when students have to produce language that they begin to see the limitations of their interlanguage. A large amount of grammar input enables students to induce or deduce the grammar rules, while the output task can

internalize the learned knowledge and enable students to master it in the authentic context. In this aspect, the textbook strikes a good balance between the number of inputs and outputs, with explicit grammar explanation, enough grammatical penetration incorporated into the modules' topics, and the opportunity to use grammar rules in practice.

**Table 2.**

Morphemes Frequency	Input	Output
Present simple <i>be</i>	5	4
Apostrophe to show possessive	6	5
Plural nouns	6	4
The third-person singular	7	5
Present continuous+auxiliary	7	6
Past simple regular verbs	7	8
Past simple irregular verbs	6	8
Articles	5	4
Total	49 (52.7%)	44 (47.3%)

#### 4. Conclusion and Suggestions

To sum up, this version of textbook is not designed to follow the developmental grammar acquisition sequence, but it is balanced in input/output activities. The compilation of textbooks in the future can be adjusted appropriately according to this point. Teachers should also help students to review more systematically when using this set of textbooks to connect grammar knowledge so as not to affect students' acquisition.

Empirical studies on first and second language acquisition confirm that there is a natural order in the process of language acquisition. Therefore, the characteristics of foreign language learning, the cognitive ability of learners, and the natural order of language acquisition should be fully considered in the compilation of foreign language textbooks. Only by doing this can we ensure that the selection of language materials and the arrangement of exercises in the textbook follow the principles from easy to difficult, from

old to new, and from simple to complex, so as to facilitate students' language learning as much as possible.

Grammar teaching should also follow the natural sequence of language acquisition. Krashen believed that classroom grammar teaching could not change the natural order of acquisition, but it could affect the speed of acquisition and ultimately benefit the mastery of the target language. Therefore, grammar teaching should be fully aware of the objectivity of the acquisition order of grammatical morphemes and follow the teachability hypothesis, which holds that only when the language structure taught is closest to that learners can acquire in a natural environment, only when learners are fully prepared for the structure of the language, can grammar teaching promotes the natural acquisition of language; otherwise, grammar teaching is not conducive to learners moving from one stage to the next.

Last but not least, foreign language teaching should respect the individual differences of learners. Although learners have a general order in the acquisition of grammatical morphemes, different language learners also have great personality differences in the acquisition process, and there are also great differences in how and when they acquire grammatical rules. Therefore, while following the natural order of grammar morpheme acquisition in foreign language teaching, teachers should show greater flexibility in teaching content, methods, and process instead of putting forward requirements for students with uniform and rigid standards.

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