

## **Problematising Locally-Produced Instructional Materials: The Case of Vocabulary in Iranian Pre-University English Textbook**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports a study which investigated if there was a match between students' English vocabulary size and the vocabulary load of a locally produced textbook. The analysis of the passages of the pre-university English textbook currently in use in Iran's education system using RANGE program indicated that in order to comprehend the texts, students need to know not only words from 2000 high frequency word list, but also words from academic and low frequency lists. On the other hand, results of the 2000 vocabulary level test administered to 464 Iranian pre-university students, male and female, showed that students did not possess sufficient vocabulary knowledge in order to comprehend the texts and that their vocabulary knowledge was limited far below 2000 words. Other analyses of the textbook, including exercises and word glosses provided more evidence for the inadequacy of the textbook. The paper concludes that the pre-university textbook is flawed in terms of the required principles and standards in materials development which results in students' frustration and disappointment in learning English. The findings of the study are discussed, which should be of much interest to local and international ELT stakeholders, especially textbook writers.

**Key words:** vocabulary load, high frequency words, text-book evaluation, vocabulary knowledge

### **Introduction**

Vocabulary treatment in English language textbooks is an important issue given the fact that vocabulary plays an indispensable role in students' development of their proficiency. Research has shown that vocabulary plays an important role in helping students build their overall English language proficiency (Schmitt, 2000; Sokmen, 1997) so that it can be said at any stage, ESL/EFL students' proficiency highly correlates with their level of lexical knowledge. Stæhr (2009, p. 577) believes that "vocabulary knowledge is a reliable predictor of learners' proficiency in a second or foreign language (L2)". Considering the important position of English textbooks in EFL curriculum and the crucial role they can play in motivating and enhancing EFL students' proficiency development, the present study set out to investigate how vocabulary has been dealt with in pre-university English textbook, the major instructional material in Iran. As far as the review of literature is concerned, quite a good number of studies have been carried out on the evaluation of different aspects of English textbooks in different contexts (see, e.g., Griffiths, 1995; Maeda, 1998; Otlowski, 2003; Takakubo, 2003; Vellenga, 2004). These researchers have attended to different aspects of textbooks and some have focused on vocabulary in textbooks. Maeda (1998) analyzed the vocabulary levels in three readers for college undergraduates and examined the level of learners' vocabulary knowledge. Results of the study showed that 65% to 73% of the different words were from the high frequency 2000-word level. Academic words made up from 5% to

19% of the total different words, and the remaining 10-20% of the words contained a small number of proper nouns and the rest were words outside the high frequency level. Takakubo's (2003) study focused on the vocabulary in textbook wordlists, and evaluated textbooks as materials for teaching lexical items. An overall finding of the study was that the introduction of vocabulary to students using the textbooks was mainly through the exercises and activities that often relied on a translation-based method with many of them appearing to be non-creative and non-interactive. Another study addressed the issue of English vocabulary in textbooks and tests in Japan: Chujo's (2004) compared the vocabulary levels of Japanese junior and senior high school (JSH) texts, Japanese college qualification tests, English proficiency tests, and EGP, ESP and semi-ESP college textbooks in order to determine what the vocabulary levels are, and what additional vocabulary is required for students to understand 95% of these materials. The study found that although most college students should be prepared to take the TOEIC, and high school students should be able to pass both the Daigaku Center Nyushi and Eiken second grade tests, most college entrance exams contain vocabulary that is significantly above the level of high school graduates. Specialized vocabulary lists can be helpful in bridging vocabulary gaps between JSH and ESP, and between JSH and the TOEFL.

In Iran also several researchers have tried to evaluate English textbooks used in schools (see, e.g., Aliakbari, 2004; Dahmardeh, 2009; Darali, 2007; Jahangard, 2007; Riazi & Aryashokouh, 2007; Shahedi, 2002; Toolabi, 2002; Yarmohammadi, 2000). Among these studies only one, Riazi and Aryashokouh (2007), investigated the problems of lexical activities in the current Iranian high school English textbooks. They found that exercises do not entail consciousness-raising activities and that they require the learners just to memorize the words in a decontextualized way.

As can be seen, not many studies have their focus on vocabulary in textbooks and this is a relatively unexplored issue, especially in EFL contexts and in particular in contexts like Iran where textbooks are locally designed and written and are the core of the ELT curriculum. It is, therefore, worth giving a special attention to this topic to shed more light on this important issue as the findings will have implications for all ELT stakeholders and particularly textbook writers. The findings of the present study will hopefully contribute to the available body of knowledge on the issue of vocabulary in English language textbooks.

### **Vocabulary and L2 Text Comprehension**

A considerable number of studies have indicated that the size of vocabulary can significantly predict success in reading in L2 (see, e.g., Coady, Magoto, Hubbard, Graney, & Mokhtari, 1993; Laufer, 1991) and have established specific vocabulary size and lexical coverage targets for adequate comprehension (e.g., Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996; Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer, 1989, 1992, 1997). Having reviewed many studies, Laufer (1997) concluded that the threshold for reading comprehension is, to a large extent, lexical which if not met successful comprehension will be hindered. Hirsh and Nation (1992) suggest that for ease of reading, where reading could be a pleasurable activity, 98-99% coverage is desirable. Hu and Nation (2000) examined the relationship between text coverage and reading comprehension for non-native speakers of English with a fiction test. It was calculated that 98% text coverage would be needed for most learners to gain adequate comprehension. The 98% target coverage assumes that the learners do not use a dictionary or get help from some other source outside the text. Currently, the contemporary thinking in the field of vocabulary teaching and learning puts the threshold of meaningful input at 98% (see, Nation, 2001, 2006; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2008).

### **English Word Frequency Lists**

One description of the various levels of vocabulary with the goal of designing the vocabulary component of a language course divides vocabulary into four levels: high frequency words; academic vocabulary; technical vocabulary; and low frequency words (Nation, 2001). High frequency words are the most frequent 2,000 words of English. This vocabulary typically covers around 80% of the running words of academic texts and newspapers, and around 90% of conversations and novels. The 570 word family Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) is like a specialized extension of the high frequency words. It covers, on average, 8.5% of academic text, 4% of newspapers and less than 2% of the running words of novels. Technical vocabulary is largely of interest and use to people working in a specialized field. It is thought that the technical words cover about 5% of the running words in specialized texts, and is made up of words that occur frequently in a specialized text. The fourth level of vocabulary consists of all the remaining words of English, the low frequency words. Goulden, Nation and Read (1990) hold that there are thousands of these words and they typically cover around 5% of the running words in texts.

Which words should be targeted and taught? When learners know the basic 2000 headwords they will know 85% of the words “on any page of any book no matter what the subject matter” (Nation & Newton, 1997, p. 238). Instructional time spent on these words is very important at all levels, not only because of their frequency, but also because of their range and their coverage. Conversely, low-frequency words are generally not used often enough to be worth the cost of teaching, unless they are prominent in a particular context, such as a specialised reading passage the university students will be reading. The implication of the word frequency lists in designing instructional materials and authoring textbook would be to attend to and consider these levels of vocabulary knowledge so that students can involve with the text and improve their learning. The textbook will certainly need to exert some challenge for the students by introducing new words in a systematic way; however, if it becomes too challenging by jumping to extremes and going beyond student’s head, e.g., then it might take away motivation from students and push them to rote learning and memorization without understanding. This issue is particularly important in context-poor settings like EFL contexts in that students do not have any exposure to English outside their classrooms. Our observation over years indicated that Iranian students and teachers complained about the difficulty of the texts in pre-university textbook, and so we decided to study this important issue empirically to be able to inform all involved in the process, while the findings might be interesting to ELT enterprise in other EFL contexts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Schmitt (2008, p. 329) states that “to facilitate adequate vocabulary learning, four vocabulary partners (students, teachers, materials writers, and researchers) need to contribute to the learning process.” While Schmitt considers these four vocabulary partners as a frame to facilitate adequate vocabulary learning, this study uses this framework to address the inadequacy of the relationship between an EFL textbook vocabulary load and students’ vocabulary knowledge. We were not able to gather first hand data from teachers regarding their attitudes toward this problem and so the study is limited from this perspective; however, in the discussion section we will draw on secondary data from published papers on Iranian EFL teachers’ attitudes to incorporate their position in this framework. As researchers we consider our role to unfold an important issue in locally produced textbooks to help all stakeholders improve the textbooks for the betterment of students’ learning.

Using this framework, then, first, the vocabulary load of the EFL textbook will be identified. Second, students’ vocabulary knowledge will be tested to find out what the current level of their lexical knowledge is. It should be stated that from the dichotomy of breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge (see, Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Nassaji, 2004; Qian, 1999,

2002; Read, 1993; Wesche & Paribakht, 1996), this study focuses on students' breath or size of vocabulary as operationalized by students' scores on the 2000 vocabulary test (Schmitt, Clapham, & Schmitt, D., 2001). Teachers' attitudes from published papers will be used to triangulate the findings from the textbook analysis and students' vocabulary knowledge.

### **Context of the Study**

The current schooling system of Iran includes four levels: 1) Primary School (five years); 2) Junior High School or Guidance School as it is called (three year); 3) Senior High School (three years) and 4) Pre-university (one year). English language is included in junior high school up to pre-university curriculum resulting in seven years of English language education in schools. In some private schools, English is also included in primary education. Surprisingly enough and despite the amount of time spent on teaching English, students do not gain a functional proficiency of English language. This is mainly because schools in Iran find their major role to prepare students for the National University Entrance Examination (NUEE) which is used as a gate for university admission. Every year about one million and a half of pre-university graduates take part in a very stressful and competitive race to get admitted into the limited seats of the colleges and universities. Only about one third of the applicants are able to access higher education in Iran. The significance of NUEE test—high-stake and multiple-choice format—in determining applicants' future cannot be overstated. English language is part of the general section of the NUEE predominantly tested through reading, vocabulary, and grammar tests. This situation has spawned a profitable industry of private preparatory and test-taking classes and a highly inequitable situation in which families who can afford private tutoring are able to ensure an advantage for their offspring. Senior (2009) contends that such tests are a direct response to the social context, not only to issues of competitiveness, but also convenience and cost effectiveness resulting in (non)standardized, discrete item multiple-choice tests. The situation has postulated a negative backwash on schools pushing them to more preparing students for tests rather than teaching for authentic learning.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, two organizations came into charge of developing educational materials for schools and universities in Iran. One is the Organization of Educational Research and Programming (OERP) as the official body in Iran for curricular programming and developing course materials (k-12), and the other SAMT organization mostly in charge of developing university textbooks for humanities. The incentive behind the formation of these organizations has been socio-political and cultural with a strong motive to eradicate Western cultural values from textbooks and filling the gap with Iranian-Islamic values and concepts where necessary and pure scientific, value-free materials in the rest of the situations. The result of this movement has been producing new textbooks including English language textbooks at all levels by the above mentioned organizations.

Iranian school students, especially in pre-university centers, are reported to be usually overwhelmed with the texts they encounter in their textbooks and have difficulty reading and comprehending the passages. The vocabulary is the key factor in comprehending the texts and as reviewed above, researchers believe that there is a vocabulary threshold for reading comprehension to take place, i.e., students should know 98-99% of the words in a passage so that they could manage deciphering the meaning of the text. It was hypothesized that pre-university students' problem with reading and comprehending their textbooks is their lack of enough vocabulary knowledge and that the book demands a wide range of vocabulary beyond the students' expected level. Research on the vocabulary load of English textbooks is a relatively unexplored area in Iran. Moreover, no study has been reported on the vocabulary size of the Iranian students as EFL learners. This is while Laufer (2000) reports studies of the vocabulary size of the students' of other nationalities including Japan, China, Indonesia,

Oman, Israel, France, Greece, and Germany. The present study bears significance from this perspective as well since it contributes to the current body of knowledge on the vocabulary size of Iranian students.

This study follows two objectives. Firstly, to problematize the pre-university English textbook in Iran by examining the vocabulary load of the textbook, and secondly to assess the Iranian students' vocabulary knowledge. The study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- 1- What is the vocabulary load of pre-university English textbook currently in use in Iran?
- 2- What is the Iranian pre-university students' English vocabulary size?
- 3- Is there a match/mismatch between the students' English vocabulary size and the level of vocabulary in the pre-university English textbook?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Due to the large number of provinces and cities and consequently the great number of students, it was not really feasible to include students from all provinces and cities in the present study. The students were chosen from three provinces, namely, Bushehr, Fars and Tehran. These three provinces roughly represent different educational regions of the country. Tehran is the capital city of the country and naturally has access to the most and best educational facilities; Fars as one of the greatest provinces of the country with its capital city, Shiraz, enjoying moderate educational facilities to an acceptable extent; and Bushehr is one of those provinces which lack enough facilities and represent poor provinces in this respect. From each province, both girl and boy pre-university centres were selected. Four hundred and sixty-four pre-university students (237 male and 227 female) studying in three fields, namely, mathematics, natural sciences, and humanities participated in this study. The student participants were all native speakers of Persian and learning English as their second language at public schools. The age range of this cohort of students was 18-20. They were all exposed to the same centralized ELT curriculum with the same textbook and teaching and testing procedures.

### **Instruments**

The data for this study were collected using the following two instruments.

#### **RANGE program**

RANGE program was utilized to examine the vocabulary load of the reading passages of the pre-university textbook. This program was devised and developed by Nation and Heatley (2002). RANGE can be used to compare a text against vocabulary lists to check the words in the text that are covered by the lists. The software has been used in other studies (see, e.g., Chung, 2003; Coxhead, 2000; Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Nation & Wang, 1999).

#### **Vocabulary Levels Test Too long.**

In order to evaluate the students' vocabulary level, the Vocabulary Levels Test developed by Schmitt, Schmitt, and Clapham (2001) was used. This test has been used in many studies on vocabulary acquisition and is widely used as a standard measure of vocabulary proficiency. The test requires the students to match lexical items to their corresponding definitions. The 2000 word level test contains ten sets of six words, three of the words in each set are test items and three are distracters.

The Vocabulary Levels Test is designed to give an estimate of vocabulary size for second language (L2) learners of general or academic English. The rationale for the test stems from research which has shown that vocabulary size is directly related to the ability to use English in various ways. For example, knowledge of the most frequent 2000 words in English provides the bulk of the lexical resources required for basic everyday oral communication (Nation, 2001). The information can be utilized by teachers and administrators in a pedagogical context to inform decisions concerning whether an examinee is likely to have the lexical resources necessary to cope with certain language tasks, such as reading authentic materials. The information can also be used to identify possible lexical deficiencies which might need addressing. Similarly, results from the Vocabulary Levels Test can be used in research studies where an estimate of lexical size at the relevant frequency levels is considered informative (see, e.g., Cobb, 1997; Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Schmitt & Meara, 1997).

### **Materials**

The English pre-university textbook (2006) which includes eight lessons (with eight texts) was used as the materials for the study. Each lesson is devoted to a specific topic, so eight different topics are covered in the whole book. Each lesson includes a reading passage followed by some comprehension questions. Do you think it is necessary to write about exercise types in the book? The exercises in the textbook are of five types: the first type which appears immediately after each text is ‘Comprehension Check’. The purpose of this exercise is to check students’ comprehension of the text. The second type of exercise is “Sentence Functions” which focuses on and aims at familiarizing students with different kinds of functions expressed by the sentences in the text. “Reading Skills”, the third type of exercises, are designed to develop reading skills in students by introducing one technique in each lesson and referring the students to the examples taken from the text. The fourth type of exercise, “Vocabulary Review,” intends to focus on reviewing and reinforcing the meaning of a small number of words from the text. Vocabulary exercises in different lessons of the textbook include sentence completion, multiple-choice, matching, and fill-in-the-blanks. The last type of exercise “Grammar Practice,” provided at the end of each lesson, is related to grammar. The purpose behind these exercises is teaching and practicing some grammatical points.

For the purpose of the present study, the passages were subjected to the RANGE program to be checked for the coverage and frequency of the words included in the text of each lesson. Additionally, the readability indexes of texts were identified using Microsoft word program. I suppose this was not amongst the aims of your study, was that Moreover, the vocabulary exercises, as one type of exercises included in the textbook, were analyzed to determine the type of vocabulary exercise.

### **Data Collection and analysis procedures**

For the first part of the study, each lesson was typed into the RANGE computer program to determine the frequency and range of the words used in Each passage For the second part of the study, that is, to determine the level of vocabulary knowledge of pre-university students, the 2000 word level vocabulary test (Schmitt et al., 2001) was administered to the students at the beginning of the school year. There are no ratings for this test; it gives an estimate of the percentage of words known at each frequency level so that 50% of the words correct at 2000 level (15 out of 30) on the test equals 50% of the words known at that level. The students who scored at least 50% and more on the 2000 word level were considered as having a large vocabulary size (Tekmen & Daloglu, 2006), and those who scored below 50% were considered as non-large vocabulary size.

In order to determine how many and what percentage of words in different texts of the textbook belonged to 2000 word high frequency words, academic level and low frequent words, RANGE program was run on the texts. Glossed words of each text were also subjected to RANGE to determine the number and percentage of words from three base lists.

Lesson	Total No. of tokens	Total No. of types	TTR	2000 word level	Academ ic list	Low frequen cy words	Average readabil ity
1	665	240	0.36	615	14	36	66.7

Vocabulary exercises were also analyzed to determine their purposes and to see at what level of vocabulary they stood. The rest of analyses were done using SPSS program. The results of the above will be presented and discussed in the next section.

## Results and discussion

### Vocabulary Load in the Pre-University English Textbook

Table 1 below presents a general view of the words in the whole textbook. The second column shows the total number of different words (tokens) for each text. As it can be seen, lesson (text) four was the shortest lesson containing 561 words, while lesson (text) seven was the longest one with 694 words. The third column displays the number of types of words in each text. For example, in lesson four with 561 tokens, there are 290 different words. The fourth column provides the type-token ratio index for each lesson. This column indicates the density of words in each text. In other words, it tells us how many times the words in the text are repeated. In lesson four, with 561 tokens and 280 word types, we have the type-token ratio of 0.50 indicating that on average, each word is used twice in this lesson. Column five presents the number and percentage of words from the 2000-word high frequency list. The sixth column shows the number and percentage of words from the list of words not included in the first 2000 words of English, but frequent in upper secondary school and university texts from a wide range of subjects (Academic vocabulary). These two base lists include the base forms of words and derived forms. The sources of these lists are A General Service List of English Words by Michael West (1953) for the first 2000 words, and The Academic Word List by Coxhead (1998, 2000) containing 570 word families. Column seven displays the number and percentage of words not found in the two lists, that is, low frequency words. The last column provides the readability index for each lesson or text which was obtained through Word program. The table clearly shows that lesson one with the readability index of 66.7 is the easiest (the closer the index to 100 the easier it will be), while lesson eight with the readability index of 46.4 is the most difficult text. Although readability index does not provide the whole picture, as it is also directly related to the length of sentences in a text, on the whole, all the texts could be evaluated moderate since the average reliability index for the whole textbook is 55.3.

**Table 1:** A general view of the words in the pre-university English textbook

Lesson	Total No. of tokens	Total No. of types	TTR	2000 word level	Academic list	Low frequency words	Average readability
1	665	240	0.36	615 (92 %)	14 (2 %)	36 (5 %)	66.7
1	665	240	0.36	615 (92 %)	14 (2 %)	36 (5 %)	66.7
2	678	290	0.42	620 (91%)	24 (4%)	34 (5 %)	63.8
3	612	253	0.41	543 (89 %)	19 (3%)	50 (8 %)	65.6
4	561	285	0.50	504 (90 %)	30 (5 %)	27 (5 %)	63.5
5	675	288	0.42	605 (90 %)	42 (6 %)	28 (4 %)	48.9
6	584	265	0.45	501 (86 %)	9 (2 %)	74 (13 %)	55.3
7	694	303	0.43	566 (82 %)	58 (8 %)	70 (10 %)	48
8	595	303	0.51	495 (83 %)	14 (2 %)	86 (14 %)	46.4
Aver	633	278	0.43	556 (88 %)	26 (4 %)	50 (8 %)	57.27

Table 1 indicates, we can see that as we move from left to right on the table and accumulate more words from different levels, we get more coverage of the text. If, for example, we look at column five, it is clear that there are 92% of the words in lesson one from the 2000-word frequency list. But if we include the 14 words from the academic list, this comes to 94% coverage of the text.

Taking the 2000 word level as the base, column five for all texts shows that coverage can range from 82% to 92%. Put it another way, on average, 88% of words in the whole textbook are from 2000 word level.

Regarding words from academic list, as the number and percentage of each lesson is displayed in column six, one can detect that 2% to 8% of words, or an average of 4% are from academic list. This would mean that the combination of words from 2000-high frequent level and words from the academic list for all texts can range from 86% to 96%, or an average of 92%. This figure indicates that in order to read some of the texts, at least four out of the eight



texts, if learners know words from these two high frequency bands, that is from 2000 high frequency level and academic level, they are still behind the threshold vocabulary coverage required for reading comprehension, which as was mentioned before is 98%. Likewise, this could be interpreted that the minimum vocabulary knowledge required to comprehend the lessons of this textbook is vocabulary knowledge of 2000 word high frequency level and words from academic level and even some low frequent words as well. Take lesson three as an example. One can see that 89% of the words are from 2000 word level, and 3% of words from academic level. The combination of these two would yield a sum of roughly 92%. To reach 98% coverage, learners should know 6% of words which are low frequent words. So taking 98% coverage as the threshold level required for comprehension of a text, the textbook appears to place a heavy burden on students in terms of the vocabulary knowledge required for comprehending the texts.

On the other hand, students' performance on the vocabulary level test indicated that, on average, students did not possess an adequate knowledge of vocabulary with an average of 7 out of 30 on the test. Table 2 presents the results of students' vocabulary size in terms of large and non-large groups. Ninety-five per cent of the students (N =439) did not possess large vocabulary size and had a score of less than 15 out of 30 on the test, while only 5% of them (23) got more than 16 and belonged to large vocabulary size group.

**Table 2:** Percentage of students possessing large and non-large vocabulary size

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	less than 15	439	94.6	95.0	95.0
	more than 16	23	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	462	99.6	100.0	
Missing	System	2	.4		
Total		464	100.0		

The low knowledge of vocabulary on the part of students is something common in Iranian EFL context. The main reason could be attributed to the inadequate amount of input and exposure the students receive in their schools and society. The main settings in which students are exposed to English are their public schools and English classes held in language teaching institutes. Considering the fact that in Iranian public high schools students study English for three hours a week in the first year and an hour and a half for the next two years, while having little or, in some cases, no exposure to English outside the class, it is neither abnormal nor surprising to have students possessing a vocabulary knowledge of far below 2000 word level, after seemingly studying English for six years. Therefore, limited hours of instruction, insufficient exposure to English outside school and inappropriate teaching methods along with negative backwash effect of NEE could be plausible explanations for the students' low vocabulary knowledge. This finding is in line with other studies conducted in other EFL contexts. Reports on high school graduates, in countries where English is taught as a foreign language, show that these students possess relatively small and inadequate vocabularies (see, e.g., Chujo, 2004; Kyongho & Nation, 1989; Laufer, 2000; Schmitt, 2008).

### **Textbook Policies on Vocabulary**

In order to find out the structure of words in each lesson, a count was made of the words in the glosses to see to which list they belong. Table 3 presents the results.

**Table 3:** Number of words with glosses in the pre-university English text-book

Lesson	Total No. of words	words with glosses	Words from 2000 word level with glosses	words from Acade list & low freq-level	words from Acade list & low freq-level with glosses
1	665	14(2 %)	7	50 (7 %)	7
2	678	16(2 %)	7	58 (9 %)	9
3	612	15(2 %)	9	69 (11%)	6
4	561	18(3 %)	11	57 (10 %)	7
5	675	21(3 %)	12	70 (10 %)	9
6	584	13(2 %)	7	83 (14 %)	6
7	694	14(2 %)	5	128(18 %)	9
8	595	16(3 %)	5	100 (16 %)	11
Total		127	63	615	64

One interesting point, yet unexpected, is that, on average, the number of words with glosses from high frequency level (63) is the same as the number of words with glosses from academic list and low frequency level (64). In some cases, like lessons three, four, and five, the number of glossed words from 2000 word level is more than words from academic list and low frequent words with glosses.

Although the results about the effects of glosses on learning vocabulary and reading comprehension are inconclusive (Hee Ko, 2005), it seems there should be some criteria to gloss the words in the margin of the texts. In other words, if the textbook writers were aware that they had included words from academic list and low frequent words, they should have provided glossed words from these two levels more and not from 2000 word level. So this complicates the issue to know whether the learners are expected to know words from high frequency level or not and all of these findings point to the fact that such textbooks are not prepared and written according to basic principles of materials writing and development.

Put it another way, if knowing words from 2000 word level on the part of students is taken for granted by the textbook writers, then the question remains why the same number of words from 2000 word level, on the one hand, and the academic level and low frequent words, on the other, are glossed in the margins. Hence, there appears to be some sort of inconsistency in determining the required and minimum threshold language knowledge on the part of learners to read and comprehend the texts.

Table 4 below provides some details on vocabulary exercises in each lesson, and shows the number of words in each lesson focused on explicitly. For example, in lesson one, 12 words out of the total number of words (20), which were covered in the exercises, were from 2000 word level, while 4 words were from academic level, and the remaining four words were low frequent words. It seems that textbook writers have not closely scrutinized the words included in the vocabulary exercises to give more prominence to the words from academic level or low frequent words and this may be recounted as another drawback of this book.

**Table 4:** Type of vocabulary exercises and number of words of attention in pre-university English text-book

Lesson	Type of vocabulary Exercise	No of words of focus in exercises	Words in exercises From 2000 word level	Words in exercises from academic list
1	Sentence completion, MC	20	12	4
2	Sentence completion, MC	20	13	5
3	Relationship between words(synonym, antonym,...),MC	40	31	4
4	Relationship between words (synonym, antonym,...),MC	40	34	3
5	Sentence completion (Fill in the blanks)	9	7	1
6	Sentence completion (Fill in the blanks)	9	7	1
7	Sentence completion (clue provided)	8	4	2
8	Sentence completion (clue provided)	8	7	1
Total		154	115	21

While little emphasis is placed on teaching of individual words, one might ask whether there is any chance that a learner would pick up new vocabulary items indirectly from repeated encounters with new words. To see how much repetition is used, a count was

made of words from the academic level and the low frequency lists that were repeated over all eight lessons in the textbook. The results are provided in Table 5. Take lesson one as an example. Table 5 shows that in lesson one, 14 words are from academic level, and one of these words is repeated through the text. Regarding low frequency words, column four shows the total number of words from low frequency level for each text, and the last column provides the number of low frequent words repeated through each text. In lesson two, for example, 34 words are from low frequency level, while seven of them are repeated. Thus, there is not much chance for students to encounter the words in subsequent lessons.

**Table 5:** Number of words repeated over in all texts in pre-university English text-book

Lesson	words from Academic level	No of words Repeated from Academic leve	low frequency words	No of words Repeated from Low frequency level
1	14	1	36	7
2	24	5	34	6
3	19	2	50	5
4	30	4	27	4
5	42	4	28	4
6	9	1	74	14
7	58	10	70	8
8	14	3	86	13
Average	26	4	50	8

L1 and L2 incidental learning studies have found that the number of times an unknown word is met in context affects whether its meaning will be acquired (see, e.g., Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998; Jenkins et al., 1984; & Webb, 2007). Research findings in this area have not been conclusive and it is still unclear how many encounters in context are needed to learn a word. The figures provided in Table 5 suggest that although the words in some cases are repeated in the texts, more repetitions of more words will be necessary if learners are supposed to acquire vocabulary gains from incidental learning and through reading. Therefore, one can argue that the book does not provide many opportunities for learners in terms of repetition of words to help them develop incidental word knowledge through reading.

Having presented the empirical evidence on the inadequacy of the textbook in providing an appropriate text for students, we now refer to some other studies on the current English language teaching in Iran from teachers' view as well as the characteristics of English language textbooks. Ostovar Namaghi (2006) using grounded theory elicited information from Iranian English language teachers. His study yielded forces steering teachers' work as the core theoretical category, which pulled together three other categories which are beyond

teachers' control. The first category was found to be mandated curriculum which as Ostovar Namaghi (2006) states controls the input. That is, instead of using their professional knowledge to select a textbook, which best serves their students' needs, teachers are obliged to teach the centrally mandated curriculum. In a panel discussion with the participant teachers, Ostovar Namaghi asserted that all the participants complained that the books are not theoretically and professionally justified and that they suffer from many problems. He then quotes teachers to say we have repeatedly voiced our complaints but they are never heard.

In another study, Jahangard (2007) who has taught English at schools for many years comes up with the question of “why the EFL curriculum in Iranian public high schools meet neither the expectations of the learners/parents and teachers nor those of the specialists who were involved in the development of the curriculum?” He used 13 criteria extracted from available literature on textbook evaluation and analyzed the four English language textbooks in use in Iranian high schools and pre-university curriculum. One of his findings is that there is a major emphasis on grammar and that vocabulary items are introduced in a decontextualized way requiring students to memorize and go for rote learning. The result has been that students develop knowledge of language (usage) rather than functional proficiency (use) of the language. This observation has come to be true even in regard to students' mother tongue. There have been plenty of complaints on the part of parents and other critics that high school graduates are not able to use their native language for oral and written functional purposes let alone to be able to use their second (English) language for communication purposes.

Dahmardeh (2009) also studied Iranian high school English language textbooks by administering a questionnaire to Iranian high school English language teachers, analyzing the Iranian National Curriculum for ELT, and doing English language textbook evaluation. The findings of his study revealed that there are many inconsistencies between the learners' needs and the textbooks.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Taken together, based on the results of this study, we can reach the conclusion that on the one hand, the English pre-university textbook introduces a large number of words for students to study, and on the other, students' vocabulary knowledge is limited to below the 2000 word level, and the textbook does not offer much help to students to acquire and learn unknown words. The findings of the study, thus, can be summarized in light of the research questions.

1- Results of the study revealed that in order to read the texts and understand them, students are required to know not only words from 2000 word high frequency level and academic list, but in four out of eight lessons, knowledge of low frequent words seems also necessary.

2- Performance of students on vocabulary level test showed that 95% of the students belonged to non-large vocabulary learners and only 5% possessed large-vocabulary size. Given the students' limited vocabulary level, one can predict that they will be incapacitated to cope with the texts and will encounter many difficulties reading and understanding the texts which will certainly affect their motivation for learning English. Since students will be tested on these words in the NEE for university admission, there will be no other way for them but to memorize the words in a decontextualized way.

3- Although some words are glossed in the margin of each text, and some of unknown words are repeated through the texts, learners are not provided with enough opportunities to gain vocabulary knowledge through reading. The vocabulary exercises in the textbook do little to focus attention on words. Some vocabulary exercises with their main focus on 2000 word level, in the form of multiple-choice questions, matching, and fill-in-the-blanks are

provided as vocabulary activities learners are required to do after reading each text. As such, we suggest that textbook writers consider revising the texts paying much more attention to the level of words included in the texts if the rationale behind developing the textbook is to prepare students to take care of their academic needs. This requires collaboration with more expert people within and outside the country to develop some criteria to be used as the basic principles in developing instructional materials for the target students.

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