



Original article

An Evaluation of Grammar progression throughout New Headway Intermediate from a Second Language Acquisition Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines grammar progression in New Headway Intermediate through the lens of second language acquisition (SLA) research. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, four textbook units representing different levels of grammatical complexity were analyzed. The study investigated how grammatical structures are sequenced, recycled, contextualized, and distributed, and assessed their alignment with SLA principles of gradual development, repeated exposure, communicative use, and cognitive manageability. Data were drawn from grammar presentations, practice activities, communicative tasks, and review materials, and analyzed using a framework informed by usage-based SLA theory, cognitive load theory, and communicative language teaching. Findings reveal a predominantly structural, unit-based progression with only partial alignment to SLA-informed principles. Limited recycling, inconsistent communicative integration, and high instructional density in some lessons may hinder acquisition. The study highlights the need to balance grammatical coverage with acquisition-oriented progression in ELT materials design.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, grammar progression, materials analysis, second language acquisition, textbook evaluation

تقييم تطور القواعد النحوية في كتاب «نيو هيدواي إنترميديت» من منظور اكتساب اللغة الثانية

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة في تطور عرض القواعد النحوية في كتاب (**New Headway Intermediate**) في ضوء أبحاث اكتساب اللغة الثانية (SLA) واعتمدت منهجاً وصفيًا تحليليًا نوعيًا لتحليل أربع وحدات تمثل درجات متفاوتة من التعقيد النحوي. وركزت على كيفية ترتيب التراكيب النحوية، وإعادة استخدامها، وربطها بالسياق، وتوزيعها عبر الوحدات، مع تقييم مدى انسجامها مع مبادئ اكتساب اللغة الثانية، مثل التدرج في التعلم، والتعرض المتكرر، والاستخدام التواصل، وقابلية المعالجة المعرفية. واستندت البيانات إلى عروض القواعد، وأنشطة التدريب، والمهام التواصلية، ومواد المراجعة، وخللت وفق إطار نظري يجمع بين نظرية الاكتساب القائم على الاستخدام، ونظرية الحمل المعرفي، ومدخل تدريس اللغة التواصل. وأظهرت النتائج أن تنظيم القواعد في الكتاب يغلب عليه الطابع البنوي المرتبط بالوحدات، مع توافق جزئي فقط مع مبادئ اكتساب اللغة الثانية؛ إذ قد تحدّ محدودية إعادة الاستخدام، وضعف التكامل التواصل، وارتفاع الكثافة التعليمية في بعض الدروس من فاعلية اكتساب اللغة. الكلمات المفتاحية: تدريس اللغة التواصل، تطور القواعد النحوية، تحليل المواد، اكتساب اللغة الثانية، تقييم الكتب المدرسية

1. Introduction

Grammar progression is an important part of English language teaching because it shapes how learners encounter and learn grammatical structures over time. How grammar is sequenced, repeated, and contextualized affects how learners develop both conscious and automatic language knowledge. Contemporary research in second language acquisition emphasizes that grammar learning is a gradual, non-linear process shaped by input frequency, cognitive readiness, and meaningful communicative use (Ellis, 2020; Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Therefore, instructional materials are more effective when their grammar organization reflects SLA principles.

However, many ELT textbooks still organize grammar in a linear, form-focused way. In such materials, grammatical structures are often presented as discrete units organized according to perceived complexity rather than empirically grounded acquisition sequences. Researchers have widely criticized this practice for overlooking key insights from usage-based theories, which stress the importance of repeated exposure, pattern recognition, and contextualized input in language development (Nation, 2022). Similarly, communicative language teaching frameworks argue that teachers should embed grammar within meaningful interaction rather than treated as an isolated system (Richards, 2022). The tension between these theoretical perspectives and actual textbook design raises important questions regarding the pedagogical validity of widely used coursebooks. New Headway Intermediate represents one of the most influential textbooks in English as a foreign language contexts and is frequently promoted as offering a well-structured and systematic progression of grammatical content. Its widespread adoption in educational settings makes it a significant subject for critical evaluation. However, despite its popularity, there remains a noticeable lack of in-depth analytical research examining how its grammar progression aligns with current second language acquisition theories and cognitively informed instructional models. Most

textbook evaluation studies focus on content coverage and activity types. Few studies examine how grammar develops across units.

This issue is important because poor grammar progression can confuse learners and interrupt learning. When textbooks introduce grammatical structures without sufficient scaffolding, recycled inadequately, or disconnected from communicative use, learners may struggle to integrate new forms into their developing interlanguage system. Ignoring cognitive load and differences among learners may make grammar lessons too difficult to process effectively (Sweller et al., 2021).

The present study seeks to provide a systematic and theoretically grounded analysis of grammar progression throughout New Headway Intermediate. It aims to investigate whether the sequencing, recycling, and contextualization of grammatical structures within the textbook reflect established principles of second language acquisition. By employing a qualitative content analysis framework informed by frequency-based learning, input-output processing, and spiral progression models, this study attempts to uncover potential gaps that may not be immediately visible in the textbook's surface organization.

Through this analysis, the study contributes to the broader field of materials evaluation by moving beyond descriptive textbook review toward a more explanatory and theory-driven approach. It also seeks to provide pedagogically relevant insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and material developers who rely on such textbooks in structuring language instruction.

1.1 Problem Statement

Although New Headway Intermediate is widely regarded as a systematically organized English language teaching textbook, there is insufficient empirical evidence demonstrating that its grammar progression is pedagogically coherent or aligned with established principles of second language acquisition. In particular, it remains unclear whether grammatical structures in the textbook are sequenced in a way that reflects learners' developmental readiness, recycled sufficiently to support retention, and integrated effectively into meaningful communicative contexts.

This issue is important because SLA research shows that grammar learning requires gradual development, repeated exposure, and meaningful context. When instructional materials fail to meet these conditions, learners may develop fragmented grammatical knowledge, experience difficulty in transferring form-focused knowledge into communication, and encounter cognitive overload due to poorly structured input.

Furthermore, most existing evaluations of English language teaching textbooks focus on surface features such as content coverage or activity types, while neglecting the internal organization of grammar progression as a dynamic and theoretically grounded process. As a result, potential inconsistencies in sequencing, recycling, and contextualization within widely used textbooks remain underexplored and insufficiently documented.

1.2 Research Objectives

Goals of this research paper include the following:

1. To examine the ordering of the grammar structures in New Headway Intermediate and their consistency with modern standards of ELT methodology.

2. To explore the compatibility between grammar lessons presented in the textbook and the results of SLA research concerning grammar teaching.
3. To highlight those places of progression gap which would be challenging for students when moving from one grammar structure to another.
4. To offer pedagogical suggestions for teachers and textbook authors.

1.3 Research Questions

The present research focuses on the following questions:

1. *In what way are grammatical structures arranged in New Headway Intermediate?*
2. *How well does the grammar progression sequence match with the approach based on SLA theory in teaching grammar?*
3. *What are the specific grammar progression gaps found in New Headway Intermediate?*
4. *What pedagogical implications can be derived from these grammar-progression gaps?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Grammar Progression and Sequencing in ELT Coursebooks

Grammar progression in English Language Teaching (ELT) coursebooks has received considerable attention in second language acquisition (SLA) research because sequencing directly affects how learners process and internalize grammatical structures. Contemporary SLA studies generally emphasize that grammar learning develops gradually through repeated exposure, meaningful use, and increasing complexity rather than through simple linear accumulation of rules (Ellis, 2020, p. 112). However, several researchers have argued that many commercial ELT textbooks continue to prioritize syllabus coverage and marketability over acquisition-oriented progression principles (Tomlinson, 2023, p. 78).

Previous studies have also questioned whether grammar sequencing in ELT textbooks reflects the developmental nature of interlanguage acquisition. According to Lightbown and Spada (2021, p. 45), learners do not necessarily acquire grammatical structures in the same order in which textbooks present them. Despite this, many coursebooks still organize grammar into isolated units that follow structural rather than developmental logic. This creates the possibility that learners may encounter cognitively demanding structures before receiving sufficient exposure to prerequisite forms.

Research on usage-based SLA additionally highlights the importance of frequency, recycling, and saliency in grammatical development. Nation (2022, p. 134) argues that learners are unlikely to retain infrequent grammatical forms unless textbooks recycle them systematically across multiple contexts. Similarly, empirical textbook evaluation studies have reported that grammar structures introduced in one unit often receive limited reactivation in later communicative activities, reducing opportunities for retention and proceduralization. These findings suggest that grammatical progression should be evaluated not only in terms of structural order, but also according to the extent to which forms are revisited and communicatively activated across units.

Another major issue concerns the relationship between grammar instruction and communicative language teaching (CLT). Although CLT promotes contextualized and meaning-focused grammar use, several textbook evaluation studies have observed that many ELT materials continue to rely

heavily on Presentation–Practice–Production (PPP) activities that emphasize controlled practice more than communicative use (Richards, 2022, p. 61). As a result, there is often a mismatch between communicative objectives and the actual grammatical demands placed on learners during classroom tasks.

Previous analyses of New Headway Intermediate have generally emphasized its communicative orientation, grammatical coverage, and accessibility for intermediate learners. For instance, Mukundan and Ahour (2010) observed that the textbook provides relatively systematic structural organization and clear grammar explanations. However, other textbook evaluation studies have suggested that communicative activities in globally distributed ELT materials do not always ensure meaningful activation of target grammatical structures during interaction (Littlejohn, 2011). Despite these contributions, relatively limited research has examined how grammar progression in New Headway Intermediate operates longitudinally across units from an SLA-informed perspective.

Empirical textbook evaluation studies have repeatedly identified inconsistencies between communicative objectives and actual grammar progression practices in commercial ELT materials. For example, Masuhara and Tomlinson (2017) found that many globally distributed ELT textbooks continue to prioritize structural sequencing and syllabus coverage over acquisition-oriented recycling and communicative activation. Similarly, Guerretaz and Johnston (2013) demonstrated that instructional materials strongly shape classroom interaction patterns and learners' opportunities for grammatical engagement. These findings suggest that textbook organization is not merely pedagogical packaging, but an influential factor in determining how learners encounter, process, and reuse grammatical structures during classroom interaction.

Previous evaluations of New Headway Intermediate have generally focused on vocabulary presentation, communicative activities, and overall syllabus organization. However, relatively limited attention has been given to the longitudinal progression of grammar across units, particularly from an SLA-informed perspective. Most existing evaluations discuss grammatical coverage descriptively rather than examining whether sequencing, recycling, and contextualization reflect acquisitional principles associated with gradual language development. Collectively, these studies suggest that the effectiveness of grammar progression depends not only on grammatical coverage, but also on how sequencing, recycling, communicative activation, and cognitive load interact across the broader instructional structure of ELT materials.

2.2 Gaps in Grammar Progression throughout ELT Textbooks: A Critical Analysis

Despite the widespread use of ELT textbooks in language classrooms, researchers continue to identify tensions between SLA-informed pedagogy and textbook grammar organization. One recurring issue involves the sequencing of grammatical complexity. Several SLA-oriented studies suggest that some ELT materials introduce contrastive or cognitively demanding structures before learners have developed sufficient familiarity with prerequisite forms (Ellis, 2020, p. 118). However, textbook designers often prioritize structural coverage and syllabus progression, which may conflict with developmental sequencing principles.

Another commonly discussed issue concerns the limited recycling of grammatical structures across units. Usage-based and frequency-oriented SLA research emphasizes that repeated

exposure plays an important role in retention and proceduralization. Nevertheless, textbook evaluation studies have found that many grammatical forms appear intensively within a single unit but receive little meaningful reactivation afterward. This pattern may reduce learners' opportunities to encounter grammatical forms across varied communicative contexts.

Several empirical studies have also questioned the extent to which ELT textbooks provide sufficient opportunities for distributed grammatical exposure. Biber and Reppen (2002) argue that authentic language use depends heavily on repeated encounters with grammatical patterns across varied contexts rather than isolated presentation within single lessons. Likewise, Römer (2004) observed that many pedagogical materials underrepresent the frequency and contextual variability of grammatical forms found in authentic language corpora. From a usage-based SLA perspective, limited recycling may restrict learners' opportunities to proceduralize grammatical knowledge through repeated contextualized exposure.

Researchers have also questioned the extent to which grammar instruction in ELT textbooks supports communicative competence. Although many textbooks include speaking and writing activities, previous studies suggest that communicative tasks do not always require meaningful use of target grammatical structures. In some cases, grammar remains separated from authentic interaction and is practiced primarily through controlled sentence-level exercises (Richards, 2022, p. 73). Consequently, communicative activities may function more as supplementary tasks than as mechanisms for activating grammatical knowledge in meaningful discourse.

Another issue identified in previous research concerns instructional density and cognitive overload in grammar presentation. Sweller (2011) argues that excessive simultaneous processing demands may reduce learners' working memory capacity during complex learning tasks. In textbook evaluation research, Harwood (2014) notes that some ELT materials introduce multiple grammatical contrasts within compressed instructional sequences, potentially increasing cognitive difficulty for learners who have not yet stabilized prerequisite forms. These observations highlight the importance of evaluating grammar progression not only in terms of structural order, but also according to cognitive manageability and distributed processing demands.

In addition, relatively few studies have attempted to operationalize SLA-informed criteria for evaluating grammar progression systematically. Much of the existing literature discusses sequencing, recycling, or contextualization independently, while limited research examines how these dimensions interact across the broader organizational structure of a textbook. Furthermore, there remains insufficient research specifically investigating how grammar progression in New Headway Intermediate aligns with principles such as developmental sequencing, repeated exposure, communicative contextualization, and cognitive manageability. The present study addresses this gap by applying operational SLA-informed criteria to the analysis of grammar progression across selected textbook units.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive-analytical design to examine the grammar progression throughout the book New Headway Intermediate. A qualitative approach is appropriate because

the study focuses on identifying patterns in grammar sequencing rather than statistical relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 52).

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection for this research consists of samples of texts and grammar lessons extracted from New Headway Intermediate. These samples were selected because they show how grammar is presented and practiced in the textbook (Nation, 2022, p. 118).

The researcher selected the samples purposefully, as it involved selecting lessons that introduce certain grammatical features, such as verb tenses, modal verbs, and sentence structures. Such lessons include:

Presentation of grammar rules

Practice of grammatical items

Communicative exercises

Reading and listening tasks

The selected texts allow detailed analysis of grammar progression across lessons.

The study analyzed four units from New Headway Intermediate: Units 3, 5, 7, and 9. These units were selected purposively because they represent different stages of grammatical complexity and include a range of tense systems, modal structures, and communicative activities relevant to the study's analytical focus.

Purposeful sampling was employed because the study aimed to conduct in-depth qualitative analysis of grammar progression patterns rather than statistical generalization. The selected units were chosen specifically for their relevance to sequencing complexity, recycling patterns, communicative integration, and instructional density.

The selected units were intended to provide variation in grammatical complexity and instructional structure rather than statistical representativeness. Together, they allowed examination of how grammar progression operates across different stages of the textbook.

3.3 Data Analysis

The research methodology used includes qualitative content analysis, which refers to a process of systematic coding and interpretation of texts to reveal underlying patterns or themes (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 88). The researcher has conducted the qualitative analysis in the following stages:

Identification of grammatical items: The researcher has analyzed every unit to identify its grammatical items.

Ordering analysis: The researcher has analyzed how the textbook presents grammatical items to check whether the progression was logical or pedagogically sound.

Recycling and reinforcement analysis: The researcher has examined whether earlier grammar items reappear in later units.

Contextualization analysis: Assessing the degree of grammar contextualization.

It helps in recognizing hidden gaps in grammar progression, such as sudden shifts from one level of grammar to another, a low degree of grammar recycling, and insufficient contextualization. Because qualitative analysis is interpretive, it can reveal both explicit and implicit patterns in grammar progression (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 61).

The coding process involved close textual examination of grammar presentation sections, controlled exercises, communicative tasks, and review activities within the selected units. Each unit was analyzed according to predefined SLA-informed criteria related to sequencing, recycling, contextualization, and cognitive load. Observed patterns were categorized and compared across units to identify recurring tendencies in grammar progression.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is designed to move beyond theoretical description toward systematic, text-based analysis of grammar progression throughout New Headway Intermediate. The framework uses SLA, materials evaluation, and usage-based linguistics to analyze grammar progression throughout the textbook.

Unit of Analysis

The analysis focuses on grammar sections from selected textbook units, including:

grammar presentation boxes

example sentences illustrating target structures

controlled practice activities

communicative tasks (speaking, writing, and integrated skills)

The analysis examines each unit as a sequence of instructional steps to determine how grammatical knowledge is introduced, developed, and reused.

The study does not assume that all deviations from SLA-informed principles automatically constitute pedagogical failure. Rather, SLA theories are used as analytical frameworks for examining whether the textbook's grammar progression reflects instructional patterns commonly associated with gradual acquisition, repeated exposure, communicative activation, and cognitive manageability in contemporary language learning research. Accordingly, the analysis focuses not on judging the textbook against absolute standards, but on identifying the extent to which its instructional design aligns with or diverges from these theoretically motivated principles.

Previous SLA studies associate limited recycling with weaker retention and reduced proceduralization because learners receive fewer opportunities to reactivate grammatical forms across contexts (Ellis, 2020; Nation, 2022).

Although contemporary SLA research often emphasizes recycling and gradual progression, some structural syllabus models prioritize grammatical coverage and explicit organization. Therefore, the present study does not treat SLA-informed sequencing principles as universally mandatory, but rather as theoretically grounded criteria for evaluating grammar progression.

Analytical Criteria and Procedures

The researcher conducts the analysis through four interrelated dimensions, each supported by explicit textual evidence:

1. Sequencing of Grammatical Structures

This dimension examines whether grammatical items are introduced in a developmentally appropriate order.

Procedure:

Identify the target grammar point in each unit

Compare it with previously introduced structures

Analyze whether prerequisite forms are sufficiently established

Textual Evidence Used:

order of grammar presentation across units

complexity of example sentences (e.g., tense combinations, clause structure)

presence or absence of preparatory tasks

Analytical Focus: Sequencing was considered developmentally inappropriate when learners were required to process a new grammatical structure and a functional contrast simultaneously without substantial prior communicative exposure to the prerequisite structure.

2. Recycling and Reinforcement

This criterion examines whether earlier grammar structures are reused across units

Procedure:

Track specific grammar items across consecutive units

Identify instances where earlier structures reappear

Textual Evidence Used:

recurrence of grammar forms in exercises and texts

integration of earlier structures into new communicative tasks

frequency and distribution of repeated exposure

Analytical Focus: A structure was considered insufficiently recycled when it failed to reappear in at least two subsequent units in communicative or semi-communicative tasks.

3. Contextualization and Communicative Integration

This criterion examines how grammar is used in meaningful communication tasks.

Procedure:

examine the relationship between grammar presentation and communicative tasks

determine whether tasks require active use of the target structure

Textual Evidence Used:

task instructions (e.g., whether they prompt specific grammar use)

alignment between grammar focus and speaking/writing activities

presence of authentic or semi-authentic discourse

Analytical Focus: The framework classifies a grammar point as weakly contextualized if communicative tasks do not explicitly or functionally require the use of the target structure.

4. Cognitive Load and Complexity Management

This dimension assesses whether the presentation of grammar aligns with learners' cognitive processing capacity.

Procedure:

analyze the number and complexity of grammar items within a single unit

examine explanations, examples, and practice density

Textual Evidence Used:

quantity of new grammar forms introduced per unit

length and complexity of explanatory rules

clustering of multiple structures in one lesson

Analytical Focus: The framework classifies a unit as cognitively overloaded if it introduces multiple complex structures simultaneously without sufficient scaffolding or practice distribution.

SLA Principle	Operational Indicator	Evidence of Misalignment
Developmental sequencing	Simpler forms precede complex contrasts	Present perfect introduced before sufficient communicative control of past simple
Recycling	Structures reappear across later units	Modal verbs disappear after initial presentation
Communicative integration	Tasks require target grammar use	Speaking tasks completed without conditionals
Cognitive load management	Limited number of new forms per lesson	Multiple tense contrasts introduced simultaneously

3.4.1 Operationalizing Alignment frequency-based learning principles

In this study, alignment frequency-based learning principles refers to the extent to which grammar progression in the textbook reflects widely accepted acquisitional principles identified in contemporary SLA research. Operationally, alignment was evaluated according to four observable criteria:

- Developmental sequencing Grammar structures should progress from simpler and more frequent forms toward more complex ones, with sufficient preparation before introducing contrastive or cognitively demanding structures.
- Systematic recycling Previously introduced grammatical structures should reappear across later units in meaningful communicative and practice contexts.
- Communicative contextualization Grammar instruction should be integrated into tasks that require learners to use target structures meaningfully during communication.
- Cognitive manageability Grammar presentation should avoid introducing multiple complex structures simultaneously without adequate scaffolding or distributed practice.

Misalignment was identified when textbook units violated one or more of these criteria through abrupt sequencing, limited recycling, weak communicative integration, or excessive instructional density.

4. Results and Analysis

The analysis of New Headway Intermediate reveals several inconsistencies in the progression of grammatical structures. These findings come from analyzing selected units for grammar sequencing, recycling, contextualization, and cognitive load. The textbook follows a mainly structural grammar syllabus instead of a progression based on SLA principles.

The analysis shows that grammatical structures are not always introduced in a cognitively or developmentally appropriate order. For example, in early units, the textbook introduces the present perfect tense alongside the past simple, requiring learners to distinguish between “I went to London last year” and “I have been to London” within the same instructional sequence. However, the preceding units provide limited communicative practice of the past simple beyond controlled exercises. As a result, learners must learn a new tense while also understanding its contrast with another tense.

In terms of grammar recycling, the findings indicate that the textbook does not consistently reinforce previously introduced grammatical structures. For instance, after the introduction of modal verbs in one unit, later units shift focus to new grammatical items without systematically reactivating earlier forms in communicative tasks. A review of follow-up exercises shows that earlier grammar points reappear only sporadically and often in isolated sentences rather than integrated discourse. Because these forms rarely reappear, learners have fewer chances to practice and remember them.

The analysis of contextualization further reveals a weak integration between grammar instruction and communicative use. The textbook does not always link speaking and writing activities to the target grammatical structures. For example, a unit introducing conditional forms may include a discussion task about hypothetical situations; however, the task instructions do not require or sufficiently guide learners to use the target structure (e.g., If I were you...). As a result, learners may complete communicative activities without actively applying the grammar point, indicating a disconnect between form-focused instruction and communicative practice.

Finally, with respect to cognitive load, several units present multiple grammatical structures within a single lesson, accompanied by dense explanations and exceptions. For example, a unit may combine tense review, modal usage, and functional distinctions within the same sequence of activities. This clustering of information increases the processing demands on learners and may exceed their cognitive capacity, particularly in the absence of sufficient scaffolding or recycling. Such design choices suggest limited consideration of cognitive load principles, which emphasize the importance of gradual input and manageable information processing.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that although New Headway Intermediate presents grammar within an apparently organized framework, its progression is characterized by inconsistencies in sequencing, insufficient recycling, weak communicative integration, and cognitive overload. The researcher identified these findings from observable patterns in the textbook’s unit structure, task design, and distribution of grammatical content, providing concrete evidence of gaps in grammar progression.

4.1 Inconsistent Sequencing of Grammatical Structures

A close examination of selected units from New Headway Intermediate reveals that the sequencing of grammatical structures does not consistently follow acquisitional or cognitive principles. This conclusion is based on a comparative analysis of how specific grammatical items are introduced across units and the extent to which prerequisite knowledge is established prior to introducing more complex forms.

For example, in one of the early units, learners are introduced to present perfect tense forms (e.g., have/has + past participle) in contrast with the past simple tense. While this contrastive presentation is pedagogically common, the analysis shows that the textbook provides limited prior recycling of past simple forms in varied communicative contexts before introducing the present perfect. As a result, learners are required to process not only a new grammatical structure but also the functional distinction between two temporally related systems simultaneously. According to second language acquisition research, such contrasts require a stable foundation in earlier forms, which appears insufficiently developed in this case (Ellis, 2020, p. 119).

A similar pattern is observed in the treatment of modal verbs, where forms expressing obligation and probability (e.g., must, have to, might) are introduced within a relatively short span of units. The textbook presents these modals with different semantic functions but does not provide a gradual progression from more frequent and functionally transparent uses to less frequent or more abstract ones. Moreover, limited recycling of earlier modal forms is evident in subsequent units, reducing opportunities for consolidation and increasing the processing demands placed on learners.

Further evidence of sequencing inconsistency can be seen in the introduction of conditional structures, where more complex forms (such as second conditional constructions) appear before learners are given sufficient exposure to simpler conditional patterns in meaningful contexts. This abrupt shift suggests a lack of alignment with the principle of gradual complexity, which is essential for managing cognitive load and supporting incremental learning (Sweller et al., 2021, p. 76).

Taken together, these examples indicate that grammatical sequencing in the textbook is primarily organized according to a structural syllabus rather than a developmentally informed progression. The observed instances of introducing complex forms without adequate scaffolding illustrate what can be described as a vertical progression gap, where the level of grammatical complexity exceeds learners' readiness. This misalignment may hinder effective acquisition by increasing cognitive load and limiting opportunities for the consolidation of prior knowledge.

For example, Unit 5 introduces the present perfect tense alongside functional contrasts with the past simple within the same instructional sequence. Learners are required not only to recognize the formal structure of the tense but also to distinguish between completed past actions and unfinished present relevance. However, earlier units provide limited communicative exposure to these contrasts before formal explanation occurs. This sequencing pattern increases cognitive demands because learners must process both grammatical form and functional distinction simultaneously. From an SLA-informed perspective, this may reduce opportunities for gradual developmental progression.

Unit	Grammar Focus	Observed Pattern	SLA-Related Concern
Unit 5	Present perfect	Introduced with tense contrast	Increased cognitive load
Unit 6	Modal verbs	Limited later reuse	Weak recycling

Unit 7	Conditionals	Mainly controlled practice	Limited communicative activation
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4.2 Limited Recycling and Weak Spiral Progression

One of the key findings from the analysis was an insufficient number of repetitions of specific grammatical structures between units. Once a structure was presented, it was often not recycled enough. This discovery contradicts the theory of progressions based on spirals, which states that learners must be constantly going over the language patterns already acquired, continuously increasing their difficulty levels (Nation, 2022, p. 148).

Insufficient recycling causes fragmented knowledge because learners learn about some grammar rules but do not get a chance to memorize them. For instance, some modals and conditionals may appear in one unit and will not get recycled in other units for communication practice.

This issue can be linked to students' incapability of developing procedural knowledge due to the lack of practice in using grammar rules in actual situations. Ellis claims that the only way of turning declarative knowledge into procedural is to have many repetitions (Ellis, 2020, p. 132).

The analysis also revealed limited recycling of previously introduced grammatical structures across later units. For instance, modal verbs introduced in Unit 6 appear primarily within controlled exercises and receive minimal reactivation in subsequent speaking or writing tasks. Although learners initially practice these forms through sentence-level activities, later units rarely require meaningful reuse in communicative contexts. According to usage-based SLA perspectives, limited repeated exposure may weaken retention and proceduralization because learners encounter insufficient opportunities to reactivate grammatical forms across varied contexts.

4.3 Weak Integration of Grammar and Communicative Contexts

Another major insight gained from analyzing New Headway Intermediate pertains to the issue of disconnect between grammar instruction and usage in a communicative context. While New Headway Intermediate does include communicative exercises, these exercises tend to have an indirect link to the target grammar and fail to involve its usage. This shows that the textbook applies CLT principles only to a limited extent (Richards, 2022, p. 76).

Several communicative activities included in the analyzed units also demonstrate weak integration between grammar instruction and communicative use. In some speaking tasks, learners are asked to discuss personal experiences or opinions without explicit requirement to use the target grammatical structure introduced in the lesson. As a result, communicative interaction may occur independently of the grammar focus, reducing opportunities for meaningful activation of newly introduced forms. This pattern suggests partial separation between grammatical presentation and communicative application within the textbook design.

4.4 Misalignment with Cognitive Load and Learner Readiness

Furthermore, another limitation identified during the analysis is the relationship between grammar instruction and cognitive load. Some modules have a lot of grammar teaching combined with many new grammar structures that may well surpass the cognitive capacity of the learner. Based on the

principle of cognitive load theory, the lesson content should account for the constraints of information overload (Sweller et al., 2021, p. 82).

Grammar classes in New Headway Intermediate incorporate complicated information, exceptions, and examples altogether, leading to excessive extraneous cognitive load. Furthermore, New Headway Intermediate fails to provide adaptive grammar progression considering the variance among intermediate learners regarding their grammatical skills. At the same time, the textbook assumes an equal level of readiness among students, neglecting individual differences.

5. Discussion

The results obtained from this study indicate that although New Headway Intermediate exhibits structural cohesion in its overt features, there lie important gaps in grammar progression which become obvious when assessed through SLA-based and cognitively informed criteria.

The discussion presented in this chapter is based on recurring instructional patterns observed across the analyzed textbook units rather than on abstract theoretical assumptions alone. The analysis identified specific examples of abrupt sequencing, limited recycling, and weak communicative integration within grammar presentation and practice activities. Accordingly, the following discussion interprets these observed patterns through SLA-informed perspectives on language development, input frequency, and communicative activation.

5.1 Interpreting Sequencing Gaps Through SLA Theory

These sequencing problems can be explained through SLA theories of learner development. The early introduction of more advanced grammatical structures before mastering basic structures goes against SLA developmental theories of readiness and development stages (Ellis, 2020, p. 119). In usage-based approaches, grammar is learned as a result of exposure to meaningful input instead of the sequence defined by a syllabus (Nation, 2022, p. 136).

5.2 Implications of Limited Recycling for Long-Term Acquisition

Limited recycling may weaken long-term retention and reduce learners' ability to use grammar automatically. In accordance with the SLA literature, multiple exposures of linguistic items in various contexts are required to move declarative knowledge towards procedural knowledge (Ellis, 2020, p. 132).

In light of the insufficient recycling of grammar in New Headway Intermediate, it can be concluded that learners may be capable of identifying grammatical structures separately yet struggle to utilize them effectively in communication settings. Such an approach reflects the conclusions made by materials development scholars, emphasizing that there are numerous examples of textbooks lacking enough repetitions (Tomlinson, 2023, p. 115).

Cognitive-wise, no recycling means no memory consolidation since repetitive activation of neural connections is necessary for acquiring information in a sustainable manner (Nation, 2022, p. 149).

5.3 Communicative Weakness and Form-Function Disconnect

Inadequate link between acquisition of grammatical forms and their use in communication constitutes just one instance of a bigger challenge faced by developers of English language textbooks – that of separating form from function. Although there are communicative exercises in New Headway Intermediate, these exercises are not usually well enough linked to the grammatical forms being acquired, thus making them ineffective.

This pattern is consistent with Richards' (2022, p. 78) conclusion regarding the superficial nature of the communicative approach to language teaching in many textbooks. According to Richards (2022), these books tend to contain communicative activities that are not sufficiently interconnected with grammar lessons. This approach makes it possible for students to carry out activities and yet not be involved in the study of forms. This pattern weakens grammar learning because learners are not required to use forms in meaningful communication (Ellis, 2020, p. 140).

5.4 Cognitive Load and Learner Variability in Grammar Progression

In fact, mismatches between the presentation of grammar rules and principles of cognitive load theory allow for additional analysis of the gaps found in the study. As per the principles of cognitive load theory, material developers should design textbooks according to the optimal balance between intrinsic, extraneous, and germane cognitive load (Sweller et al., 2021, p. 83).

For instance, the book *New Headway Intermediate* features grammar units that include dense descriptions and several structures at the same time. Furthermore, there is no account of differences between students that is considered a crucial aspect of teaching. In particular, intermediate students may vary substantially in terms of their grammar skills. At the same time, the textbook does not provide sufficient attention to learner differences (Lightbown & Spada, 2021, p. 58).

Pedagogically, this suggests the need for a more flexible grammar progression system.

5.5 Methodological Innovations in Grammar Progression Research

Recent SLA researchers have introduced several innovations and the study of teaching materials, which question the conventional ways of organizing grammar in syllabi. The first one is the idea of usage-based language acquisition, according to which teachers should not teach grammar as isolated rules but rather as patterns that emerge due to the frequency of use, chunking, and noticing of patterns (Ellis, 2020, p. 125).

The second innovation concerns the introduction of the complex dynamic systems theory into linguistics. This theory postulates that language acquisition is a dynamic non-linear process that involves many interacting variables, so it cannot be studied in accordance with linear progression principles (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2021, p. 67).

Methodologically, an increasing trend is the application of corpus linguistics in studying the occurrence and distribution of grammar forms in textbooks in comparison with the authentic language practice (Nation, 2022, p. 155). Through corpus linguistic studies, one can conduct an empirically sound study on whether the content of the textbooks corresponds to real-life language, detecting possible gaps in input representation.

Moreover, it should be mentioned that there is an increasing trend to analyze not only what grammar structures are presented in textbooks but also how they are used in the context of specific units (Tomlinson, 2023, p. 91). This allows conducting a more nuanced study of grammar progression.

5.6 Bridging the Gap: Toward an Integrated Model of Grammar Progression

Achieving integration between theory and practice when it comes to grammar progression necessitates using a more comprehensive and empirical approach to developing textbooks and evaluating them. Firstly, textbooks ought to embrace the frequency approach of organizing material in textbooks, whereby grammatical items are organized based on their frequency of

occurrence in real-life language usage (Nation, 2022, p. 162). Doing so would ensure that the frequent grammatical items are taught at an early stage.

Moreover, there should be form-focused instructions within communicative contexts to ensure that grammatical structures are not taught in isolation (Ellis, 2020, p. 133). Additionally, textbook developers may want to consider implementing a recycling and spiral progression approach. These techniques involve returning to grammatical points learned earlier at different levels of complexity (Lightbown & Spada, 2021, p. 60).

From a methodological point of view, it would be useful to employ the combination of corpus analysis and classroom research, which would give an opportunity to assess the quality of the input and its effect on learners' achievements (Nation, 2022, p. 170).

6. Limitations

There are several limitations of the study that have to be considered in order to evaluate the study's scope and its findings' applicability. First, the study has been carried out based on a single textbook – New Headway Intermediate, which has made it possible to conduct an intensive study of the grammar progression throughout the textbook but, at the same time, makes it impossible to generalize the study results to other English language teaching materials or proficiency levels. According to Tomlinson (2023), the results of studies using a single source of data should be considered contextually relevant, not universally applicable (p. 118).

Third, this research relies on a qualitative content analysis methodology, which, while appropriate for pattern recognition and interpretations, cannot avoid a subjective element. Although coding was done systematically, interpreting the grammar progression depends entirely on the researcher's point of view. According to Krippendorff (2019, p. 92), content analysis is necessarily interpretative; therefore, different scholars can come up with slightly varying interpretations of the same dataset.

Fourth, the present study lacks empirical data from the classroom context, including learners' progress or understanding and teachers' observations. Therefore, all findings are based on materials analysis alone and do not consider any actual learners' achievements. While materials analysis is useful in its own right, SLA theory stresses that any instructional material should be proven effective in the classroom environment (Ellis, 2020, p. 144).

Moreover, the current paper does not offer a comparative analysis of the textbook under consideration with others. Comparative analysis is widely applied to materials evaluation in order to establish relative strong and weak aspects of textbooks. Thus, due to lack of cross-textbooks comparison, the gaps described in the paper might not necessarily be specific to this particular textbook but can be common for all such textbooks (Nation, 2022, p. 158).

Another weakness that should be considered is the fact that even though the analytical framework is based on SLA theories, there is no discussion of sociocultural and contextual issues related to language learning in the book. It should be mentioned that language learning is a complex process depending on many conditions and not limited only by materials used in class (Lightbown & Spada, 2021, p. 63).

The findings of the present study should be interpreted within the limitations of qualitative textbook analysis. The study examines instructional patterns within selected textbook units rather

than measuring actual learner acquisition outcomes. Consequently, the analysis identifies potential strengths and limitations in grammar progression design rather than establishing direct causal effects on language learning performance.

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that New Headway Intermediate organizes grammar in a mostly linear, unit-based sequence that only partially aligns with second language acquisition (SLA) principles. While the textbook appears systematic, it often introduces complex grammar before learners have fully acquired prerequisite knowledge, suggesting a structurally driven rather than acquisition-oriented design.

The analysis identifies a partial mismatch with SLA principles such as gradual development, frequent recycling, and meaningful contextualization. It also highlights key weaknesses: inconsistent sequencing of grammar points, limited recycling of previously taught forms, weak communicative integration, and insufficient attention to cognitive load, all of which may hinder effective learning.

Pedagogically, the study argues for textbook designs that better reflect SLA research by ensuring smoother progression, systematic recycling, and stronger contextual embedding of grammar. It concludes that despite its popularity, the textbook has notable limitations and recommends shifting toward more dynamic, usage-based, and learner-centered approaches in future materials development.

8. Future Research

This study also suggests several directions for future research. Firstly, the possibility of conducting comparative analyses among various ELT textbooks might be considered by researchers in the future. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how grammar progression throughout ELT textbooks works across several different materials and would provide an empirically based assessment of whether these progression gaps are systemic within the field of ELT or only apply to certain textbooks (Nation, 2022, p. 163).

Secondly, empirical investigations of the influence of grammar progression on learner achievement should be conducted. In other words, classroom-based experiments and/or quasi-experiments could be carried out, measuring how various types of grammar progression affect learner acquisition, retention, and communicative competence. This would resolve one of the major limitations of this study, which did not incorporate empirical evidence of learner performance (Ellis, 2020, p. 149).

The fourth recommendation for future research may consist in the application of mixed methodology, which would combine qualitative analyses of grammar texts with quantitative methods such as learners' examination results or the frequency of certain grammatical constructions. With the use of such an approach, it would be possible to get a more detailed insight into input quality and learner performance (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 68).

The fifth research recommendation would be to conduct learner-oriented investigations, in which surveys or interviews would be used as research tools. Surveys or interviews could help investigate the problem of grammar progression from a different angle. The data obtained through learner- or

teacher-centered research could provide important information about problems, solutions, and gaps in the coursebook (Lightbown & Spada, 2021, p. 70).

Fifthly, future studies should consider the effect of digital and adaptive learning technologies on grammar progression. In view of the growing presence of digital technology in ELT, it would be possible to create adaptive systems that can change grammar progression according to learners' achievements. This follows the current trend towards personalization and intelligent tutoring systems (Tomlinson, 2023, p. 124).

Finally, the relationship between grammatical development and other dimensions of language could be the subject of further research. Language acquisition is a complicated matter, and in the future, research will need to approach language learning from an integrative point of view (Richards, 2022, p. 97).

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