



Assessing the Level of Communicativeness of Activities in Iran's FRDE-based State High School English Textbooks (Prospect and Vision Series)

Hossein Khazaee

Department of English Language Translation, Lahijan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran

Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani*

Department of English Language Translation, Lahijan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran

Introduction

Teaching an international language such as English in countries like Iran, where English is not the first language, is critical in today's competitive world. This is because the need for communication and international ties is more pressing than ever. The English instruction in Iran's state high schools has long been criticized for being far from what is found in the curricula of countries that aim to develop communicative ability and oral skills. The transmission of grammar-based content, language context English as a foreign language (EFL), and exam-oriented instruction have been among the most significant barriers to achieving communicative goals in English instruction in Iran (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Zarrinabadi & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2018). Despite spending hours in English classes, Iranian students have never been able to communicate effectively in English. This has led to the privatization of English education in Iran with the emergence of numerous private institutes and classes, each claiming to be the most proficient at what they do.

The above-mentioned problems are partly due to the type of education philosophy followed in Iran. The philosophical foundation for education in Iran is that of perennialism (Maftoon & Shakouri, 2013), which reflects the conservatism of ideas and harkens back to the past for subject matter. According to Maftoon and Shakouri, in such a philosophical perspective, knowledge is seen as property that should be passed on from authority to individual. This philosophy is based on Aristotle's naturalism, which asserts that there are natural truths that do not change and that they should be the basis for education.

The Iranian K-12 educational system is centralized and divided into two levels: primary and secondary (lower-secondary [three years of the lower secondary cycle] and upper-secondary [three years of the upper secondary cycle]) (Norouzi et al., 2022). As mentioned by Norouzi et al., primary schools are publicly funded, compulsory, and last for six years, although we have some primary schools that receive tuition for what they teach pupils. Secondary schools are also free and compulsory. Here, too, we have schools that charge tuition for the instruction they provide to students. Although many pupils might have the experience of being educated in English in private institutes, it is in secondary schools that students start receiving instruction in English (Zarrinabadi & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2018).



Zarrinabadi and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2018) asserted that calls for reform in the K–12 educational system of Iran resulted in revisions (Fundamental Reform Document of Education [FRDE]) in English language materials aimed at enhancing students' learning by focusing on what are called higher-order thinking processes in accordance with a self-esteeming, active, communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. A new set of English textbooks, named English for School, has been issued in six volumes to take the place of the old ones. A teacher's handbook, a student book, a student workbook, a CD/DVD, and so on are included in each of these six volumes (Goodarzi et al., 2020). The English for Schools textbooks for the lower secondary cycle (grades 7, 8, and 9) are known as Prospect 1, 2, and 3, whereas the textbooks for the upper secondary cycle (grades 10, 11, & 12) are known as Vision 1, 2, and 3. Many different themes and functions are said to be at play in each of these textbooks (Zarrinabadi & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2018). The simultaneous integration of listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills has also been an emphasis in these textbooks (Goodarzi et al., 2020). According to the creators of these textbooks, students with a basic level of English language skills can use these textbooks to become fluent in speaking and writing English (Goodarzi et al., 2020).

The question that arises here is whether this newly developed series of instructional materials truly reflect the communicative needs of Iranian students. With this end in view, based on Littlewood's (2004) communicative continuum, we aimed at conducting a content analysis of Iran's state high school textbooks to assess the level of communicativeness of activities in the brand-new English language materials (Prospect and Vision series). The following are the research questions of the present study:

1. Do Iran's FRDE-based state high school English textbooks in the lower secondary cycle (Prospect series) place more emphasis on focus on forms or focus on meaning (communication)?
2. Do Iran's FRDE-based state high school English textbooks in the upper secondary cycle (Vision series) place more emphasis on focus on forms or focus on meaning (communication)?

Literature Review

From the first days of implementing FRDE, attempts have been made to investigate the different aspects of the newly developed curricular policy regarding ELT practices in state high schools in Iran. A number of these studies (e.g., Gheitani et al., 2020; Gholami Pasand & Ghasemi, 2018; Kheirabadi & Alavimoghaddam, 2016) evaluated the quality of the developed materials through content analysis and textbook evaluation. A number of other studies investigated the practices of English language teachers (e.g., Ansari et al., 2019; Hemmati & Aziz Malayeri, 2022; Riahipour et al., 2019; Shareghi et al., 2021). Other studies focused on the perceptions and motivations of students concerning the reforms in ELT practices and materials (e.g., Kaivanpanah et al., 2016). The following are a number of recent studies that investigated the quality of the developed materials through content analysis and textbook evaluation.

An evaluation of Prospect 1 was conducted by Asadi et al. (2016) using the context, input, process, and product (CIPP) program evaluation model. The results indicated that Prospect 1 has several shortcomings, including a poorly designed literacy approach, over-localized content, and a lack of grammar structures.

Iranian teachers' perceptions of the Prospect series were evaluated by Goodarzi et al. (2020). Findings showed that, despite being very successful compared to previous English textbooks, the Prospect series has some major problems with activities, methods, topics, design, and not enough teaching hours.

As part of their cultural linguistics evaluation, Rahimi and Sharifian (2020) examined the visuals used in the Iranian state high school Vision 3 textbook. Vision 3 revealed three themes of Persian cultural schemas: family gathering, hijab, and blood donation. According to the interview results, Iranian EFL textbooks do not improve students' communication skills or meet their communicative needs.

Asakereh et al. (2019) examined the English as a lingua franca (ELF) elements of English textbooks utilized in the Iranian educational system using a critical content analysis of these texts. It was discovered that the textbooks do not provide English instructors enough opportunities to apply the sociolinguistic and

sociocultural realities of the English language since they don't expose students to a wide range of situational circumstances, characters, and cultural components.

Derakhshan (2021) examined the national Iranian EFL textbooks from a semiotics standpoint. The results show that there is minimal opportunity in the newly localized Iranian EFL textbooks for users to become more culturally conscious. A dynamic approach for assessing cultural representation has been put forth to show how EFL textbooks might be created, used, and accepted in educational contexts more successfully.

In an article published in 2020, Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei investigated gender representation in Iranian English language textbooks. It was revealed from the manual and computational analyses that textbook authors were aware of gender consciousness, using gender-neutral vocabulary and dividing dialogues equally between males and females. Despite this, women remain underrepresented in Iranian high school English-language textbooks.

Through our search in different databases, no study has been found with the aim of the present manuscript, that is, assessing the level of communicativeness of activities in the brand-new English language materials (Prospect and Vision series) through applying Littlewood's (2004) communicative continuum. With this in mind, the next section elaborates on the methodological issues underpinning the present article.

Method

Design of the Study

Qualitative content analysis was followed in the present study. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), there are three approaches to qualitative content analysis, namely "conventional, directed, or summative" (p. 1277). Conventional content analysis is data-driven. Based on Hsieh and Shannon, "this type of design is usually appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited" (p. 1279). Directed content analysis, based on Hsieh and Shannon, aims "to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (p. 1281). Summative content analysis, based on Hsieh and Shannon, "starts with identifying and quantifying certain words or content in text with the purpose of understanding the contextual use of the words or content" (p. 1283). However, as Hsieh and Shannon further added, "a summative approach to qualitative content analysis goes beyond mere word counts to include latent content analysis. Latent content analysis refers to the process of interpretation of content" (pp. 1283-1284).

Here and in this study, we followed a summative latent approach to qualitative content analysis. We assessed the level of communicativeness of activities in Iran's FRDE-based high school English textbooks (Prospect and Vision Series) through in-depth analysis of the content of the textbooks by applying a pre-determined set of criteria for analysis. These criteria came from Littlewood's (2004) communicative continuum model. We did not merely count the number of categories in the continuum of communicativeness of activities. In particular, we tried to figure out where the content of the textbooks fit on Littlewood's (2004) continuum.

Instruments

Textbooks

Iran's FRDE-based state high school English textbooks (Prospect and Vision series) were downloaded from the official website for school textbooks available at <http://www.chap.sch.ir/>. The textbooks for

students, which were in PDF format and readable by MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020, were used for the analysis.

Littlewood’s (2004) communicative continuum

Littlewood’s (2004) communicative continuum was used to evaluate the amount of communicativeness in Iran’s FRDE-based state high school English textbooks (Prospect and Vision series). Littlewood’s framework includes five categories in a continuum with varying degrees of focus on forms or meaning. The left side of the continuum focuses on forms, while the right side focuses on meaning (communication). Figure 1 below depicts Littlewood’s (2004) communicative continuum. The test was piloted on 35 students who were randomly chosen to take part in the pilot study. The results of the pilot study indicated that the reliability value for the vocabulary pre-test and post-test using KR-21 reached .71. At the end of the pilot study, the researchers made some modifications on the vocabulary test to make it more useful to the actual participants. Pre-test scores were collected to be compared with post-test scores to determine participants’ progress at the end of the course. After the training, the researchers performed a post-test. Pre- and post- tests had similar materials. Therefore, to measure the participants’ vocabulary learning in the post-test, a vocabulary test containing 30 items with the same level of difficulty was used. The reliability of the scores was evaluated using the KR-21 formula (R=.71).

Focus on forms		←	→	Focus on meaning	
Non-communicative learning	Pre-communicative language practice			Structured communication	Authentic communication
Focusing on the structures of language, how they are formed and what they mean, e.g. substitution exercises, ‘discovery’ and awareness-raising activities	Practising language with some attention to meaning but not communicating new messages to others, e.g. ‘question-and-answer’ practice			Using language to communicate in situations which elicit pre-learnt language, but with some unpredictability, e.g. structured role-play and simple problem-solving	Using language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable, e.g. creative role-play, more complex problem-solving and discussion
‘Exercises’	←	(Ellis)	→	‘Tasks’	
‘Enabling tasks’	←	(Estaire and Zanon)	→	‘Communicative tasks’	

Figure 1. Continuum of communicativeness of activities (Littlewood, 2004).

MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020

The data were coded and analyzed using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020. MAXQDA is software that assists academic, scientific, and business institutions with computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods analysis of data, texts, and multimedia. MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 offers statistical analysis of qualitative data in addition to the advanced qualitative analysis features of MAXQDA Plus and MAXQDA Standard.

Data Collection

In the first steps of conducting this research, the investigators collected all materials related to the Prospect and Vision series. The main analysis was, however, performed on the students' books. A chapter from each textbook was randomly selected by the researchers. Overall, six chapters were chosen for the analysis. The list of these chapters with their related contents is presented in Tables 1-4.

TABLE 1

Map of the Selected Units from the Prospect Series in the Present Study

Prospect 1 Unit 3	Function Talking about your age Talking about dates	Sounds & Letters Ii Tt Nn	Key Language Vocabulary: age, birthday, months of the year, numbers 1 to 31 Expressions: It's my birthday (today). Happy birthday,! How old are you? I'm years old. When's your birthday? (It's) in (Bahman). Really? How do you say this in English?
Prospect 2 Unit 1	Theme and Function My Nationality Talking about Nationalities	Spelling and Pronunciation ch sh fr sp br	Key Language Expressions Are you from Iran? Are you Iranian? Yes, I am. No, I'm not. Where are you from? I'm from Iran. Which is correct?
Prospect 3 Unit 5 Media Talking about Media	Vocabulary Media (connect, interview, online,...)	Language Melody Rising Intonation (surprises)	Grammar Past Tense (Regular)
		See Also Past Tense of "to be"	Key Language Expressions - Did the girls listen to the radio? - Yes, they did. - Who watched the movie last night? - My sister. - Could you please give it to me?

As Table 1 shows, Prospect 1, 2, and 3 had different maps of content; however, each textbook followed the same divisions of sections throughout. As a result of this feature, which was evident in the Vision series as well, selecting only one unit from each textbook could reveal the whole picture behind each volume. In the first three volumes of the English instructional materials for the lower secondary cycle, Prospect 1, 2, and 3 offer more basic instruction than the Vision series, wherein the focus is on teaching the students the sounds, letters, and key language of English.

TABLE 2

Map of Unit 2 of Vision 1 in the Present Study

Get Ready	Introduction to the Lesson		
Conversation	Visiting Iranian National Observatory		
New Words & Expressions	Learning Vocabulary of Reading		
Reading	A Wonderful Liquid	Reading Comprehension	
Grammar	Adjectives	See Also (comparative and superlative adjectives)	
Listening & Speaking	Asking about Details		
Pronunciation	Rising Intonation		
Writing	Adjective Kinds of Adjectives Place of Adjectives Spelling Hints		
What You Learned	Reviewing Lesson 2		

TABLE 3

Map of Unit 1 of Vision 2 in the Present Study

Get Ready	Introduction to the Lesson		
Conversation	Talking about Languages		
New Words & Expressions	Learning Vocabulary of Reading		
Reading	Languages of the World	Reading Strategy (Scanning)	Reading Comprehension
Vocabulary Development	Synonyms		
Grammar	Countable and Uncountable Nouns	See Also (Numbers)	
Listening & Speaking	Shopping, Asking and Answering about Prices and Numbers		
Pronunciation	Teen Numbers and Ten Numbers		
Writing	Simple Sentences		
What You Learned	Reviewing Lesson 1		

TABLE 4

Map of Unit 3 of Vision 3 in the Present Study

Get Ready	Introduction to the Lesson		
Conversation	Talking about Wind Turbines		
New Words & Expressions	Learning Vocabulary of Reading		
Reading	Earth for our Children	Reading Strategy (Note taking)	Reading Comprehension
Vocabulary Development	Proverbs		
Grammar	Passive Voice with Modals	See Also (Past perfect tense)	
Listening & Speaking	Talking about an Activity before another Activity in the Past		
Pronunciation	Rising Intonation		
Writing	Supporting & Concluding Sentences		
What You Learned	Reviewing Lesson 3		

As Tables 2-4 show, Vision 1, 2, and 3 have similar profiling of content wherein some sort of advance organizer (get ready section of each unit) is used for making the students aware of the forthcoming content. Then there are sections on conversation, new words and expressions, and so forth, which follow the same format in all three Vision volumes.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data, codes were written in MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020. The codes were based on the categories of the continuum of communicativeness of activities (Littlewood, 2004) in Figure 1. Then the PDFs of the books were uploaded to MAXQDA. Analyses, including quantitative analysis of cases and groups for each selected unit and code frequencies for the whole of each Prospect and Vision series, were performed and themes were extracted. Outputs from the MAXQDA software were saved in Word 2016 (.doc) file format.

Results

Table 5 presents the crosstab output (resulting from quantitative analysis of cases and groups) from MAXQDA concerning the amount of communicativeness of activities in the Prospect series (answer to question 1 of the current study).

TABLE 5
The Level of Communicativeness of Activities in the Prospect Series

	Prospect 3	Prospect 2	Prospect 1
Non-communicative learning	39.1%	33.3%	42.9%
Pre-communicative language practice	52.2%	33.3%	28.6%
Communicative language practice	0	0	0
Structured communication	8.7%	33.3%	28.6%
Authentic communication	0	0	0
SUM	100.00	100.00	100.00
N = Documents	1	1	1

Figure 2 below depicts the output of MAXQDA concerning code frequencies and the level of communicativeness of activities in the Prospect series.

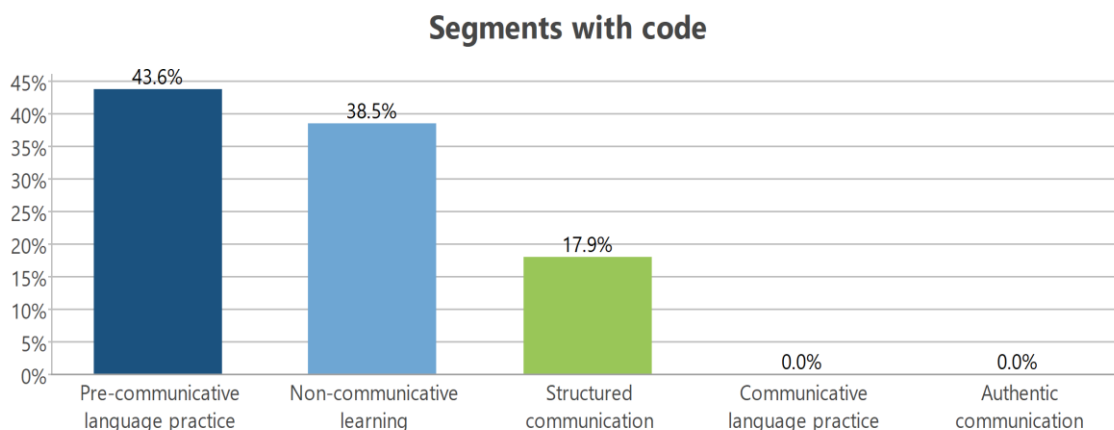


Figure 2. Code frequencies concerning the level of communicativeness of activities in the Prospect series.

Based on Table 5 and Figure 2, the majority of the activities in the Prospect series were related to non-communicative learning, pre-communicative language practice, and structured communication within Littlewood’s (2004) continuum, with no evidence of any communicative language practice or authentic communication. We noticed that most of the activities were related to (a) memorization and role-playing of conversations; (b) explicit, deductive grammar explanations and mechanical repetitions; (c) doing written exercises and checking and explaining answers; (d) reading the texts chorally and repeating the teachers’ words and structures one by one; and (e) explicit explanations of a number of language expressions with the use of the whiteboard. It should be mentioned, in response to the first research question of this study, that Iran’s lower secondary school English textbooks (Prospect series) are more concerned with forms than meaning or communication, with little focus on pre-communicative language practices and structured communication.

Table 6 presents the crosstab output (resulting from quantitative analysis of cases and groups) from MAXQDA concerning the level of communicativeness of activities in the Vision series (Question 2 of the current study).

TABLE 6
The Level of Communicativeness of Activities in the Vision Series

	Vision 3	Vision 2	Vision 1
Non-communicative learning	70.4%	77.8%	84.6%
Pre-communicative language practice	25.9%	18.5%	15.4%
Communicative language practice	0	0	0
Structured communication	3.7%	3.7%	0
Authentic communication	0	0	0
SUM	100.00	100.00	100.00

Figure 3 below depicts the output of MAXQDA concerning code frequencies and the level of communicativeness of activities in the Vision series.

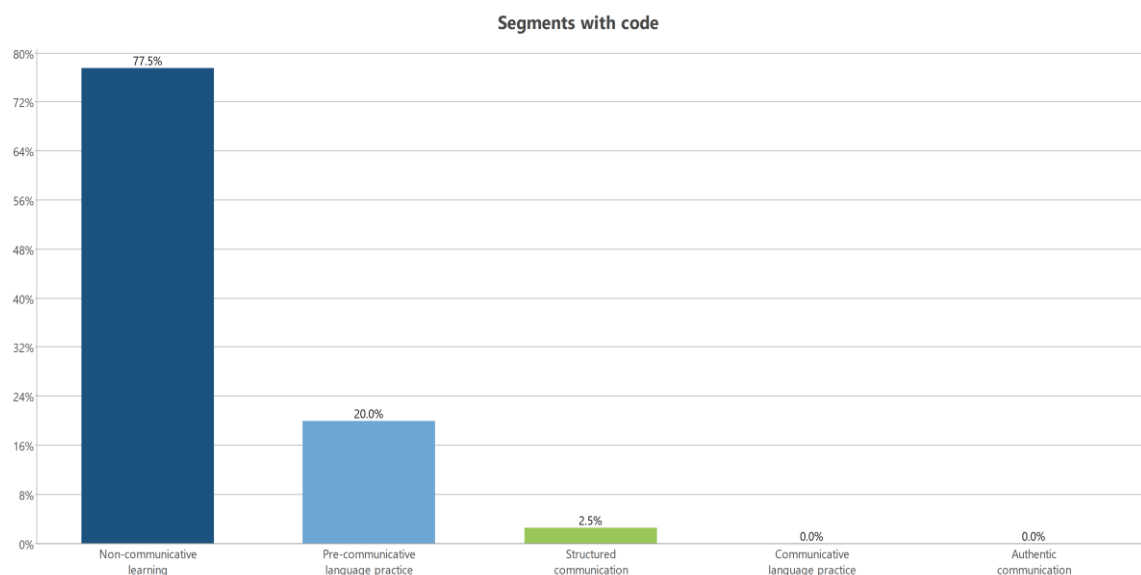


Figure 3. Code frequencies concerning the level of communicativeness of activities in the Vision series

In Table 6 and Figure 3, most of the observed activities were of non-communicative learning, pre-communicative language practice, and structured communication within Littlewood’s (2004) continuum, again with no evidence of communicative language practice or authentic communication. Answering the

second research question of the present study, it should be mentioned that Iran's FRDE-based state high school English textbooks in the upper secondary cycle (Vision series) are more concerned with forms than meaning or communication, with little focus on pre-communicative language practices and structured communication. Possibly, this is due to the exam-oriented instruction the learners need for Iran's university entrance exams, called *Konkur*, at this stage of learning.

As is seen above, the activities of Iran's FRDE-based high school English textbooks (Prospect and Vision series) were not congruent with the principles of a genuine version of Communicative language teaching (CLT). The Prospect and Vision series need revisions to provide students with more communicative language practice and authentic communication.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the researchers used the continuum of communicativeness of activities framework (Littlewood, 2004) to analyze the English language teaching (ELT) practices in Iran's FRDE-based state high school English textbooks (Prospect and Vision series). We conducted this analysis so as to determine whether these activities were more geared toward a focus on forms or a focus on meaning (communication). Littlewood's framework presents a range of pedagogical possibilities for evaluating teaching practices. Practices that are categorized as focusing on forms appear on the left side of the continuum, while practices that focus on meaning (communication) appear on the right side. It cannot be stated that categories on the right side of the continuum are more appropriate than those on the left. This is because a solid and powerful strand of activities depends on a variety of contextual elements, including the learners' age and proficiency level, whether they are learning in a well-equipped environment, and so on. Learners with lower levels of skill will almost certainly need to complete a number of activities on the left side of the continuum before attempting to use tasks and concentrate on communicative activities.

It can be seen from the findings section of this study that the activities in Iran's FRDE-based high school English textbooks (Prospect and Vision series) are concerned with non-communicative learning, pre-communicative language practice, and structured communication. The findings from this paper suggest that CLT is not genuinely being implemented in Iran's FRDE-based English for high school students' textbooks. Moreover, what takes place in the classrooms may not have many parallels with the standard notions of CLT. This study supports the existing literature which demonstrates the difficulties in implementing CLT in Iran (e.g., Safari & Sahragard, 2015; Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018). This is a confirmation of the results of studies that pinpointed the non-adherence to CLT principles in the newly developed English textbooks for state high schools in Iran (e.g., Riahipour et al., 2019). The results are also a confirmation of the results of studies that called for the modification of the textbooks (e.g., Goodarzi et al., 2020).

There are a number of reasons that can be named as probable reasons for such inconsistencies with the tenets of CLT and the low level of communicativeness in the content of the Prospect and Vision series, among which the transmission of grammar-based content, language context, and exam-oriented instruction are the most significant barriers. The Prospect and Vision series lack true communicative activities, especially those that emphasize communicative practice and authentic communication. This makes students rote learners of a number of functions and themes and not ready for communication outside the confines of the classrooms. Our research did not investigate the cultural aspects of the Prospect and Vision series; therefore, we cannot compare our findings with studies that addressed cultural or gender issues in the textbooks (e.g., Derakhshan, 2021; Gholami Pasand & Ghasemi, 2018). In the future, researchers might look into things like how ready Iranian teachers are to use CLT.

Considering the role of examinations as an impeding factor in implementing CLT, the utilization of CLT-based assessment could be an appropriate remedy to encourage a more comprehensive implementation (Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018). Moreover, a localized version of a task-based language teaching approach or production-oriented approach could be useful to introduce communication into

Iranian high schools' language classes. Teachers can also be active agents in developing a localized version of a task-based language teaching approach or production-oriented approach specifically tailored for the Iranian market.

The Authors

Hossein Khazaei is an Assistant Professor of TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran where he teaches courses in English Language Teaching. His main research interests are corpus linguistics, academic writing, second language acquisition, and textbook evaluation.

Department of English Language Translation
Lahijan Branch
Islamic Azad University
Lahijan, Iran
Email: khazaei.h.1980@gmail.com

Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani (corresponding author) is an Assistant Professor of TESOL at Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran where he teaches courses in English Language Teaching. His main research interests are CAPT, CALL, and English language skills. He is the member of the editorial board of Cogent Education (ISSN: 2331-186X), Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education (ISSN: 2363-5169) and Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties (ISSN: 1057-3569).

Department of English Language Translation
Lahijan Branch
Islamic Azad University
Lahijan, Iran
Email: abbas.pourhosein@yahoo.com

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