Teachability and learnability have been two crucial issues in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and instructed SLA. In particular, much research into the role of instruction in second language (L2) learning has been conducted over the last three decades based on the Teachability Hypothesis proposed by Pienemann (1984). The Teachability Hypothesis assumes that ‘an L2-structure can be learned by instruction only if the learner’s interlanguage is close to the point when this structure is acquired in the natural setting’ (Pienemann, 1984:198). This suggests that L2 instruction cannot be beneficial if learners are not ready.

Teachability and Learnability across Languages, edited by R. Arntzen, G. Håkansson, A. Hjelde and J.-U. Keßler, and published by the John Benjamins Publishing Company is the sixth volume of the PALART (Processability Approaches to Language Acquisition Research and Teaching) series, which tackles the issues of teachability and learnability exclusively within the framework of Processability Theory (PT) (e.g., Pienemann, 1998, 2005). PT accounts for a universal hierarchy of processing procedures for grammatical structures in L2 acquisition using the language-generation model (Levelt, 1989) and Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) (e.g., Bresnan, 2001). This volume begins with an introductory chapter offering a comprehensive summary of the major findings presented in the eleven chapters. There are three parts: Part I, Teachability and learnability; Part II, Methods
and assessment; and Part III, Cross-linguistic aspects of SLA. The volume also includes a closing chapter that offers new perspectives on heritage language acquisition.

The first section, Part I (Chapters 1–4), explores the role of instruction in L2 learning and discusses the validity of learnability and teachability. Chapter 1, by Baten and Keßler, gives an extensive review of research findings related to the teachability hypothesis. By presenting a research timeline focusing on a theoretical perspective of the impacts of formal instruction though the L2 acquisition route, the authors lead the reader towards a better understanding of the significance and relevance of the teachability hypothesis. In Chapter 2, Håkansson shows that children aged 7–8 obtain English L2 knowledge through media before they receive formal instruction at school, based on the analyses of two picture-pointing tasks, the ELIAS Grammar test and the BPVS British Picture Vocabulary Scale, as performed by 41 Swedish children. This shows that children’s grammar also follows the developmental sequence defined by PT, while L1 transfer occurs in L2 vocabulary. Chapter 3, by Flyman Mattsson, examines 24 textbooks at different levels of Swedish language education for immigrants. In the first analysis, the occurrences of three morpho-syntactic structures are compared among four courses using PT, while the second analysis focuses on how the textbook writers account for the difficulty of those structures in specific texts labelled ‘easy’ and ‘difficult’. The author reports a gap between the natural L2 development found in SLA research and the current classroom language instruction. Chapter 4, by Dyson, addresses the issues of the application of the teachability hypothesis to spoken and written L2 English questions by conducting a pre-/post-test design with experimental and comparison groups comprising 20 postgraduate ESL learners at different PT stages. The results suggest that instruction does not allow L2 learners to skip stages, whereas it may facilitate the progress of learners who are not ready. All the chapters in Part I claim the importance of providing input at an appropriate stage in L2 instruction.

Part II (Chapters 5–7) deals with methodological issues and the assessment of L2 research. Chapter 5, by Baten, explores the potential usefulness of Elicited Imitation Tasks (EITs) to determine L2 developmental stages. The data were obtained from EITs performed by 15 migrant learners who came from various L1 backgrounds to Germany at three different times. In the EIT, 40 stimulus sentences, including 20 sentences with ungrammatical case use, were used, and participants were required to either repeat the sentence or reconstruct a case error into a target-like case marker. The results indicate that the EIT is comparable to the spontaneous speech data used in other PT research, suggesting that EITs can be applied to PT
studies. Chapter 6, by Saturno, presents additional evidence suggesting that EITs could be an efficient measure of a learner’s potential developmental stage using data from the VILLA (Varieties of Initial Learners in Language Acquisition) project (Dimroth et al. 2013). By examining 17 Italian L1 learners of Polish L2 who performed an EIT targeting the morpho-syntactic contrast between the nominative and accusative cases, which in Polish correspond to the syntactic functions of subject and object, respectively, after nine hours of L2 exposure, the EIT was confirmed to produce output that reflected the present state of the language processor. Chapter 7, by Agebjörn, investigates the reliability of the Complexity-Accuracy-Fluency (CAF) linguistic measures which primarily focus on accuracy. The author argues that other measures of language development – one within PT, for example – should be a useful complement to communicative language testing to increase the objectivity and reliability of language assessment.

Part III (Chapters 8–10) cover the cross-linguistic aspects of SLA, particularly the acquisition of morpho-syntax in various typologically different languages, including English, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish. Chapter 8, by Evenstad Emilsen, analyses the acquisition of nominal morphology in Norwegian L2 by Kurdish L1 children and demonstrates a significant parallel between the grammar of monolingual children and that of sequential bilingual children. The author also shows that child L2 learners use Norwegian L2 grammar more accurately than do adult L2 learners. In Chapter 9, Mano, Yoshinari and Eguchi explore the influence of L1 patterns on acquisition in three different L2 contexts: English, Hungarian and Japanese. They argue that L2 learners exhibit individual sentence structure tendencies, regardless of the typological patterns of their L1. Chapter 10, by Türker-van der Heiden and Mercan, deals with the acquisition of L2 Turkish morpho-syntax by Norwegian university students. Based on the longitudinal analysis of L2 written data, the chapter provides a detailed developmental sequence of phrasal and clausal (genitive)-possessive structures.

Finally, Montrul’s Chapter 11 presents an overview of heritage language acquisition, which can be defined as a type of early bilingual acquisition in a particular sociolinguistic environment. The author discusses the relationship between heritage language acquisition and SLA, and suggests that PT is potentially applicable to the analyses of heritage language development. This chapter has theoretical implications for future PT research, and offers insights into the attrition and incomplete acquisition of heritage languages.

Overall, Teachability and Learnability across Languages reviews valuable research findings and discussions on the current theoretical and methodological issues in SLA studies. Therefore, it should be relevant to
anyone involved in second-/foreign-language education and/or engaged in research into L2 learning and teaching. Notably, this book, which describes some new methodological advancements, should be a helpful resource for researchers who use PT as a theoretical framework. Although not all chapters are directly related to PT, this volume contributes to the expansion of the scope of PT by asking questions about the processability hierarchy in written L2 development, the applicability of the PT framework to heritage language acquisition, and so on, all of which are topics that require more extensive investigation.

References