Artículo de Investigación

A Backward Design Approach to Syllabus Design for English Language Proficiency Development

Modelo Inverso de Diseño Instruccional para Promover el Aprendizaje del Inglés

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Resumen

Este documento da cuenta de la investigación realizada frente a la evaluación de la habilidad de habla con un enfoque de diseño inverso aplicado al currículo, el cual, aunque es conocido por profesionales, ha sido frecuentemente dejado de lado a medida que se establece la realidad del aula. Algunos educadores se dan cuenta de que, en vez de planificar las actividades primero, es más eficaz planificar un curso a partir de los resultados o metas del aprendizaje, y luego retroceder para pensar qué evidencia demostrará que se han cumplido estos objetivos; posteriormente diseñar clases y actividades que permitan recolectar esa evidencia. Con un método de investigación-acción, los autores recopilaron datos durante un año académico con 26 alumnos de grado 11 en un colegio de Bogotá, Colombia. Este estudio utilizó notas de campo, una entrevista semiestructurada, una encuesta, además de videos y grabaciones de audio de 11 lecciones. Los hallazgos sugieren que la mayoría de la clase logró avances en la competencia oral y evaluó el enfoque de manera positiva. La precisión, por otro lado, parece requerir un tratamiento diferente. Los autores concluyeron que el Plan de Estudios de Inglés Sugerido por el Ministerio de Educación de Colombia constituye una

oportunidad para que los profesores de inglés y otros prueben un Diseño Inverso para guiar sus decisiones.

Palabras clave: Diseño Inverso, diseño de cursos, lengua extranjera, expresión oral, enseñanza para la comprensión.

Abstract

This paper reports an inquiry on promoting and assessing speaking with a Backward Design Approach to syllabus design, which although known by many practitioners, is often put aside as the reality of the classroom sets in. Some educators realize that instead of planning activities first, it is more effective to plan a course from the learning outcomes or goals, and then move 'backward' to thinking about what evidence will show that these goals have been met; and then design classes and activities that will allow that evidence to be collected. With an action research method, the authors gathered data for an academic year from 26 pupils of the 11th grade at a school of Bogotá, Colombia. This study used field notes, a semi-structured interview, a survey, in addition to videos and audio recordings of 11 lessons. Findings suggest that most of the class made gains in oral proficiency and evaluated the approach positively. Accuracy, on the other hand, seems to require a different treatment. The authors concluded that the Ministry of Education of Colombia Suggested English Curriculum constitutes an opportunity for teachers of English and others to try a Backward Design to guide their decisions.

Keywords: Backward Design, course design, foreign language, speaking, teaching for

understanding.

Introduction

The Ministry of Education of Colombia (M.E.N, 2004, 2009, 2015, and 2016 a, 2016 b and 2016 c) has made efforts to put the strengthening of English language learning in the educational agenda. However, it acknowledges that the results have not been satisfactory. Scholars consider that school conditions hamper the prospect of performing as expected; the goals were then unrealistic and envisaged an idyllic, non-existent group of students (Guerrero, 2008). Despite the drawbacks, others argue that the policies for English learning at schools should be seen as a possibility for everyone, and not just for a social elite of the international schools, as it has been in the past (De Mejía, 2011).

The authors of this article feel that these policies and regulations have encouraged us to search pedagogical strategies that engage learners. We share our voice of classroom practitioners who have worked with large classes, few resources, and who have tried to move from a focus on the study of the target language to a focus on communication. We have tried to align our syllabi, lesson plans,

and assessment with the syllabi proposed by the Ministry of Education of Colombia, yet we encountered that our high school students could barely express a brief idea in writing, and answer questions based on a reading. Then we found that teaching for understanding (TFU) promoted meaningful learning through effective planning. See Wiggins & Mctighe (2005) and Perkins & Blythe (1994).

We reasoned that if we could plan with the outcomes in mind, we would be able to understand where we were at. Then we applied a speaking exercise, giving a basic guide: *talk about you, name, age, likes, dislikes, and family*. Then each student prepared the topic for ten minutes and spoke with one of the two teachers alone. We observed five aspects that offered an account of their speaking performance. These appear in Table I. 88% of the 26 students kept the head up, it means that students were able to speak looking at the teacher-researcher without hesitation, a show of self-confidence.

Table 1. Observation of speaking

N= 26   %

Kept the head up (They looked at the teacher-researcher)	88%
Kept interaction going	69.9%
Spoke relaxed	57%
Spoke clearly	38%
Used correct grammar	38%

From the data, we inferred that most learners felt better in a one-on one communication with the teacher. Not having to speak in front of the classmates relieved the tension; they said that the felt relaxed and tried to establish a conversation. We conducted the study to address the problem of lack of oral fluency. Observations and tests allowed us to establish that our school leavers had difficulties to tackle listening and speaking tasks; they were not able to answer simple questions or express an original idea. In other words, knowing the destination, we clarified the procedures. In line with the suggested curricula (M.E.N, 2016a), we set the outcomes first and worked our way backward to propose tasks that provide us with evidence of progress in speaking. We assessed understanding and meaning learning, and how they retrieved the new knowledge to apply it to the new tasks we proposed.

Theoretical framework

This study is based on the framework of teaching for understanding (TFU) as a pedagogical strategy to achieve learning goals to gain understanding and awareness. Perkins & Blythe (1994, P. 26) affirm understanding is being able to carry out a variety of "performances" that show one's understanding of a topic and, at the same time, advance it. They call them understanding performances

or performances of understanding. Wiggins and Mctighe (2005) proposed the term understanding distinct from knowledge when affirming that "understanding is a mental construct, an abstraction made by the human mind to make sense of many distinct pieces of knowledge. It is the moment when learners can explain, interpret, apply, shift perspective, display empathy, and reflectively self-assessment (p.11). In this sense, learners not only used the knowledge or the concepts they had learned, but they could also go further and used those concepts to transfer them to other situations and sceneries as Wiggins and Mctighe describe: "To know something is to focus on facts, skills and procedures that must be learned by heart, while understanding involves meeting a challenge for thought" (Wiggins & Mctighe, 2005, p. 5)

The other construct refers to second language (L2) acquisition in which we highlight social interaction in reports or conversations as defined by Luoma (2004), Brown & Yule (2001), Nunan (1989), Harmer (2001) and Thornbury (2005). This study aimed to promote speaking. Since personality has been identified as one of the elements in speaking we corroborated that some can express their ideas easier than others. How did we arrive at that corroborations? One of the teacher-researchers has been working with the sample beginner ELL group for six years which allows her to give more details in the data collection. Her knowledge of the students added support to the analysis in terms of their self-image and cognition. Their ability to express their thoughts, and their knowledge about the world (Luoma, 2004) contributed to the inquiry.

Method

The study took place in an academic year at an urban school located in Bogotá, Colombia. Participants were 11 boys and 15 girls of an 11th grade. This study followed the stages of action research: *planning, acting, observing,* and *reflecting*. The pedagogical innovation aimed to enhance achievement and create a friendly climate. We acted as reflective practitioners, for bringing about change. (Skerrit, 1993). In the planning stage, we conducted a diagnosis of speaking proficiency. In the acting stage, we applied the Understanding by Design (UBD) using the Backward Design Template adapted from Wiggins & Mctighe (2005). We proposed tasks of mind mapping, interviewing classmates, and giving oral reports. We monitored the students' progress as they composed and spoke texts about their lives. In the observing stage, we examined the learners' utterances and recorded their behavior; while in the reflecting stage, we discussed the sessions, the task performance, reorganized lessons, gave feedback, and conducted formative assessment (Marzano, 2009). By the end of the eleven sessions, which appear in detail in Table 2.

The study drew on the literature on Understanding by Design (UBD) (Wiggins and Mctighe 2011; Perkins & Blythe, 1994) and on Backward Design (Wiggins & Mctighe, 2005; Bloom, 1956; Mctighe & Seif, 2011; Richards, 2013, Marzano, 2009, and Western Washington University (2018). The framework is based on seven key tenets summarized by Wiggins & Mctighe (2012 p. 1).

Figure 1. Three steps of Backward Design. Wiggins and Mctighe (2005).

Teachers are coaches of understanding, not mere purveyors of content knowledge, skill, or activity. They focus on ensuring that learning happens, not just teaching (and assuming that what was taught was learned); they always aim and check for successful meaning-making and transfer by the learner. The description of the lessons implemented with Backward Design in Table 2 provide a picture of the teachers' decision making processes, about the scope, sequence, scaffolding and other items that the readership will find useful.

Table 2. Outline of the lessons implemented with Backward Design

Desired result		**Lesson 1.** Pupils analyze and talk about lifestyles
	Activities	-Complete the chart with your information and ask two classmates: *name, age, do you like watching TV? Do you like to visit museums? Do you like exercising?* -Read and discuss the text. -Please write on these expressions: are you a culture vulture? A couch potato? Or a party animal? Why?
	Resources	Reading, chart, and vocabulary worksheets.
	Modes	Reading, listening, and speaking.
Facet of understanding		Pupils can explain the characteristics of lifestyles.

Desired result		**Lesson 2**. Pupils know the difference between speaking and interaction.
	Activities	They describe, interpret, and explain their lifestyles, likes, and dislikes. -Write about you: age, family, hobbies, and plans.

	-In pairs take notes on the similarities and differences between you and your classmate.
Resources	Papers, pencils, markers, charts.
Modes	Listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
Facet of understanding	Pupils can explain and interpret differences between lifestyles and give definitions of speaking and interaction.

Desired result	**Lesson 3**. Pupils can learn new words about health and food lifestyles and answer questions orally about them.
Activities	-Play charades: mimic and guess vocabulary related to habits that keep us healthy. -Develop the workshop on a healthy diet and types of food. -Listen to the conversation about adopting good habits and lifestyles. Select the correct answer.
Resources	Hand-outs, vocabulary on the board.
Modes	Listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
Facet of understanding	Pupils can explain and interpret health habits.

Desired result	**Lesson 4.** Pupils learn the differences and similarities between their lifestyles and their classmates'.
Activities	Create a conversation about personal information, habits, likes, and dislikes.
Resources	Text, vocabulary, and voice recorder.
Modes	Listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
Facet of understanding	Pupils can explain, interpret, and apply information about likes and dislikes in line with different lifestyles.

Desired result	**Lesson 5**. .Pupils reflect on how to interact in a conversation and share with their classmates their personal information orally.
Activities	Record and listen to how the recording sounds. It means natural or artificial? We socialized the term interaction to know some elements such us conversation, replay, improvise, spontaneous questions, or outcomes.
Resources	Voice recorder, written text by the learners.
Modes	Listening and speaking.
Facet of understanding	Pupils can apply, have self-knowledge, and have perspective about their own and their classmates' lifestyle characteristics.

Desired result	**Lesson 6.** Pupils search for information about lifestyles in the web to describe and give their point of view about them.
Activities	-Search five descriptions of the idioms: *party animal, culture vulture, couch potato, and workaholic*. -What are the positive and negative aspects of those idioms? -Share your findings with your classmate. -*Assignment:* Create a mind map with the information and talk about the results.
Resources	Internet, notebook, and vocabulary worksheets.
Modes	Reading and speaking.
Facet of understanding	Pupils can see in perspective the lifestyle characteristics and show their viewpoint.

Desired result	Lessons 7-8 Pupils design a mind map about the four different lifestyles they know analyzing the differences and similarities to theirs and show it to their classmates.
Activities	-Listen and observe the mind map. -What is a mind map? -What are the characteristics of the four lifestyles? -What is my life-style and why?
Resources	Mind maps.
Modes	Listening and speaking.
Facet of understanding	Pupils can explain, interpret, see in perspective, and demonstrate empathy with lifestyle definitions and characteristics.

Desired result	Lesson 9-10. Pupils can search for information about interviews and reported speech on the web to carry out their interviews with a person they like (a relative or a friend).
Activities	-Search on the web information about how to carry out an interview. -Analyze kinds of interviews and questions. -Create your own 10 questions to carry out their lifestyle interviews. -Listen to explanations about reported speech on YouTube.
Resources	Computers and websites.
Modes	Listening and speaking.
Facet of understanding	Pupils can interpret, explain, and see in perspective new information about how to carry out interviews to plan and make theirs.

Desired result	Lesson 11. Pupils report orally the information about a relative or friend life-style and give their opinion about it.
Activities	Show the interview format with the 5 questions they have applied. Record their interview. Report orally the gathered information through the interview and give their opinion about it compared with theirs.
Resources	Internet interview formats and questions and audio recordings
Modes	Reading, writing, listening, and speaking.
Facet of understanding	Pupils can explain, interpret, apply, have perspective, empathize, and have self-knowledge when creating, making, and reporting the lifestyle of the person they interviewed.

The lessons were based on UBD and TFU. The sequence boosted the research to plan activities towards improving oral proficiency. Each one of the steps were conducted taking into consideration the main result we pretended to achieve. It was not an objective but a result. Thanks to these well-organized stages, the lessons do not only contained instructions but facets of understanding. It was linked to the way we would present the content and questions to interact with the group. It was necessary to implement the research with eleven interventions due to the process of oral proficiency. In that way, students went through more lessons to gain self-confidence and adapt themselves to a new methodology when learning a foreign language and progress on speaking.

Findings

This study attempted to solve the problem of low oral proficiency in a class of 26 students with a beginner level of English. The original syllabus was oriented towards topics and activities and the teacher-researchers introduced a goal-oriented syllabus. The findings and the interpretation of the data appear in Table 3.

Finding No. 1. Planning proved useful and participants appreciated it

Teaching for Understanding informed our decisions. Learners approached tasks demonstrating persistence. Costa, Kallic Mctighe and Zmuda (2020) claim that "People have a better chance of completing a task if they are focused on what they want, what they have to do, the time they have to get it done, and a plan for how they will achieve it." (p.1). Data suggested that planning proved useful. 14 out of 26 students made significant progress in oral production. Most learners claimed that after 11 lessons, they realized that the syllabus organized their tasks logically and clearly. For instance, participants R.M. and others asserted that they were able to follow a model to organize their spoken intervention before recording it. The excerpts below illustrate the finding.

Excerpt # 1. R.M. Self-introduction [Unedited]

Hello, my name is R. M. I live in the city of Bogotá Colombia. I am a studying at the school,* am studying grade 11,* I have 16 years' old. My way of living is to always be happy. My hobby is exercising daily with much effort. I like *to play on my phone, listening to music, watch TV (football, *dolls). I like to eat and exercise

Excerpt #1 can be understood for it followed a logical sequence. 14 students affirmed that they improved their understanding and speaking routes because they could understand, express, present, write, and pronounce by using order and integrated new vocabulary. Besides, all participants found the pedagogical innovation interesting and meaningful. They claimed that they liked being organized and that the activities were interesting and allowed them to understand, learn, and express their opinions. On the other hand, six pupils judged they managed to achieve the goals fully.

Participants claimed that they developed the facets of understanding: According to 14 of the 26 learners, they were able to explain, interpret, apply, show empathy, and display self-knowledge in the 11 lessons. In contrast, three participants claimed that they were unable to advance; one of them said that he did not improve for lack of interest in English. Indeed, he did not understand the tasks, despite feedback and assistance to redo the work.

Finding No 2. Backward design promoted speaking

After implementing the UBD template, participants developed understanding, displayed confidence, and adequate use of grammar structures. They showed that they could infer from a text, apply the new knowledge to their context, have perspective, give a point of view, (Wiggins &

Mctighe, 2005), interpret their lifestyles, compare and report information about their friends and relatives' lifestyles and habits. Excerpt # 2 transcribes the audio report of an interview.

Excerpt # 2. Unedited Student's report (audio)

1. I interviewed a teacher her name is L. P.

2. She is a person vulture culture because she told me she liked to travel a lot in his* spare time.

3. She told me she liked art and agriculture.

4. She explained to me that his final [research) project with university degree was sophomore's

[at the] school where he works because he likes to interact with young people.

5. The lifestyle is interesting because it travels and follows the art.

6. Although you may not like exercising, [She is] is a healthy person.

7. My lifestyle is similar because I like traveling and I attracts art, music, how different is that I like to play sports and not her.

Excerpt 2 and others indicate that participants were able to convey messages. Some pronunciation mistakes were taken as an opportunity to improve lesson by lesson with the teacher's guide and classmates' support as (Luoma, 2004) and (Marzano, 2009) suggest. On the other hand, UBD proved to be useful and appreciated by learners. We observed that 14 learners found in Backward Design a useful strategy that organized the activities systematically. Also, we discovered that students perceived that classes were dynamic, attractive, and ludic. Interview formats and the models of reported speech permitted chaining sentences. For example, in a task to interview someone outside class, L.C. displayed progress in expression.

Excerpt # 3. [unedited]

L.C.: *Uhm… I interview to my brother and he is couch potato because he told me that like sleep much in the day. She don't like read with much books and he is a person sociable because he told his friends and he like the movies and series, he believes that it is very informative. In my personal opinion the life couch potato because is ah no, because is a good, because this person is very calm and always is relaxed and it is good for have a better life but the problem is when this person begin to eat a lot of food and also is bad because he does not exercise.*

Although language and punctuation errors abound, the learner managed to communicate a message. This can be attributed to the fact that texts, collaborative work, scaffolded tasks, and strategies facilitated understanding and achievement. (c.f., Nunan, 1989; Thornbury, 2005; Harmer, 2001; Brown & Yule, 2001 and Luoma, 2004). Most participants affirmed that, in addition to

listening, reading, and writing, they were able to interact with peers. The data indicated that 11 of the 26 learners always interacted with classmates because they saw students interested and attentive to speaking without being ridiculed. They affirmed that there was an atmosphere of empathy, confidence that let them achieve objectives. In contrast, two students claimed that they hardly ever interacted; they resorted to Spanish, did not manage vocabulary, or avoided speaking.

In general, Backward Design favored speaking leaving aside embarrassment. For instance, learners responded positively to the question: Do you think the intervention favored English speaking interaction? 14 said always; 10 sometimes; 2 hardly ever. Besides, they sensed the tasks could be useful for their lives and future. Also, ten participants declared that spoken interaction helped their listening, and pronunciation while 12 admitted not having had opportunities to speak English before. Their assessment led our teaching, always thinking of our learners' differences and of helping them reach the desired results (Fusaro, 2008) (Bloom, 1956) (Richards, 2013).

Finding No 3, UBD facilitated monitoring and assessment

We guided, monitored, and assessed self-expression and did not restrict ourselves to drill and practice (Ellis, 2001). Excerpt 3 illustrates that point; it belongs to R.M. a shy and demotivated student who searched for ways of communicating.

Excerpt # 4. Interview R.M. and S.D in the video [unedited]

R.M. -Hello! My name is R.M.

S.D -Hi! My name is SD, I am sixteen years old, and you?

R.M. -I am sixteen years old too. I live in Bogota, where do you live?

S.D -I live in Bogota too, speak about yourself.

R.M. -Ok I live with my mom and my three brothers, and you?

S.D -I live with my parents, my two sisters, and a Chihuahua dog.

   What do you like?

R.M. -I like listening to music, I like exercise too, and I like play in the cellphone.

S.D -And what do you like?

R.M. -I like listening to music too, writing songs, sing and read.

S.D -Bye!

R.M. -Goodbye!"

R.M was coherent although there were difficulties in grammar and pronunciation. Other learners showed progress and confidence to overcome those difficulties with the instructors' and classmates' collaboration. The entry of our field notes corroborate that:

> *Participants like S.D., N.R., and L.C. spoke with me in English and some others like D.J., T.M., Y.M., searched for words in the translator and tried to interact with me. I did not expect to see T.M. speaking English for she had said she did not like English and spoke in the last classes.* (Teacher-researchers field notes. May 4th).

Students saw assessment as a formative process in which their teachers monitored unobtrusively (Marzano, 2009). As for speaking assessment, 14 participants, were able to understand the other's messages, communicate, and express themselves. Their self-assessment concurred with that statement: nine felt they made themselves understood, six said they managed to understand, but not to speak, five affirmed they understood the teacher, but not classmates, and three claimed their vocabulary increased, but could not speak and two did not take the survey.

Table 3. Summary of findings in connection with research questions and data

Research question	Data interpretation	Finding
How may a teaching for understanding framework inform decisions that promote speaking?	*UBD Syllabus design contributed to*: -Making lesson planning systematic -Making goals clear -Understanding -Promoting a positive attitude -Generating the learners' positive evaluation.	*Syllabus design and planning proved useful* and participants appreciated it.
How would a Backward Design contribute to the organization of instruction?	*The structuring of tasks, activities, and assignments*: -Created a climate of cooperation -Transferred knowledge -Allowed gathering of evidence of language development -Raised the participants' awareness of the learning process.	Backward Design promoted speaking
How would a Backward Design contribute to the assessment of speaking?	*Assessment*: -Focused on meaning -Allowed individual follow-up -Offered support -Gave participants a sense of success -Was deemed unobtrusive.	*Understanding by Design (UBD facilitated monitoring and assessment.*

The pedagogical intervention helped students develop some of the habits needed to become self-directed learners. Findings suggest that first, syllabus design and planning proved useful, and participants appreciated it. Second, Backward Design promoted speaking, and third, UBD facilitated monitoring and assessment.

Discussion

The elements for research considered the suggestion of the teacher who was in charge of the group, the advisor's guidance, the official document issued by Ministry of Education of Colombia; Estándares Básicos en Lengua Extranjera: Inglés (M.E.N, 2006), and the Rubrics for Assessing Student Writing, Listening, and Speaking, Middle School (Mc Graw-Hill, n. d). These elements helped us to give a description of the learners' English level of proficiency and establish an overview of the real context and the curriculum requirements.

Speaking results from a well-guided process. However, when teaching students are assigned activities without a previous process. Even the lessons do not include oral production. Along with the research, students received an orientation to speak and interact naturally taking into consideration logical, clear, and organized planning (Luoma, 2004).

We were able to change our practices. We could identify apprentices' differences and needs in speaking. For example, we designed the speaking tasks and activities considering the learner's likes, personal needs, and reflections during the beginning and end of the lessons. Also, the students self-evaluated their progress and searched for ways to improve with our guidance, support, and feedback, we monitored and reflected on our students' progress in an unobtrusive process (Marzano, 2009) allowing them to feel more comfortable to express orally.

TFU enhanced our regular practices and helped meet learners' needs and interests. Besides, most boys and girls in the study achieved speaking goals thanks to the interest, effort, and commitment they invested. We recommend trying and testing UBD because it is systematic, organized, dynamic, and appealing. We concur with Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron & Osher (2020) this cannot be an isolated effort since well-scaffolded instruction and "adequate support and preparation for educators alongside the development of thoughtful curriculum and assessments, as well as sound resource policy based on students' needs, is required." (p. 133). The school district, parents, and the educational community, in general, should contribute to revamping curricula.

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