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BACKWARD DESIGN: WHEN A GOOD ENDING MAKES A GOOD BEGINNING

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Teaching is a means to an end. Having a clear goal helps to focus our planning and guide purposeful action toward the intended results.
Wiggins and McTighe (2005)

Abstract: The article examines the principles of backward design as a means of designing the whole instruction process. It looks at the possibilities this method offers in terms of material design, lesson design and curriculum design. The assumption is that backword design helps teachers to plan their instruction activity so that it is both meaningful and motivational. Students seem to get a better awareness of the undergoing instruction process, being able to understand its purposes.

Keywords: backword design, material design, planning, teacher's role.

Research in language education aims to offer viable solutions that will enhance both the teaching and learning processes. One important issue is to determine the teacher's role in the involved processes. Special attention has been paid to the teacher's role as a facilitator scaffolding the process of a foreign language acquisition, a role undeniably extremely important. In the student-centred classroom the teacher guides and encourages, motivates and inspires so that eventually students take control over their own learning.

While adopting a historical perspective on the roles teachers have had, Kumaravadivelu distinguishes three main categories: teachers as (a) passive technicians, (b) reflective practitioners, and (c) transformative intellectuals [5, p. 8]. The passive technician performs the role of the conduit, the reflective practitioner – the role of a facilitator, and finally the transformative intellectual – the role of a change agent.

The role adopted by the vast majority of scholars is definitely that of facilitator. Harmer [4] argues, however, that teachers might adopt various roles in their practice depending on the students' needs. Thus, teachers might adopt the role of a controller, organiser, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, and observer. Harmer suggests switching the roles when it is appropriate to do it, and consciously carry out and perform the adopted role.

While determining the teacher's role it quite often happens that one of the fundamental roles is underestimated. In order to facilitate the foreign language learning process, the teacher should be able to design appropriately his/her instructive process, and as a consequence improve the quality of teaching. It is particularly the role of a designer that needs to be revalued as 'no matter how competent a motivator a teacher is, if his/her teaching lacks instructional clarity and the learners simply cannot follow the intended programme, motivation to learn the particular subject matter is unlikely to blossom' [3, p. 26].

Richards argues that the process of teaching is an act of performance where the teacher should have developed a series of teaching skills that will help him/her 'carry herself through the lesson' [7, p. 9]. For example, the novice teacher should adopt the routines while planning his/her lesson and think of how to: open the lesson, introduce and explain tasks, set up learning arrangements, check students' understanding, guide student practice, monitor students' language use, make transitions from one task to another, and end the lesson. Yet, this routine approach is rather mechanical and is not goal driven. The scholar states that expertise comes with the course of time, whereas the teacher becomes more flexible and being able of performing 'improvisational teaching' [7, p. 10].

Experienced teachers might perform better than novice teachers. Yet, even the act of improvisation should be goal-driven and not teaching skills-driven. Richards points to the fact that teaching actually is 'a complex cognitively driven process affected by the classroom context, the teacher's general and specific instructional

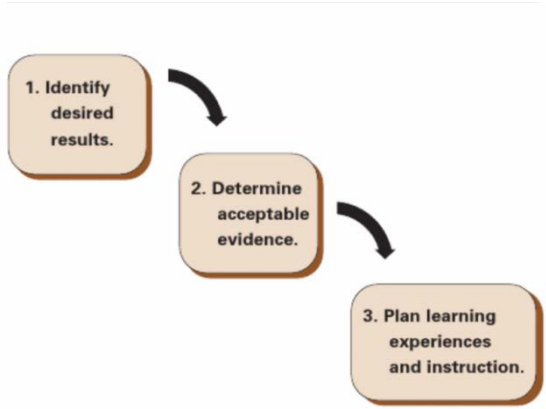
goals, the teacher's beliefs and values, the learners' motivations and reactions to the lesson, and the teacher's management of critical moments during a lesson' [7, p. 10].

In Brown's opinion [2, p. 149-150] one of the steps in planning a lesson is to determine the topic and the purpose of the lesson, and then write down the overall goal. This should be done only after having considered the curriculum and the 'tone' of the textbooks. The suggested method seems to be more content driven and less established goals oriented.

So far, designing a lesson plan has been considered from the traditional perspective where first and foremost how to teach content is taken into consideration, whereas the end results are considered at the end. This method encourages the teacher to cover the curriculum by designing a series of activities which will reflect the content of the lesson. The correlation of activities to the goals is considered last. This might be the cause for what Nunan calls 'fragmentation' in the modern course books, and which means that the sequence of activities is difficult to understand. The scholar warns against using fragmented activities which might puzzle students who would view such a lesson as 'confusing, unprincipled and piecemeal' [6, p.215].

Wiggins and McTighe [8] have advocated for a shift in the traditional paradigm in order to ensure instructional clarity and help learners follow the intended programme. The scholars emphasize the need of logically inferring the lessons, units, and courses from the results sought, and not deriving them from the methods, books, and activities with which teachers are most comfortable. That is why starting with the end actually helps proceed more logically towards the desired destination, and as a result promote enduring learning. Hence the notion of backward design was introduced, which is believed to offer 'a robust approach to planning' [8, p. 8). Teachers are no longer expected to merely cover the curriculum, they are actually expected to create it.

Figure 1. Stages of Backward Design



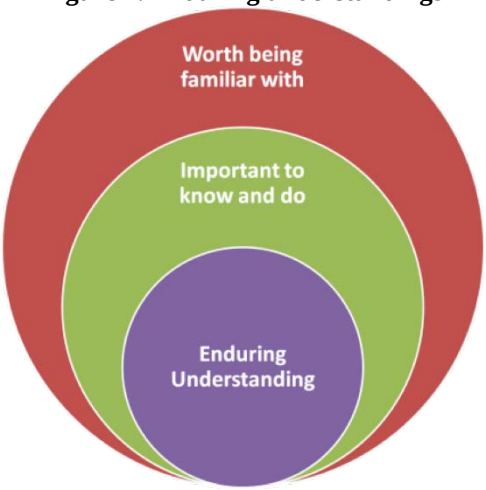
There are three stages of Backward Design (Figure 1). The first stage consists in identifying the desired results. The teacher should basically ask three questions:

1. What should students know, understand, and be able to do?
2. What is worthy of understanding?
3. What enduring understandings are desired?

Wiggins and McTighe put special emphasis on understanding. They warn against using the terms understanding and knowledge interchangeably as knowledge relates to a body of coherent facts, whereas understanding to the meaning of facts. The student is expected not only to know something to be true, but also to understand why it is true, what makes it knowledge. In addition the student should be able to judge when to and when not to use what he/she knows. In Wiggins and McTighe's opinion understanding should be viewed as meaningful inferences.

It becomes thus a priority for the teacher-designer to identify the enduring understandings in order to realize his/her desired goals. Wiggins and McTighe suggest establishing circular priorities (Figure 2 [1]), which might help gaining clarity on the teacher's goals.

Figure 2. Enduring understandings



The second stage involves the process of determining acceptable evidence, where the teacher should ask the following two questions:

1. How will I know if students have achieved the desired results?
2. What will I accept as evidence of student understanding and proficiency?

This stage considers the various forms of assessment that the teacher plans to use in order to understand the students' progress, i.e. 'to ensure that students are being assess over the goals the instructor wants students to attain' [1].

Evidence of desired results means evidence gathered through a variety of formal and informal assessments during a unit of study or a course. It does not exclusively include the final tests given usually at the end of the teaching process. It also refers to collected evidence sought and which may include

- traditional quizzes and tests,
- performance tasks and projects,
- observations and dialogues,
- students' self-assessments gathered over time,
- term papers,
- short-answer quizzes,
- free-response questions,
- homework assignments,
- lab projects,
- practice problems,

- group projects.

Wiggins and McTighe claim that ‘this approach encourages teachers and curriculum planners to first “think like an assessor” before designing specific units and lessons, and thus to consider up front how they will determine if students have attained the desired understandings’ [8, p. 18].

The third stage deals with planning learning experiences and instruction. This is the time where the teacher closely considers the most appropriate instructional activities. The key questions to be asked at this stage are:

1. What enabling knowledge (facts, concepts, principles) and skills (processes, procedures, strategies) will students need in order to perform effectively and achieve desired results?
2. What activities will equip students with the needed knowledge and skills?
3. What will need to be taught and coached, and how should it best be taught, in light of performance goals?
4. What materials and resources are best suited to accomplish these goals?

It can be noted that the decision-making process related to the teaching methods, the sequencing (of lessons/activities within a lesson, etc.), and the material used during instruction happens only after the desired ends and assessment forms have been thoroughly considered.

It is important to emphasize that Wiggins and McTighe’s approach to instructional planning is not new. The novelty consists in offering a more detailed description of the steps to be taken in order to plan successfully the teaching process. In addition a template has been elaborated to facilitate the entire process (Appendix 1). Finally, special emphasis has been put on the importance of enduring understanding. Teachers should plan their instruction in suc a way so that at the end the students:

- Can explain—via generalizations or principles, providing justified and systematic accounts of phenomena, facts, and data; make insightful connections and provide illuminating examples or illustrations.
- Can interpret—tell meaningful stories; offer apt translations; provide a revealing historical or personal dimension to ideas and events; make the object of understanding personal or accessible through images, anecdotes, analogies, and models.

- Can apply—effectively use and adapt what we know in diverse and real contexts—we can "do" the subject.
- Have perspective—see and hear points of view through critical eyes and ears; see the big picture.
- Can empathize—find value in what others might find odd, alien, or implausible; perceive sensitively on the basis of prior direct experience.
- Have self-knowledge—show metacognitive awareness; perceive the personal style, prejudices, projections, and habits of mind that both shape and impede our own understanding; are aware of what we do not understand; reflect on the meaning of learning and experience [8, p. 84].

I applied backward design to planning my courses this year. 53 students attended more or less regularly my course in Discourse Analysis. I have designed the course taking into consideration the principles of backward design (Appendix 2). My strong belief is that theory does not contribute to the students' enduring understanding. The purpose was to help student apply appropriately the knowledge to their contexts.

At the beginning I wanted to determine what their understanding of discourse is. Students were asked to come up with a series of expectations they have regarding this new course. It should be noted that all students thought of discourse as a public speech. Consequently their expectations ranged from improving their abilities to create a speech to delivering correctly the speech. Similarly, students hoped to improve their overall language proficiency level as well as their analytical skills.

During the course of the instruction the students' understanding was assessed by asking them to perform certain analyses. Yet, the constant interaction during lectures and practical classes offered a better insight of how their understanding of the subject is proceeding. At the end I wanted to see how the intended purposes have been realized. The students were asked to state what the purpose of the course was. It should be noted that 88% of the students gave accurate explanations and meaningful interpretations, 6% of the students misunderstood the task and did a totally different assignment where they proved they can effectively apply the knowledge gained at the course. However, 11% of the students offered inaccurate answers, which basically consisted of copying some definitions related to discourse and discourse analysis. The data still needs to undergo a

further analysis, which will allow to get a better insight of the matter.

The reviewed literature as well as the preliminary results of the investigation indicate that backword design helps teachers in the process of planning the whole instruction process. Indeed, proceeding from where one wants to get, it is easier to plan the steps to be taken in order to realize one's goals. Thus, teachers should have a clear vision of their final ends from the very beginning in order to make the instruction process purposeful and motivational for the students and for themselves.

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Appendix 1

Stage 1 – Desired Results	
ESTABLISHED GOALS The enduring understandings and learning	*Transfer* *Students will be able to independently use their learning to…* Refers to how students will transfer the knowledge gained from the lesson, unit, or course and apply it outside of the context of the course.

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="5">goals of the lesson, unit, or course.</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Meaning</td></tr>
<tr><td>UNDERSTANDINGS
Students will understand that…

Refers to the big ideas and specific understandings students will have when the complete the lesson, unit, or course.</td><td>ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Refers to the provocative questions that foster inquiry, understanding, and transfer of learning. These questions typically frame the lesson, unit, or course and are often revisited. If students attain the established goals, they should be able to answer the essential question(s).</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Acquisition</td></tr>
<tr><td>Students will know…

Refers to the key knowledge students will acquire from the lesson, unit, or course.</td><td>Students will be skilled at…

Refers to the key skills students will acquire from the lesson, unit, or course.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Stage 2 – Evidence and Assessment</td></tr>
<tr><td>Evaluative Criteria</td><td colspan="2">Assessment Evidence</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Refers to the various types of criteria that students will be evaluated on.</td><td colspan="2">PERFORMANCE TASK(S):

Refers to the authentic performance task(s) that students will complete to demonstrate the desired understandings or demonstrate they have attained the goals. The performance task(s) are typically larger assessments that coalesce various concepts and understandings like large projects or papers.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">OTHER EVIDENCE:

Refers to other types of evidence that will show if students have demonstrated achievement of the desired results. This includes quizzes, tests, homework, etc. This is also a good point to consider incorporating self-assessments and student reflections.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Stage 3 – Learning Plan</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Summary of Key Learning Events and Instruction

This stage encompasses the individual learning activities and instructional strategies that will be employed. This includes lectures, discussions, problem-solving sessions, etc.</td></tr>
</table>

(Bowen, 2017)

Appendix 2

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Stage 1 – Desired Results</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="6">ESTABLISHED GOALS

Be aware of:
• different types of discourses as well as of their characteristic features;
• the complexity of human interaction.
Be able to:
• decode appropriately different types of discourses;
• create their own discourses appropriate for different contexts in the English language.</td><td colspan="2">Transfer</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Students will be able to independently use their learning to…

• construct cohesive and coherent discourses appropriate for different contexts in English;
• successfully realize their communicative intentions while communicating in English;
• understand the implied messages in communicative acts in English;
• decode the meaning of various types of discourses in English by applying the functional analysis.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Meaning</td></tr>
<tr><td>UNDERSTANDINGS
Students will understand that…

• discourse implies any stretch of connected language;
• discourse is contest bound;
• there are several functions of discourse;
• cohesion is important, yet the role of coherence is much more significant;
• indirectness is the preferred strategy in everyday interactions;
• the theory of speech acts helps decoding the intended message;
• communication failures can be avoided in communication.</td><td>ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

• What is this? [This question aims to make students determine if the presented example is a discourse or not.]
• How can you prove that this stretch of language is a discourse?
• Why cannot you say that this stretch of language is a discourse?
• What function prevails in the given example?
• What acts does the addresser perform in the given interaction?
• What made this interaction successful?
• Why did communication failure occur in this interaction?
• What would you do in order to avoid communication failure?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Acquisition</td></tr>
<tr><td>Students will know…</td><td>Students will be skilled at…</td></tr>
</table>

	• what discourse is; • the constituents of Roman Jacobson's communicative situation; • in what way cohesion and coherence are realized in a discourse; • what a communication act consists of.	• determining what is discourse and what type of discourse it is; • analyzing the functions of a given discourse; • identifying and creating cohesive and coherent discourse; • interpreting appropriately the intended message in a verbal interaction
Stage 2 – Evidence and Assessment		
Evaluative Criteria	Assessment Evidence	
	PERFORMANCE TASK(S): • The students will be asked to perform a series of analyses of different types of authentic discourses where they will have to demonstrate the ability to identify the main features of discourse throughout the course. • The students will be asked to determine the functions of various discourses. • The students will be asked to create their own discourses. • At the end the students will asked to write a final test paper to demonstrate achievement of the desired results.	
	OTHER EVIDENCE: Other type of evidence to used: • quizzes; • tests; • observations; • dialogues; • peer-assessment; • self-assessment.	
Stage 3 – Learning Plan		
Summary of Key Learning Events and Instruction Lectures: 1. Defining discourse 2. Functional approach to discourse analysis 3. Structural approach to discourse analysis. Cohesion grammar conventions 4. Structural approach to discourse analysis. Coherence lexical conventions 5. Micro-level coherence of discourse 6. Macro-level coherence of discourse 7. Conversation as a particular type of discourse 8. Conversation analysis Laboratory classes:		

1. Language in use
2. Analysing the functions of discourse (on the example of slogans and hashtags)
3. Proper English: Language, Culture and Curriculum
4. Principal concerns and preoccupation in language teaching
5. Analysis of the main cohesive devices in discourse
6. Determining how coherence is realized in discourse
7. Determining the factors affective human interaction
8. Analysis of conversations