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# Backward Design Method in Foreign Language Curriculum Development

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**Abstract**

In this paper the authors focuses their main attention on the need for improvement of curriculum planning within the course "Foreign Language". The article presents the topicality, purposes and stages of a foreign technology called "backward design process" as the innovative method of foreign language curriculum development. It highlights the main characteristics of the stages, reveals both advantages and difficulties that may occur during the application of backward design technology within Russian higher education system. The authors give the brief characteristics of current state of language training in National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University and describe achievements and problems based on the experience gained.

*Keywords:* Curriculum; foreign language; backward design; learnung outcomes assessment.

## 1. Introduction

One of the crucial stages in any education process is planning of curriculum, which represents the course (discipline, elective) in the contracted form. Today, when designing a curriculum, higher education institutions adhere to state educational standards, which are approved and recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation and which serve as a basis for curriculum development. It should also be noted

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that current curricula are supposed to consider a wide range of factors, from the geographic region to the possibility of innovative technologies implementation.

As a rule, curriculum design implies making a plan of activities, formulating general provisions, determining the goals, etc. Traditionally, the first and most important stage in the development of Foreign Language curriculum is collecting resource materials in compliance with the set goals, identified educational activities and approved standards. It is worth noting that the current curricula rather meet the requirement of the Ministry, university and potential employers than satisfy the needs of students. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the process of curriculum planning and make it scientifically based. This is a critical issue of today when the requirements to the university graduates are becoming more and more stringent. As a result, the curricula need regular revision and the learning process should be continually improved. It seems to be quite important to find new approaches to curriculum planning, which will allow considering the needs of particular students.

Backward design is one of the innovative approaches to curriculum development and lesson planning. The method was introduced by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and is widely used in western countries. The authors suppose that backward design may also be efficiently implemented in Foreign Language curriculum planning at Russian higher education institutions.

## 2. Method description

Backward design implies three stages:
1. Identifying desired outcomes;
2. Determining acceptable assessment evidence;
3. Learning plan experience.

The first step is to formulate the program outcomes and identify the skills that the student is to acquire by the course completion. However, the content of the educational program should adhere to the requirements of the Ministry of Education. Therefore, the desired outcomes and the Ministry requirements to the Foreign Language curriculum need to be overlapping. The principal difficulty that educators and curriculum designers typically encounter is the large amount of information to be learnt within the limited number of academic hours. In this regard, it is vitally important to set the priorities, which allows not only obtaining desired outcomes but also taking into account the standards approved by the Ministry and the university.

Foreign Language as an academic subject has great potential in terms of education, development, and communication goals. One of the basic requirements of the content of the Foreign Language education program is use of authentic materials. These resources are supposed to represent samples of natural speech and acquaint the students with typical rules of native speakers' behavior and particularities of their culture.

Let us implement the backward design method to authenticity of educational resources. As the authors of the method say, to take into account this or that requirement in the process of curriculum development, it is necessary to give precise answers to the following two questions: what knowledge will the student have obtained by the end of the course? What will the student be able to do based on the knowledge obtained? The answers to these questions are program outcomes. In the perspective of Russian education and in terms of resource authenticity, the answer to the first question is development of socio-cultural competence. As for the second question, this knowledge on native speakers' culture will make it possible for the student to be aware of traditions, to estimate the situation and choose the appropriate behaviour strategy, which, in its turn, ensures successful cross-cultural interaction.

The suggested answers are possible options, the number of which is unlimited. The curriculum designer or educator can identify as many learning outcomes as he/she supposes to be necessary, with due regard to the level of students, as well as to their interests and needs. This is an undoubtable advantage of the method as it allows getting the balance right between adhering to the state standards and satisfying students' needs.

The second stage is to determine acceptable assessment evidence, in other words, to develop the control procedure. How can we know that the student has achieved the desired outcomes? What will be the evidence of successful development of this or that competence? These questions are key issues in the efficiency assessment of the teacher's activity. In the opinion of Wiggins and McTighe (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), when planning a curriculum, it is more important to think about learning outcomes assessment than to speculate on the number of units and topics to study. In accordance with the technique suggested, the control procedure, assessment forms and

criteria should have been worked out before the syllabus was developed, i.e. design of assessment tools precedes determination of the course content. This approach precisely identifies the final outcomes and specifies the course content in detail.

Monitoring and assessment of students' knowledge is one of the most important constituents of the learning process. The teaching and management efficiency of training process depend greatly on its appropriate organization, the right choice of its forms (Konysheva, 2004). Currently, monitoring functions and objectives are determined, its types and forms are developed in the domestic education. However, in modern universities the basic forms of students' knowledge monitoring consists mostly of oral interview, written or practical tests, the results of which are reflected in rating system. From the viewpoint of authors of "backward design process", the monitoring and evaluation knowledge system is to become more extensive and should not consist only of score calculation. When evaluating students' knowledge and searching for optimal criteria, one should take into account the four main principles:

1. Inclusiveness. Knowledge and skills acquired by the students throughout the whole study period should be evaluated;
2. Variety. Monitoring system has to contain different forms of training efficiency evaluation including traditional and innovative ones;
3. Complexity. At awarding final estimate one needs to take into account not only the number of points according to test results, but also student's portfolio, his/her performance within the course, and subsequent activity;
4. Reflection. A student's evaluation of the work presented in the form of "self-evaluation".

To choose the most appropriate monitoring and evaluation forms it is necessary to put clear questions based, first of all, on previously identified final results. Thus, the requirement of material authenticity includes the basic final result of fostering socio-cultural competence. The following question should be answered before curriculum design, namely: What tasks enable students to demonstrate their awareness of social culture of the studied language? The answer to that question would allow us to define the forms of monitoring.

When there is socio-cultural competence as an additional cross-cultural constituent of Foreign Language course, it is expedient to focus on creative tasks rather than tests in choosing these or those monitoring forms, as they reveal the improvements in knowledge retention (Kolkova et al., 2005). As M. Angelova and Y. Zhao put it, "In order to achieve culture awareness, L2 teachers should try to incorporate culture teaching in the L2 classroom. Language teachers need to point out the culturally appropriate way to use language in specific situations and explore culturally based linguistic differences to promote understanding instead of misconceptions or prejudices" (Angelova & Zhao, 2014). But it should be noted that if a teacher defines his/her task not to increase understanding of the culture in study language, but to improve knowledge of particular customs and traditions as a key finite outcome based on the requirement of material authenticity, then tests can be used as one of the appropriate techniques of pedagogical study.

As for creative tasks, they are currently widely used in educational activity, in particular, foreign language teaching in the domestic university system. One of the merits in application of such tasks is the fact that they develop students' creative independence. The second, but not less important, aspect is playing technique that makes possible for students' to be immersed into learning environment (cultural, language, professional). Therefore, to determine the socio-cultural competence one can choose such tasks as "people watching" (watching people in different situations), analysis of basic articles in the well-known journals, analysis of literature reviews, role-playing of the behavior strategies in native and foreign cultures. The list of similar tasks can be continued, and the major teacher's challenge is to choose those tasks that would meet students' needs and interests to the greatest extent.

The answer to the second question (what assessment criteria will be used to grade student achievement?) will make it possible to figure out the assessment criteria for final learning outcomes. It is worth noting that in order to avoid one-sided assessment of student achievement, it is necessary to consider the four above-mentioned principles when assessing student achievement of final learning outcomes.

Finally, the third stage is directly linked with curriculum development; precisely, it involves determination of basic instructional activities and areas of focus in accordance with final learning outcomes, quality monitoring and learning outcome assessment system. A number of key questions should be considered at this stage: what essential knowledge (facts, idea, and laws) and skills (processes, procedures, and strategies) will students need to achieve

final learning outcomes? What should be taught and what are the best instructional activities with regard to the set goals? What instructional materials and sources should be used to accomplish the goals? One of the main principles of backward design lies in the fact that the choice of instructional method, sequence of lessons, and resource materials should be defined only when final learning outcomes, quality monitoring and learning outcome assessment system have been identified.

## 3. Results and discussion

The brief overview of backward design principles proves the possibility to apply this technology in developing the Foreign Language curriculum. The basic advantages of this technology are as follows: clear bridges between state educational standards, students' needs, learning outcomes, and curriculum content. In addition, it is not the subject modules and discipline resource materials that define the curriculum content. The starting point in curriculum design is determination of students' skills and competences to be achieved. Undoubtedly, application of backward design in curriculum design should definitely help curriculum designers to consider students' needs, which in its turn, stipulates students' motivation and quality of foreign language teaching.

The backward design has been successfully applied in Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU), Institute of Natural Resources (INR) since 2009. It was applied in design of the curriculum "Foreign Language for Specific Purpose" for the students of the $3^{rd}$, $4^{th}$, and $5^{th}$ year of education. It is currently applied in developing "Foreign Language" curriculum for the students of the $1^{st}$ and $2^{nd}$ years of education. The findings of the annual questionnaire survey reveal that students are more motivated to learn foreign languages as they work to satisfy their own personal achievement goals. Precisely, each year almost 90% of respondents (students) agree that consideration of their needs in foreign language curriculum development is the underlying motivation for successful studying. The growing motivation to learn foreign languages is clearly observed in increasing number of students who participate in the International Scientific Symposium in honor of Academician M.A. Usov, in the panel "Geology and Petroleum Engineering" with the reports in English and German languages (2009 – 47 participants, 2010 – 68 participants, in 2011-2015 the number of students ranges from 94 to 100). Today, students thrive on participation in academic mobility programs. In 2009, only three students of INR TPU studied in foreign universities. Since 2010 the number of students who participated in academic mobility programs has been in the range of 55- 80.

Despite the obvious advantages of the described technology, however, a number of limitations have been revealed. The first difficulty which can be easily encountered by educators and curriculum designers is linked with the assessment criteria. In the first year of technology implementation, it became obvious that faculty members working within the same education program, following the same curriculum goals elaborated absolutely different assessment criteria for final learning outcomes. In such a case, doubts arise about the validity of quality control and assessment systems. The results of the first year of education based on the curriculum backward design showed that it was impossible to define what students had achieved. The second difficulty turns to the definition of final learning outcomes. When considering students' needs and peculiarities, there is a serious risk of drop in students learning achievement even if the state educational standards are taken into account. To overcome the above-mentioned difficulties, the Department of Foreign Languages of INR, TPU organized the Education Board, which laid the basis for developing universal and flexible quality control and assessment systems. The assessment system proposed by the Education Board of the Department of Foreign Languages takes into account both standard education goals and individual ones, as well as short-term and long-term gains of the education program.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the successful experience in implementing backward design in development of Foreign Language curricula, it is possible to conclude that despite the revealed limitations and difficulties, the backward design can be effectively implemented in the system of Russian Higher Education, particularly in developing Foreign Language curricula. The backward design helps educators reduce the bugs that impede students' academic progress in foreign language acquisition due to providing students with the possibility to affect curriculum content.

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