

The Role of Backward Design in Improving Writing skills of Pakistani Undergraduate Students



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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate the role of the backward design approach to improve undergraduate students' writing skills. A limited number of studies have been conducted on this issue internationally; however, this was the first study undertaken in the Pakistani context. The study employed a quantitative approach and quasi-experimental design. The data was collected through a quantitative pre and post questionnaire dispensed to 175 undergraduate students enrolled in the first year of the Bachelor of Studies program in a university in Pakistan. The findings offered a broad picture of the positive role of the intervention on undergraduate students writing skills. The difference proved that the backward design approach has a substantial effect on improving students' writing skills in this study.

Key Words: English as a Second Language (ESL), Backward Design (BD), Writing Skills, Undergraduate Students, Pakistan

Introduction

Communication skills (both oral and written) hold great importance in modern times and are the most prominent characteristics that demarcate an educated person. Good writing skills are the source of success in academic and all fields of life. To start communication in any language, one of the primary skills in writing. Writing needs effort and practice as it is a process of trial and error. Writing offers people a way to express their emotions, opinions, dreams, and feelings. Brown (2001) emphasizes that writing is a process that provokes thinking, and as a final product, it enables an individual to analyze and explain what they know.

Language curriculum development and design is a significant aspect of curriculum studies. It involves the importance of language skills and developing and administering language education programs that add value to students' learning with a focus on learners' language learning needs. Curriculum development incorporates establishing the goals, picking the content, crafting it according to suitable and achievable learning objectives, implementing necessary teaching and learning materials and activities, and specifying the tools for assessment and evaluation (Richards, 2013).

The notion of syllabus design emerged in the early 1960s (even before curriculum development

started) as a description of a course that aimed at clarifying the materials and contents to be used for instruction and highlighted what is to be taught and how it is going to be tested or assessed. Richards (2013) refers to the material becomes a part of the syllabus as content. Nunan (1988) pointed out that due to a contradiction regarding the nature syllabus, it becomes difficult to distinguish syllabus designing and development from curriculum designing and development. However, designing and developing a curriculum is a more complex task compared to designing and developing a syllabus. This is because the curriculum design and development process is a more complex process because it keeps into focus students' individual learning needs, aims and objectives of the specific study program, as well as selecting and setting syllabus in an appropriate manner, deciding on teaching methodology to be used, and selecting the materials to be used for executing assessment (Nunan, 1988).

Education is commonly associated with the notion of forwarding design, first and foremost, in conjunction with syllabus designing and planning, secondly teaching methodology to be used, and lastly, finishing the task with the analyzing and evaluating the learning outcomes. The steps involved in forwarding design are to be followed in order for scheduling both

the teaching and assessment processes. The forward design method was adopted and used by the Council of Europe in the 1970s for the purpose of deciding on the teaching methodology and teaching styles after having developed the teaching content. It started with the theory of language, followed by a plan, after which a textbook was selected for teaching language based on that textbook. The strategy used was a coverage-oriented strategy, which was considered crucial and required the teaching of each and every page of the textbook, aiming at seeking out such a teaching process that may help in determining the appropriateness of pedagogy. However, the syllabus did not endorse or favour the implication of any distinctive teaching methodology. [Richards \(2013\)](#) elaborated that in forward design, the decision rests with the teacher regarding the course content, pedagogy, its implementation and evaluation of the learning outcomes.

Undoubtedly, settling the problems linked with the selection of syllabus content along with sequencing are regarded as essential points for starting forward design, which is also customary in language curriculum development. This approach does not require the need for understanding on the part of the students. Mainly grounded on a suitable curriculum design, it requires the teachers to assist language students only with incomprehension. [Childre et al. \(2009\)](#) argue that in the case of the incorrect design of a curriculum, teaching would not be able to effectively establish the learners' understanding. [Scruges et al. \(2007\)](#) maintain that since in instruction, priority is given mainly to course and textbooks, delivering lectures, and making and dispensing worksheets for establishing appropriate learning, many students fail to grasp the basic comprehension of the critical concepts. Criticism on forwarding design and the flaws in the design led to the introduction of backward design in curriculum development in 1998 by [McTighe and Wiggins](#) under the view of "Understanding by Design". [Wiggins and McTighe \(2006\)](#) stressed that summative assessment should be kept into focus while planning the curriculum design and learning process.

It is claimed by [Richards \(2013\)](#) that the backward design approach started emerging rapidly in the field of general education after 2005, along with the idea of summative assessment. Under the backward approach, along with learning objectives in mind, teachers start the teaching process with students' learning as well as skill development needs

in focus and choose such instruction techniques which help them in fulfilling these requirements. Due to this reason, the backward design stresses and revolves around the huge importance of learners' understanding, which leads to an increase in learners' interest in learning. The backward design model also helps a learner in comprehending better the objectives of the learning process, which encourages them to achieve the learning goals in a speedy manner.

The backward design approach is an essential tool for retrained teachers as it helps them in designing a curriculum for helping their students learn differently because if the learning objectives are clear to the teachers, they can plan their students' learning in a better way. Backward design approach centers on learning, how learners will be assessed, and the learning outcomes. It starts with clarification of the results of the knowledge, and after that, specific teaching content, teaching methods and activities are created to fulfilling the learning objectives ([Wiggins & McTighe, 2006](#)).

As a method of planning in education, backward design is a model of planning initiated by [Wiggins and McTighe \(1998\)](#). Backwards design has three major stages: "(a) Identify the desired results, (b) determine the selected evidence, and (c) plan instruction and experiences to meet the results" ([Florian & Zimmerman, 2015](#)). According to [Hinchliffe \(2016\)](#), backward design is when we understand the genuine concept of knowledge, and we can explain, interpret and clearly state our perspective. [Wiggins and McTighe \(2011\)](#) mention the benefits of using backward design in the educational process as a structured yet flexible framework for managing curriculum planning, instruction, and assessment. The backward design allows a planning process and organization for guiding curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

The critical belief of backward design is based on the following ideas:

1. Backward design helps to enhance the learning process without offering a rigid process.
2. This design helps students and teachers to achieve goals of learning and transfer of knowledge. Students' ability to use knowledge and skill is effectively enhanced through a backward design approach.
3. Students' understanding can reveal autonomously when they easily explain, interpret, apply, shift perspective, empathize,

and self-assess their learning under backward design.

4. To get the desired result, an effective curriculum is planned under backward design through evidence and learning. This process helps to gain the maximum understanding amongst students.
5. With the help of the backward design approach, teachers always aim to transfer knowledge to the learner successfully.

The backward design approach has become a well-established tradition in curriculum design in the past years, predominantly in general education. It has emerged as a noticeable curriculum approach in language teaching as well (Richards, 2013). Unlike forward design, backward design starts with the end task that is assessment and learning objectives and outcomes in mind. It proposes that teachers should start with what the learners are supposed to get out of instruction as an end result and the skills and essential objectives they need to fulfil, and consequently, the teacher has to decipher how she will realize such instructional objectives to the best of her abilities (Richards, 2013).

The backward design approach is a great way for bringing in the fundamental knowledge and resources for engaging students. It permits English teachers to introduce writing and helps them to make thematic units, which can assist language teachers in creating meaningful and engaging units to bring to their students the experience of memorable learning. Wiggins and McTighe (2011) have put forth the best definition of backward design in these words: “The most successful teaching begins with clarity about desired learning outcomes and about the evidence that will show how learning has occurred” (p. 7). Thus, the core focus of interest in the backward design approach centers upon understanding, which prompts and encourages learners much more for learning. The backward design approach helps the learners in understanding the goals of learning in a better way and triggers them to reach them faster. Castillo (2015) stressed the effectiveness of using the backward design in designing the writing module for ESL students. Since the backward design approach is emerging as a new design for curriculum development and lesson planning in accordance with the learners’ learning needs and for enhancing the learning of English as a second language (ESL) students as well, this study aimed to investigate the role of backward design in

improving the writing skills of Pakistani undergraduate ESL students.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach and quasi-experimental design. A pre and post questionnaire was developed in the English language, comprising 29 items to check the difference in study participants’ writing skills before and after the intervention (i.e. use of backward design approach). Guidance was taken from two tools developed by prior researchers for two separate studies (Zoghi & Asadzadian, 2014; Javed, 2016) for developing the questionnaire items. The questionnaire evaluated information on the respondents’ academic background, language and writing skills. The pre-questionnaire gathered information on how students felt about their English writing skills. The post-questionnaire collected data to find out the difference in students responses after they were taught through a backward design approach. For gathering the responses, a four-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Agree; and 4=Strongly Agree) was used for gauging disagreement or agreement with the particular understanding of students related to the backward design approach and how it enhanced their writing skills. In this study, the traditional five-point Likert scale was not used and instead, the 4-point Likert scale was explicitly adopted to circumvent any neutral midpoint as an option. The reason behind using the 4-point Likert scale was to make sure that the respondents express both agreement and disagreement in a proper way. It helped to minimize the probability of respondents’ uncertainty across response categories (Beamish, 2004).

The questionnaire respondents were 175 bachelor students in a private sector university in Pakistan. The gap between pre and post questionnaire was six months. The pre-questionnaire was filled before the intervention, and the post questionnaire was filled after the intervention.

The pre and post questionnaire were analyzed to support the respondents’ writing skills enhancement after learning through backward design. The data collected was distributed in a separate table for each category. “Along with all four Likert scale responses, the dichotomous percentages for the two disagreement points (Combined disagreement) and two agreement points (Combined agreement) were also analyzed for all the items” as suggested by Javed

(2020, p. 43). The Mean score of all the items was analyzed to make the results more accurate. The results and findings of the data mainly focused on the combined percentage to associate the difference between pre and post questionnaire and to see how the intervention had enhanced the students' writing ability.

Findings

This study investigated the difference in writing skills before and after the undergraduate ESL students were taught through a backward design approach. Table 1 presents the data of pre-questionnaire.

Table 1. Results of Pre-Questionnaire

Distribution of responses percentage (%)								
S. No.	Item	SDA	DA	A	SA	CDA	CA	M
1.	I face no problem while writing an assignment in English.	15.4	69.7	14.9	0	85.1	14.9	1.99
2.	I face no problem in taking an assessment in English.	9.7	64.0	26.3	0	73.7	26.3	2.17
3.	I can maintain clarity of ideas and flow while I write in English.	14.3	58.3	27.4	0	72.6	27.4	2.13
4.	I can logically organize my ideas when I write in English.	9.7	63.4	26.9	0	73.1	26.9	2.17
5.	I can write a good academic paragraph in English.	13.7	57.7	28.6	0	71.4	28.6	2.15
6.	I can logically support and develop my main point when I write in English.	9.7	64.6	25.7	0	74.3	25.7	2.16
7.	I can write using an academic style in English.	15.4	58.3	26.3	0	73.7	26.3	2.11
8.	I can use appropriate vocabulary and word forms while writing to communicate effectively with the reader.	9.7	63.4	26.9	0	73.1	26.9	2.17
9.	I can use a variety of sentence structures while I write in English.	13.7	57.7	28.6	0	71.4	28.6	2.15
10.	I can use appropriate spelling, capitalization and punctuation while I write in English.	2.3	61.7	34.3	1.7	64.0	36.0	2.35
11.	I can write an accurate summary of the information that I have read in English.	12.0	64.6	23.4	0	76.6	23.4	2.11
12.	I can write an accurate paraphrase of information that I have read in English.	13.7	57.7	28.6	0	71.4	28.6	2.15
13.	I can effetely brainstorm to gather ideas before writing in English.	13.7	57.7	28.6	0	71.4	28.6	2.15
14.	I can revise my writing in English to improve the development and organization of my written expression.	9.7	63.4	26.9	0	73.1	26.9	2.17
15.	I can edit my writing to improve the wording, grammar, punctuation and spelling.	15.4	63.4	21.1	0	78.8	21.1	2.06
16.	I can write quickly in English.	15.4	63.4	21.7	0	78.8	21.7	2.06
17.	I can use my independent thinking while I write in English.	18.3	66.9	14.9	0	85.2	14.9	1.97

Note: SDA = Strongly Disagree(1) ; DA= Disagree (2) ; A = Agree (3) ; SA = Strongly Agree(4) ; CDA = Combined Disagree ; CA = Combined Agree ; M = Mean

The data shows that the respondents faced a problem related to writing skills in English. Most of the respondents faced problem while writing in English, taking assessments, organizing ideas and using variety in sentence structure. The data also reveals that the Table 2 presents the post-questionnaire data.

respondents face issues while writing summary, spelling, paraphrasing and punctuation. The respondents also faced difficulty while thinking independently about what to write in English.

Table 2. Results of Post-Questionnaire

Distribution of responses percentage (%)								
S. No.	Item	SDA	DA	A	SA	CDA	CA	M
1.	I face no problem while writing an assignment in English.	0	4.6	57.7	37.7	4.6	95.4	3.33
2.	I face no problem in taking an assessment in English.	0	4.0	62.3	33.7	4.0	96.0	3.30
3.	I can maintain clarity of ideas and flow while I write in English.	0	4.6	58.3	37.1	4.6	95.4	3.33
4.	I can logically organize my ideas when I write in English.	0	4.0	62.3	33.7	4.0	96.0	3.30
5.	I can write a good academic paragraph in English.	0	4.6	61.7	33.7	4.6	95.4	3.29
6.	I can logically support and develop my main point when I write in English.	0	4.0	57.1	38.9	4.0	96.0	3.35
7.	I can write using an academic style in English.	0	4.0	63.4	32.6	4.0	96.0	3.29
8.	I can use appropriate vocabulary and word forms while writing to communicate effectively with the reader.	0	4.0	61.7	34.3	4.0	96.0	3.30
9.	I can use a variety of sentence structures while I write in English.	0	4.0	62.3	33.7	4.0	96.0	3.30
10.	I can use appropriate spelling, capitalization and punctuation while I write in English.	0	4.0	62.9	33.1	4.0	96.0	3.29
11.	I can write an accurate summary of the information that I have read in English.	0	5.1	62.9	32.0	5.1	94.9	3.27
12.	I can write an accurate paraphrase of information that I have read in English.	0	5.1	58.9	36.0	5.1	94.9	3.31
13.	I can effetely brainstorm to gather ideas before writing in English.	0	4.6	56.6	38.9	4.6	95.5	3.34
14.	I can revise my writing in English to improve the development and organization of my written expression.	0	5.7	56.6	37.7	5.7	94.3	3.32
15.	I can edit my writing to improve the wording, grammar, punctuation and spelling.	0	5.1	62.3	32.6	5.1	94.9	3.27
16.	I can write quickly in English.	0	4.6	49.1	46.3	4.6	95.4	3.42
17.	I can use my independent thinking while I write in English.	0	4.6	50.3	45.1	4.6	95.4	3.41

Note: SDA = Strongly Disagree(1) ; DA= Disagree (2) ; A = Agree (3) ; SA = Strongly Agree(4) ; CDA = Combined Disagree ; CA = Combined Agree ; M = Mean.

The data shows that many of the respondents reported that they could write in English better after learning through a backward design approach than before. The responses show a significant improvement in the respondents' English writing skill after the

intervention. The students' grammar, punctuation and spelling problems were resolved. The respondent also reported that they could write a good summary and they could paraphrase well in English after being taught through a backward design approach. The

results also show that the respondents were now more confident to take assessments and could logically organize their ideas in the English language. They could write English effectively and communicate with their reader efficiently.

Table 3 presents the Combined Disagreement, Combined Agreement and Mean of pre and post questionnaire

Table 3. Comparison of Pre Questionnaire & Post Questionnaire

Comparison of responses CDA(%), CA(%) & Mean		Pre B2			Post B2		
S. No	Item	CDA	CA	M	CDA	CA	M
1.	I face no problem while writing an assignment in English.	85.1	14.9	1.99	4.6	95.4	3.33
2.	I face no problem in taking an assessment in English.	73.7	26.3	2.17	4.0	96.0	3.30
3.	I can maintain clarity of ideas and flow while I write in English.	72.6	27.4	2.13	4.6	95.4	3.33
4.	I can logically organize my ideas when I write in English.	73.1	26.9	2.17	4.0	96.0	3.30
5.	I can write a good academic paragraph in English.	71.4	28.6	2.15	4.6	95.4	3.29
6.	I can logically support and develop my main point when I write in English.	74.3	25.7	2.16	4.0	96.0	3.35
7.	I can write using an academic style in English.	73.7	26.3	2.11	4.0	96.0	3.29
8.	I can use appropriate vocabulary and word forms while writing to communicate effectively with the reader.	73.1	26.9	2.17	4.0	96.0	3.30
9.	I can use a variety of sentence structures while I write in English.	71.4	28.6	2.15	4.0	96.0	3.30
10.	I can use appropriate spelling, capitalization and punctuation while I write in English.	64.0	36.0	2.35	4.0	96.0	3.29
11.	I can write an accurate summary of the information that I have read in English.	76.6	23.4	2.11	5.1	94.9	3.27
12.	I can write an accurate paraphrase of information that I have read in English.	71.4	28.6	2.15	5.1	94.9	3.31
13.	I can effetely brainstorm to gather ideas before writing in English.	71.4	28.6	2.15	4.6	95.5	3.34
14.	I can revise my writing in English to improve the development and organization of my written expression.	73.1	26.9	2.17	5.7	94.3	3.32
15.	I can edit my writing to improve the wording, grammar, punctuation and spelling.	78.8	21.1	2.06	5.1	94.9	3.27
16.	I can write quickly in English.	78.8	21.7	2.06	4.6	95.4	3.42
17.	I can use my independent thinking while I write in English.	85.2	14.9	1.97	4.6	95.4	3.41

Note: SDA = Strongly Disagree(1) ; DA= Disagree (2) ; A = Agree (3) ; SA = Strongly Agree(4) ; CDA = Combined Disagree ; CA = Combined Agree ; M = Mean.

The data explains the apparent difference related to before and after intervention in the writing abilities of the respondents. It shows that before learning through backward design, the respondents faced many problems in their writing. Their writing skills improved after intervention, and they were more

confident and promising writers of English than before.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the role of backward design in improving undergraduate ESL learners'

writing skills in Pakistan. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2006), teachers not only teach, but they also design what students will learn in the class and how to learn it. Teachers can develop the curriculum and give a unique learning experience to meet the specified learning purpose. Teachers can empower themselves and their students to decide whether they have achieved their goals and how they can do it. Many responses in this study showed that students do not feel comfortable while they write in English as their English writing skills are not up to mark. The pre questionnaire results also indicate that students face problem in gathering ideas while writing. They do not feel comfortable while they write in English. The respondents also reported that they face problem while communicating in English. A noticeable number of respondents reported that after the intervention, they became good at English writing and could quickly brainstorm before writing in English. They also faced no problem while making a summary, paraphrasing, using grammar and vocabulary after the intervention. [Bowen \(2017\)](#) also mentioned the benefits of using the backward method. He indicated that lesson plans and the units designed to achieve the goals of the language curriculum could be best developed through the backward design. [Daniela and Derek \(2017\)](#) also contend that backward design is the most suitable design

to utilize the curriculum at its best to improve writing skills. The findings of this research are in line with [Saengchan et al.'s \(2016\)](#) pilot research in which they examined the success of backward design on students' learning. The current findings also indicate that students are more satisfied with their writing skills after implementing the backward design in their writing process.

Conclusion

The overall findings showed an incredible difference among the responses of participants before and after the use of the backward design approach. A large number of respondents indicated that their English writing skill improved, and they became more accurate in their writing. The respondents also revealed that after the intervention, they could write good academic paragraphs in English. They also could develop main points while using a literary style in English and use appropriate words and vocabulary during writing in English. The findings indicate that the students who were taught through the backward design approach now get more writing scores than ever before. Therefore, the results indicate that the backward design teaching approach was pedagogically and significantly superior to the conventional forward design approach in improving ESL learners' writing skills.

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