# Testing Tips

## An Introduction to Backward Design
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This month's Testing Tips offers an overview of *backward design* in the context of the Understanding by Design® (UbD) framework, as understood from the perspective of a graduate student conducting an internship in language testing. Backward design, a concept with which I was unfamiliar before beginning a summer internship at CAL, offers a framework that enhances instruction by approaching curriculum and assessment in innovative ways.

To start, the UbD framework is rooted in the concept of *alignment*, which is to say that the three stages of backward design must align not just to standards, but to one another (McTighe and Wiggins, 2012). The elements of the framework must logically move from one stage to the next, preparing the learner to progress successfully through the three stages.

Stage 1 of backward design involves identifying desired results, which requires determining learning priorities based on long-term performance goals. The bottom-line goal of education is *transfer*, so that students have the capacity to use and demonstrate learning across contexts in authentic situations.

According to McTighe and Wiggins, Stage 2 focuses on considering in advance what assessment evidence is needed to document and validate that the targeted learning has been achieved. As a means of assessing understanding and transfer of learning, performance tasks are implemented. Assessment may take a variety of forms, depending upon the tasks.

Finally, McTighe and Wiggins describe Stage 3 of backward design, in which teachers plan lessons and activities that are the most appropriate given the types of goals established in Stage 1 and the assessments planned in Stage 2. Students require various opportunities that engage them in actively using the language to draw inferences and make generalizations to attain understanding. By actively constructing meaning, students learn how to use content effectively.

UbD is a useful framework for teachers, and it's also a helpful framework to share with students. When I reflect on myself as a learner, it is refreshing to think that instructors are endeavoring to establish explicit teaching goals. A learning activity with a clear direction helps to prevent the dreaded eyes-glazed-over look, and thoughtfully orchestrating instruction with assessment and objectives in mind from the start avoids rote memorization and recitation. It ensures meaningful classroom activity, which is more likely to matter to a learner. Thus, students are more likely to put in the extra effort needed to fully grasp an idea, while finding that material is "sticking" more easily in their memory.

With respect to language learning, backward design reinforces things we already know, like the importance of authentic tasks and meaningful communication. Few students are likely to be captivated by subjunctive case endings or irregular verbs. However, by identifying specific learning goals that transfer across contexts, educators can help facilitate the application of language skills in areas that overlap with individual student interests. What better way to measure success than that?

Source: McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (2012). *Understanding by Design® Framework*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

If you have a question about language assessment, submit it for a future **Ask a Tester** column by sending an email to opat@cal.org with the subject line "Ask a Tester."