Designing a Teaching Unit: Key Steps for a Coherent ELT Unit: Integrating Curriculum and Materials Principles

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ABSTRACT
Designing learning units is essential for bridging the gap between theoretical curriculum frameworks and classroom practice; however, teachers often encounter mismatches between standard textbooks and the specific needs of local students. This article outlines key steps in creating cohesive English language teaching (ELT) units by integrating curriculum principles and teaching materials through a systematic framework. Referring to the Backward Design Model and the cyclical planning process, this article describes a process that begins with identifying desired learning outcomes, followed by analyzing assessment data, and planning structured teaching activities. Additionally, this article emphasizes the importance of developing planned teaching materials, ensuring internal alignment, and maintaining a continuous cycle of implementation, reflection, evaluation, and revision. The research results show that this approach positions teachers as deliberate designers who can adapt teaching materials to specific institutional contexts. Ultimately, this framework contributes to the field by increasing teacher autonomy and encouraging organic curriculum development, ensuring that ELT units remain meaningful, effective, and responsive to context.

Keywords: Backward Design, Curriculum Coherence, English Language Teaching, Materials Development, Needs Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Designing a teaching unit plays a crucial role in bridging theoretical curriculum frameworks and classroom practices in English Language Teaching (ELT). Unit design enables teachers to translate curriculum objectives, learning outcomes, and syllabus requirements into structured instructional activities, learning materials, and assessment tasks that are coherent and aligned with goals. Through systematic unit planning, teachers can ensure alignment between curricular intentions and learners' needs, thus promoting meaningful learning experiences (Sahuddin, 2015; Usman et al., 2023).

A significant challenge in ELT unit design lies in the misalignment between centrally developed curricula and classroom implementation. Specialist-driven curriculum models often rely on standardized, mass-produced coursebooks that are designed for broad contexts rather than specific institutional settings. As a result, these materials may fail to reflect local classroom realities, learner characteristics, and institutional objectives, which can reduce instructional relevance and effectiveness (Norhayati et al., 2024; Curriculum Approach Used in Teaching English, 2025).

To address curricular misalignment, recent ELT research emphasizes the importance of teacher agency in developing curriculum and materials. Teachers are encouraged to move beyond the role of material users and actively engage as designers and evaluators of teaching units. By exercising professional judgment and adapting materials to local contexts, teachers can implement context-sensitive and flexible pedagogical practices that align with postmethod perspectives and respond more effectively to learners' needs (Usman et al., 2023; English Teacher Perception of Implementation Kurikulum Merdeka, 2025).

The purpose of this article is to describe key steps in designing coherent ELT teaching units by drawing on established curriculum and instructional design models, particularly Backward Design and cyclical multi-step planning

processes. These models emphasize alignment among learning objectives, instructional activities, materials, and assessment. By integrating principles of curriculum planning and materials development, the article aims to provide a practical framework that supports teachers in developing effective and contextually responsive ELT teaching units (Ayu Utami & Bram, 2022; Indonesian Journal of English Education, 2020; Backward Design: Strategi Pembelajaran, 2025).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, conceptual research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. The purpose is to construct a coherent framework for designing ELT teaching units by synthesizing established theories of curriculum design, materials development, and reflective teaching.

Data were drawn from relevant scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and policy-related publications focusing on Backward Design, instructional alignment, ELT materials principles, and cyclical curriculum development. The literature was selected based on its relevance to unit planning and teacher-led curriculum design.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis to identify recurring stages and principles of effective unit design. These themes were organized into a sequential framework encompassing unit conceptualization, materials development, instructional alignment, implementation, reflection, evaluation, and revision. Conceptual rigor was ensured through triangulation of theories and reference to well-established instructional design models. As the study relied exclusively on secondary sources, no ethical approval was required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing The Unit Through Backward Design

Conceptualization in designing a curriculum and learning materials is a crucial step that should not be overlooked, especially in the field of English language teaching. A well-designed unit isn't just about fun activities with meaningless

materials; it should also consist of activities that use meaningful language. In this situation, Backward Design is here to help create a well-thought-out concept to support purposeful unit planning. By using Backward Design when conceptualizing unit materials, teachers can ensure that the materials used are explicit in terms of goals and communicative purposes.

In 1998, Wiggins and McTighe introduced this design approach as "Backward design begins with the end in mind" (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, p.8). It emphasizes the importance of identifying learning goals before selecting activities to be used in class. When designing using this approach, the first step teachers should take is to identify learners' needs and the goals of the unit that students can achieve. Within ELT, this approach works very well, as the primary purpose of language learning is for students to communicate meaningfully in real-world contexts, rather than being limited to the acquisition of grammatical knowledge.

There is a three-stage backward design process for curriculum planning, which involves identifying the desired outcomes, analyzing data sources, and planning appropriate action plans. This helps to enhance school improvement planning and ensure that decisions are driven by data (McTighe & Thomas, 2003, p. 1). Based on the stages, conceptualizing the unit encourages teachers to view each language instruction as a crucial process, not just the content of each unit. Trinter and Hughes (2021) also view a curriculum as more than just a compilation of topics, textbooks, or pacing guides; it is a comprehensive and dynamic plan that guides the teacher throughout the learning process.

Step 1: Identifying Desired Learning Outcomes

The first stage of Backward Design focuses on identifying desired learning outcomes. This means that when designing a particular unit, we need to know what we want to achieve at the end. Desired outcomes can vary and are often derived from curriculum standards or institutional goals. In ELT, students are typically only asked to understand how grammar works without considering whether they have a solid grasp of the underlying concepts. Thus, in backward design, this does not

apply because it requires more clarity to ensure that the unit has a clear communicative focus and provides direction for subsequent stages of design. By identifying these broader outcomes at the conceptual stage, curriculum designers acknowledge the diverse nature of language learning and create space for more holistic instructional planning.

Step 2: Analyzing Sources of Data

The second stage of Backward Design involves analyzing sources of data. In this stage, teachers should determine which materials are aligned with the learning outcomes. Choosing acceptable materials also demonstrates the advancement in material design. Here, assessment serves as a reference to guide the selection and adaptation of learning materials. When assessments are clear, teachers can ensure that the texts, exercises, and activities they use support the learning process. Thus, assessment is not an afterthought, but an essential component of the unit's conceptual framework.

Step 3: Planning Appropriate Action Plans

The third stage of Backward Design focuses on planning appropriate action plans. At this stage, activities are designed to scaffold the teaching and learning process, enabling the unit to achieve the desired outcomes and complete the assessment tasks effectively. Planning learning experiences through backward design encourages flexibility and contextual sensitivity, allowing teachers to identify students' needs at the proficiency level before selecting the appropriate materials and activities. Therefore, by clearly defining learning outcomes and assessments, teachers can adapt without sacrificing the coherence of the learning unit.

Backward design positioning the teachers as intentional designers. In this case, the primary focus shifts from units that only contain complete content material to meaningful competence materials. By analyzing multiple sources of assessment evidence, such as students' needs and performance, teachers are better equipped to design an action plan that can achieve the unit's goal (Utami & Bram, 2023). Using this framework to conceptualize a unit can improve learning instruction for learners and make learning easier for children to assimilate the materials and apply them in their

future lives.

In conclusion, conceptualizing the unit through Backward Design is an excellent choice because it provides a systematic and principled approach to instruction. By beginning with identifying the desired results, analyzing data sources, and planning appropriate action plans, teachers can create a well-designed and practical unit. This approach not only enhances instructional quality, but also supports learners to develop their language skills and competencies for effective communication beyond the classroom.

Integrating Materials Principles and Instructional Coherence

Step 4: Materials Development

Materials development involves the systematic creation or adaptation of instructional resources, such as activities, handouts, and quizzes, that directly support lesson objectives and prepare learners for the targeted assessment tasks. At this stage, materials are not selected randomly; instead, they are deliberately designed to operationalize learning objectives derived from earlier planning stages. Well-developed materials function as scaffolding tools that guide learners toward successful task completion and meaningful language use (Sahuddin, 2015; Usman et al., 2023).

Core Material Principles: Effective instructional materials should be developed based on core pedagogical principles, particularly authenticity, intellectual engagement, and learner-centeredness. Authentic materials provide learners with exposure to language that closely reflects real-world communication contexts, while intellectually engaging tasks encourage active cognitive involvement rather than passive learning. Furthermore, materials should be organized through a precise pedagogical sequence (e.g., input → practice → production pedagogical cycle) to support gradual skill development and ensure instructional clarity and coherence throughout the unit (Norhayati et al., 2024; Sahuddin, 2015).

Step 5: Ensuring Internal Alignment

Ensuring internal alignment is a critical step in maintaining instructional coherence within the teaching unit.

This process involves systematically verifying that learning goals, instructional content, classroom activities, and assessment tasks are logically connected and mutually reinforcing. When alignment is achieved, each instructional component serves a clear purpose in helping students attain the intended learning outcomes, reducing redundancy and instructional mismatch (Ayu Utami & Bram, 2022; The Benefits of Backward Design, 2020).

Step 6: Unit Implementation (Teaching)

Unit implementation represents the enactment of the designed teaching unit in the classroom. During this stage, teachers are expected to deliver lessons while carefully observing students' responses, participation, and performance in relation to the stated objectives. Classroom observation and reflective note-taking enable teachers to identify instructional strengths and areas requiring adjustment, thereby supporting ongoing refinement of materials and instructional strategies (Usman et al., 2023; *Backward Design: Strategi Pembelajaran*, 2025).

The implementation phase is a critical point where curriculum planning is realized in the classroom. This stage involves conducting lessons while carefully documenting student reactions, performance, and behavior in relation to predetermined objectives. Effective unit implementation requires teachers to maintain dual awareness: teaching while systematically observing and recording classroom dynamics.

During implementation, teachers must adopt an observational attitude that goes beyond surface involvement. Reflective Teaching (RT) serves as a tool for continuous professional development, enabling educators to identify areas for improvement in their methods and strive for ongoing growth. This involves not only executing lesson plans but also actively monitoring how students respond to the material, assignments, and teaching strategies. Teachers should note patterns of student engagement, areas where understanding is hindered, unexpected difficulties, and moments when learning objectives are successfully achieved.

Observational data collected during the learning process serve various purposes. First, this data provides immediate

feedback on whether learning objectives have been achieved. Second, it reveals gaps between the planned and implemented curriculum—the inevitable differences between what is planned and what actually happens in a dynamic classroom environment. Third, it captures authentic student voices and behaviors, which form the basis for further reflection and evaluation.

Documentation methods during implementation may include field notes, audio or video recordings of lessons, samples of student work, informal assessment results, and anecdotal notes about key moments in class. Self-reflection enables teachers to utilize data effectively in informing their teaching decisions by analyzing student work, assessment results, and classroom observations to identify patterns and trends. The key is to establish systematic data collection procedures that can be managed within the demands of active teaching while generating information rich enough for further analysis.

The Cyclical Nature: Continuous Improvement

The true power of systematic unit design does not come from a single implementation cycle, but from a process of continuous, iterative improvement. This cyclical approach transforms teaching from a static transmission model into a dynamic, evolving practice based on evidence and reflection. Imagine the design process of a cyclical unit, such as a GPS navigation system. Goals and objectives serve as the destination set in the device. As you drive (teach), the system monitors your progress (reflection). If you encounter obstacles or take a wrong turn, the system analyzes the data (evaluation) and provides a new, revised route (revision) to ensure you ultimately reach the correct destination.

Step 7: Systematic Observation and Description

Reflection is the first critical step toward continuous improvement, but it must be distinguished from casual or impressionistic thinking about teaching and learning. Reflective practice involves increasing metacognitive awareness by encouraging teachers to reflect on their thinking processes, decision-making strategies, and instructional

choices. True reflection requires systematic and conscious observation of teaching experiences, focusing on describing what actually happened rather than relying on intuition, impulses, or selective memory.

The reflection process begins with reviewing the observational data collected during implementation. Teachers review their field notes, review recorded lessons, analyze student work, and recall specific classroom incidents. The goal at this stage is purely descriptive: to reconstruct as accurately as possible the sequence of events, student responses, teaching decisions, and learning outcomes that characterized the teaching unit.

Several frameworks support structured reflection in English language teaching (ELT). Reflective practice in language teaching has been implemented through various frameworks, based on the foundational work of John Dewey and Donald Schön. Dewey emphasizes reflection as structured inquiry, involving suggestion, intellectualization, hypothesis formation, reasoning, and testing. Schön distinguishes between reflection on action (retrospective analysis) and reflection in action (thinking during teaching), both of which are essential for professional development.

Adequate reflection uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods include rating scales and checklists that document teaching events, while qualitative methods include field notes, journals, and audio-visual recordings. Teachers can use checklists to document whether specific teaching events occurred (creating learning groups, stating objectives, providing feedback), while qualitative methods capture the subtle and contextual nature of classroom interactions.

Journaling is a highly effective tool for reflection and self-exploration. Regular journal entries create detailed records of teaching experiences, allowing teachers to track patterns that develop over time, document evolving thinking, and preserve insights that might otherwise be forgotten. The act of writing itself encourages deeper processing and analysis of teaching experiences.

Step 10: Evaluating and Analyzing Reflections and Comparing Outcomes

While reflection focuses on description, evaluation shifts to interpretation and assessment, this stage involves analyzing reflections, deliberately separating observations from interpretations, and systematically comparing actual results with initial assessments of student needs and institutional goals.

The evaluation process requires teachers to ask critical questions: Why did specific teaching strategies succeed or fail? What factors contributed to student engagement or disengagement? How well did the material support the learning objectives? Were the assessment methods appropriate for measuring the desired outcomes? Which students struggled and why? What patterns emerged across the various lessons in the unit?

Evaluation determines the extent to which instructional goals have been achieved, helps teachers assess students' language proficiency, monitors learning progress, and identifies areas of strength and weakness. However, evaluation in the context of unit design goes beyond student assessment to include a critical examination of the instructional system as a whole—the material, methods, goals, and the teacher's own pedagogical decisions.

An important aspect of evaluation involves distinguishing between formative and summative functions. Formative evaluation assesses performance to promote continuous growth and improvement, provides insights and evidence that help educators identify strengths to maintain and areas that require development. In the context of unit evaluation, formative insights gathered during implementation are used for immediate adjustments and long-term revisions. In contrast, summative evaluation provides a comprehensive assessment of the unit's effectiveness.

The separation between observation and interpretation prevents premature conclusions and ensures that evaluation is based on evidence rather than assumptions. Teachers should systematically review their descriptive reflections, identify specific data points, and then develop interpretations based on

multiple sources of evidence. This analytical process may reveal that a lesson that appeared unsuccessful actually achieved its goals for most students but failed to accommodate certain learning styles, or that student inactivity was not caused by inappropriate content but by unclear task instructions.

Comparison with the initial analysis of student needs and institutional goals provides an essential context for evaluation. Teaching units that successfully address identified language gaps demonstrate greater effectiveness than units that, although well-executed, fail to target priority learning needs. Similarly, alignment with the institutional curriculum, exam requirements, and broader educational policies must be considered in a comprehensive evaluation of the program.

Step 11: Active Experimentation as Implementing Changes for the Next Cycle

The culmination of reflection and evaluation is active experimentation—using feedback and findings to prioritize and implement revisions to the teaching unit for the next instructional cycle. This stage reflects the action dimension of experiential learning theory, transforming insights into concrete improvements.

Active experimentation closes the learning cycle and reconnects the process to the real world, producing consequences that create new experiences and start the cycle anew. In the context of unit revision, active experimentation means making specific, evidence-based modifications to objectives, materials, tasks, or sequencing based on evaluation findings.

Revision decisions should be prioritized based on several factors: the severity of the identified problem, the number of students affected, the feasibility of implementing the change, and alignment with broader curriculum goals. Not all issues identified can or should be addressed simultaneously. Teachers should strategically focus on revisions that are most likely to result in the most significant improvement in student learning outcomes.

The scope of revisions can vary significantly depending on the evaluation results. Minor modifications may involve

refining instructions, adjusting time allocations, or adding additional examples to the material. Moderate revisions may include restructuring the sequence of lessons, replacing ineffective activities, or developing alternative assessment methods to enhance learning outcomes. Major revisions may require a review of learning objectives, the implementation of different methodological approaches, or a complete redesign of the material to meet the needs of students better.

Collaborative action research involves teachers in a cyclical process of experimenting with pedagogical strategies, sharing experiences, and developing their practical knowledge of teaching. The action research cycle—plan, do, observe, reflect—aligns with the process of unit design and revision, with each iteration building on insights from the previous cycle. This approach transforms curriculum development from a top-down, expert-driven process to a teacher-led, organic inquiry based on classroom realities.

Documenting revisions and their rationales is crucial for maintaining institutional memory and fostering professional growth. Teachers should record the changes made, the reasons specific revisions were prioritized, the expected outcomes, and how the revised elements performed in subsequent implementations. Through repeated cycles, this documentation reveals patterns in instructional design challenges, successful solutions, and the evolution of pedagogical thinking.

The revision process also involves recognizing limitations and working creatively within them. Time constraints, existing curricula, exam requirements, institutional resources, and class size all influence the revisions that can be made. However, language teachers must be aware of the complexity of innovating curricula, recognizing that action research creates knowledge based on investigations conducted in specific practical contexts. The goal is gradual improvement within realistic parameters rather than unattainable perfection.

Fostering Organic Curriculum Development

The cyclical process of implementation, reflection, evaluation, and revision represents organic curriculum development—bottom-up innovation based on classroom evidence and teacher research. This contrasts with a purely prescriptive approach in which the curriculum is developed externally without input from the practitioners who implement it.

Lesson analysis involves the systematic assessment of components using frameworks such as the Didactic Suitability Criteria, which provide structured guidance for reflection on lessons implemented across multiple dimensions, including epistemic, cognitive, interactional, mediational, affective, and ecological aspects. Such frameworks support teachers in conducting comprehensive, multidimensional evaluations that inform meaningful revisions and improvements.

The continuous improvement cycle provides several benefits for ELT professionals. First, it develops teachers' expertise and confidence through systematic inquiry into their own practice. Teachers become more skilled at diagnosing learning difficulties, designing effective interventions, and evaluating their impact. Second, it produces context-appropriate materials and methods, specifically tailored to a particular student population and institutional environment. Third, it fosters a professional identity as reflective practitioners rather than mere curriculum deliverers.

Reflective teaching practices have a transformative impact on student learning outcomes by increasing engagement, motivation, and achievement, while contributing to teacher satisfaction and well-being. When teachers engage in systematic reflection and revision, they experience greater professional satisfaction and maintain resilience in the face of teaching challenges.

Ultimately, the cyclical improvement process contributes to the broader development of professional knowledge in the field of English language teaching (ELT). Various models of reflective practice have been developed, with research indicating that integrating reflective practice into teacher education programs represents a valuable form of professional

development. When teachers share insights from their action research cycles through publications, conference presentations, or informal professional networks, the collective knowledge base grows, benefiting the entire field.

CONCLUSION

The process of designing integrated ELT teaching units through Backward Design and iterative refinement offers a robust solution to the common mismatch between centralized curricula and local classroom realities. By prioritizing the identification of desired learning outcomes and determining assessment evidence before planning teaching activities, teachers ensure that each component of the unit is deliberately focused on meaningful communication. This systematic approach involves the development of scheduled materials and a continuous cycle of reflection, evaluation, and revision, which transforms teaching from a static transmission model into a dynamic and evolving practice. The main contribution of this framework is the empowerment of teachers as deliberate designers, who use their professional authority to create contextually relevant learning experiences. In addition, the cyclical nature of this process encourages organic curriculum development, enabling continuous instructional improvement that enhances both teacher expertise and student learning outcomes in a given institutional context.

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