

Addressing Structural Imbalance in Primary EFL Reading Lesson Design: A TAG Framework for Teaching–Learning–Assessment Alignment Based on Understanding by Design (UbD)*

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Primary EFL reading classrooms often face the challenge of being rich in activities but loosely structured. This study aimed to examine the practical problems in instructional design from the perspective of Understanding by Design (UbD) and to develop an approach for optimizing such design. A qualitative text analysis was conducted on 15 interview transcripts, 15 post-lesson reflections and 15 teaching logs collected from primary school EFL teachers and teaching and research group leaders in District N of Guiyang. The data were analyzed through three levels of coding. The findings indicated that teachers demonstrated relatively strong competence in designing classroom activities; however, their learning objectives were often defined mainly at the level of knowledge and skills, while assessment evidence was insufficiently planned in advance. As a result, the instructional design process showed a structural imbalance characterized by “activity prominence, unclear objectives, and insufficient evidence.” Based on these findings, the study proposes the TAG framework: Target clarifies understanding-oriented learning objectives, Assessment plans assessment evidence in advance, and Growth organizes a sequence of learning activities that supports the development of student understanding. The framework translates the backward-design logic of UbD into a more practical pathway for primary EFL reading instruction and provides an empirical reference for improving the quality of instructional design at the regional level.

Keywords: Understanding by Design (UbD), instructional design, primary EFL, TAG framework, teaching–learning–assessment alignment

Research Background

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition), issued by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, emphasize alignment among teaching–learning–assessment

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alignment and integrated unit instruction, encouraging a shift from a focus on what teachers teach toward what students are expected to understand (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). However, the phenomenon of being “rich in activities but loosely structured” remains relatively common in primary EFL classrooms at the regional level. Weak connections among instructional objectives, assessment, and learning activities can hinder the improvement of instructional design quality.

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) developed Understanding by Design (UbD), which organizes instructional design around desired understandings, assessment evidence, and learning experiences. Chinese scholarship has further emphasized the role of deep understanding, knowledge transfer, and backward design in UbD-oriented instructional design (Wang, 2025). Liu and Wan (2026) further conceptualized UbD-oriented instructional design around three questions: What should students understand? How can their understanding be demonstrated? And how can learning activities support the development of that understanding?

UbD does not simply emphasize a sequential arrangement of “objectives–assessment–activities”; rather, it organizes learning experiences around desired understandings, assessment evidence, and learning experiences, with big ideas and essential questions supporting the development and transfer of understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). When the connections among objectives, understanding, and transfer are overlooked, instructional design can easily remain at the level of activity organization, making it difficult to achieve a genuine shift toward understanding-oriented classroom instruction.

Research Design and Methods

The participants were 15 primary school EFL teachers from 13 primary schools in District N of Guiyang, who were selected through purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research materials consisted of 15 interview transcripts, 15 post-lesson reflections and 15 teaching logs provided by the participating teachers. These materials were collected during a regional professional development activity on integrated unit instructional design in 2025 and focused primarily on instructional objectives, activity organization, assessment implementation, and post-lesson adjustments.

The study employed qualitative text analysis to examine the teacher interviews, post-lesson reflections, and teaching logs. The data were analyzed through three levels of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Continuous comparison and synthesis were used to identify categories and overarching themes. The coding process was informed by Chen's (2000) approach to qualitative data analysis, which provided a systematic basis for organizing and interpreting the textual data. The analysis ultimately identified the structural theme of “activity prominence, unclear objectives, and insufficient evidence,” which provided a basis for examining the imbalance in the practical implementation of the three stages of UbD.

To strengthen the credibility and consistency of the analysis, two researchers with backgrounds in curriculum and instruction independently coded the data and subsequently discussed their coding results to reach consensus (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Findings

Instructional Objectives: A Focus on Knowledge and Skills

Most teachers were able to identify objectives related to language knowledge and skills, but they paid insufficient attention to what students truly understood. For example, one teacher wrote in a post-lesson reflection: “The main focus of this lesson was to enable students to learn vocabulary related to healthy food and practice

sentence substitution.” Another teacher noted: “Several activities were designed around the theme of Family Life in the hope that students would become proficient in using the present progressive tense.”

These reflections indicated that teachers tended to treat the unit theme primarily as a vehicle for language practice, with limited further exploration of deeper understandings that could support transfer, such as healthy choices and family interactions.

Assessment Design: Limited Advance Planning

Teachers generally attached importance to classroom feedback, but their assessment practices relied largely on immediate observation and experiential judgment. Some teachers noted in their teaching logs: “Rewards were given randomly according to students’ performance during the lesson.” Another teacher stated: “Students’ learning was mainly judged based on how the lesson felt.”

These accounts suggested that teachers seldom planned assessment tasks and criteria in advance during the instructional design stage. As a result, assessment was not consistently connected with instructional objectives.

Learning Activities: Weak Alignment with Objectives

Teachers generally placed considerable emphasis on creating learning contexts and designing classroom activities. However, some activities tended to prioritize form over instructional objectives. For example, one teacher noted: “During group discussions, only a few students spoke, while the others participated very little.” Another teacher pointed out: “Presentation tasks were usually completed by students who were more proficient in English.”

This pattern can be interpreted in relation to the diffusion of responsibility effect in cooperative learning discussed by Cai and Lu (2025). It suggested that some collaborative activities lacked clearly defined task roles and remained weakly connected to the intended instructional objectives.

Professional Development and Practice

Participation in district-level professional development and school-based teaching and research activities was relatively common. However, teachers still showed insufficient capacity to translate theoretical ideas into classroom structures. Teaching and research activities tended to emphasize the performance of open lessons while paying less attention to training in the logic of backward design. Although teachers understood the concept of UbD, they still tended to begin their instructional design with learning activities in practice.

This disconnect between theoretical understanding and classroom practice suggested that teachers’ attention to the forms of activities sometimes exceeded their attention to the overall structure of instructional design. This finding further highlights the gap between teachers’ conceptual understanding of UbD and its practical enactment in instructional design.

Understanding Structural Imbalance through UbD

The findings indicated that teachers placed greater emphasis on classroom activity design, while their overall planning of learning objectives and assessment evidence remained relatively limited. As a result, they had not yet developed a coherent instructional design approach in which objectives, assessment, and learning activities mutually supported one another.

From the perspective of UbD, this pattern suggested a structural imbalance in the implementation of backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Although teachers had developed relatively rich experience in organizing classroom activities, their instructional design did not consistently begin with what students were

expected to understand or with how such understanding could be demonstrated. Instead, instructional planning often remained centered on the organization of classroom activities.

This indicated that some teachers' understanding of the UbD principle of backward design remained largely at the level of activity organization. They had not yet fully developed an awareness of designing instruction around the question of what students truly understand. In this sense, the problem was not simply a lack of classroom activities, but rather a weak structural connection among objectives, assessment evidence, and learning activities.

Therefore, instructional design needs to establish stronger connections among objectives, assessment, and learning activities. Such alignment can help translate the core competency-oriented requirements of the curriculum into a more coherent classroom design and support a shift from activity-driven instruction toward understanding-oriented instruction (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022; Wang, 2025).

The TAG Instructional Design Framework

Core Components of the TAG Framework

Building on the findings above and the backward-design logic of Understanding by Design (UbD), as originally proposed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), this study developed the TAG instructional design framework, which brings together three interconnected dimensions: Target, Assessment, and Growth. Rather than treating objectives, assessment, and learning activities as separate components, the framework emphasizes their alignment and interaction throughout the instructional process, recognizing that instructional quality depends on the way multiple design elements work together (Wan, 2026). Previous research has highlighted that UbD organizes instructional design around what students are expected to understand, how their understanding can be demonstrated, and how learning experiences can support the development of that understanding (Liu & Wan, 2026).

Target shifts the focus of learning objectives from what students are expected to know or do toward what they are expected to understand (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Wang, 2025). It encourages teachers to identify deeper understandings with relevance to students' lives from the theme of a unit, rather than limiting objectives to vocabulary, sentence patterns, or other language knowledge and skills.

Assessment calls for assessment evidence to be considered at the design stage, before learning activities are planned (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Performance-based tasks, such as oral expression, contextual communication, and short writing tasks, can provide evidence of whether students are able to use what they have learned in meaningful contexts.

Growth refers to the learning experiences through which students develop and demonstrate understanding. Reading, communication, and collaborative tasks can provide opportunities for students to use English in meaningful contexts. In this process, learning activities are designed to serve the intended objectives and support the development of understanding, rather than functioning as isolated classroom exercises. Meaningful language use and communication in contextualized learning have also been emphasized in primary EFL instruction (Li, 2022).

Practical Value of the TAG Framework

The TAG framework is not a direct replication of the three stages of UbD. Rather, it represents a practice-oriented adaptation of the backward-design approach to the realities of primary EFL classrooms (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The findings showed that some teachers tended to prioritize activities based on their existing

classroom experience, which could result in weak connections among learning objectives, assessment, and learning activities.

The TAG framework addresses this problem by making these connections more explicit. It encourages teachers to clarify what students should understand, determine what evidence would demonstrate that understanding, and then organize learning experiences that enable students to demonstrate such understanding. In this way, the framework provides a practical pathway for moving classroom instruction from activity-driven design toward understanding-oriented instruction.

Classroom Practice: A Grade 3 *Hobbies* Unit

The following classroom example was drawn from one of the participating teachers. The TAG framework was applied in a Grade 3 unit on *Hobbies*. The lesson was designed around the understanding that hobbies are connected not only to personal interests but also to students' feelings and everyday experiences. Accordingly, the teacher set a learning goal that went beyond students' ability to talk about their hobbies: students were also expected to explain how their hobbies made them feel and what those activities meant to them.

Target: From Language Use to Meaningful Expression

The learning objectives focused on students' ability to use English to talk about their hobbies while expressing the feelings and personal experiences associated with them. This extended the learning goal beyond the accurate production of target language and toward the expression of personal meaning.

Assessment: Making Understanding Visible

To provide evidence of student understanding, the teacher designed a task called "My Colourful Life." Students introduced a hobby from their own lives and explained how the activity made them feel. For example, a student might say, "I like drawing in the park. It makes me happy." The task allowed the teacher to look beyond students' grammatical accuracy. What mattered was also whether students could use English to connect a hobby with a personal feeling or life experience. Assessment was therefore incorporated into the design from the beginning rather than added after the learning activities had been completed.

Growth: Preparing Students for the Performance Task

The learning experiences were organized to prepare students for the final task. The teacher first used pictures and videos to create a meaningful context and invited students to discuss questions such as "Which hobby do you like?" and "How does it make you feel?" Students then completed a worksheet based on their own hobbies and shared their interests and feelings with group members. The sequence gradually moved from language practice toward personal expression, with each activity providing preparation for the final task.

To make the task accessible to Grade 3 students with different levels of language proficiency, the teacher also established two differentiated levels of assessment expectations. At Level 1, students were expected to use "I like..." to express a hobby. At Level 2, they were expected to go further by explaining how the hobby made them feel, using expressions such as "happy," "relaxed," and "make friends." The differentiated expectations allowed students to participate at different levels while maintaining a shared focus on meaningful expression.

Overall, the lesson illustrates how the TAG framework can translate the principles of backward design into a practical approach to primary EFL instruction. Target clarified the intended understanding, Assessment identified the evidence through which that understanding could be demonstrated, and Growth organized the

learning experiences needed to prepare students for that performance. The case thus showed how stronger connections among objectives, assessment, and learning activities could support a shift from knowledge- and activity-focused practice toward understanding and meaningful expression.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of Understanding by Design (UbD) in primary EFL instructional design through qualitative analysis of teacher interviews, post-lesson reflections, and teaching logs. The findings revealed a clear imbalance in instructional design: teachers were relatively confident in organizing classroom activities and creating learning contexts, but the alignment among learning objectives, assessment evidence, and learning activities remained weak. This imbalance was characterized by “activity prominence, unclear objectives, and insufficient evidence.”

To address this problem, the study developed the TAG instructional design framework, which consists of Target, Assessment, and Growth. Target focuses teachers’ attention on what students are expected to understand; Assessment encourages the advance planning of evidence through which such understanding can be demonstrated; and Growth organizes learning experiences that support students in developing and expressing that understanding. Together, the three dimensions provide a practical way of translating the backward-design logic of UbD into primary EFL classroom practice.

Rather than introducing another layer of instructional procedures, the TAG framework reorganizes existing design practices around students’ understanding and meaningful use of English. The classroom example further illustrates how stronger connections among objectives, assessment, and learning experiences can move instruction beyond knowledge- and activity-focused practice toward understanding-oriented and meaningful language use.

This study has several limitations. The participants were drawn primarily from primary schools within a single regional context, which limits the transferability of the findings to other educational settings. In addition, the study relied mainly on teacher interviews, post-lesson reflections, and teaching logs rather than direct classroom observations or systematic evidence of student learning. Future research could combine classroom observations, instructional design documents, and student learning evidence to examine how backward-design principles are enacted across different teaching contexts and to further investigate how the TAG framework can be applied across diverse primary EFL settings.

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