

# A framework for navigating the review and revision of the ELT curriculum

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This article offers procedures and tools grounded in the backward design approach to guide the English language teaching curriculum review and revision process and maximize its effectiveness. The framework is systematic, data-informed, and teacher-driven. It seeks to cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and foster teacher collaboration and engagement. Language programs can adapt the procedures provided as suitable to their educational settings. Teachers can also draw upon this framework for curriculum planning.

## 1. Introduction

A curriculum can be defined as a comprehensive teaching and learning blueprint devised to reach the intended outcomes of a course (Richards, 2013). The term *curriculum* can be used to refer to the curriculum of a particular course as well as the holistic curriculum of a program or an institution. Curricula are designed and sequenced based on the purpose, goals, and mission of an educational program. For example, if a language program exists to help learners acquire academic English language skills, then the curriculum of individual courses would be designed to meet this overall goal. It is important to note that *curriculum* and *syllabus* are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the educational plan for a given course. In this article, the term curriculum is used to refer to the overall teaching and learning plan of a course in relation to other courses and the program as a whole. This learning plan includes (1) course goals, objectives, and outcomes; (2) ways of formative and summative assessments; (3) the sequencing of objectives and outcomes of courses within and across levels of English language proficiency; and (4) learning activities and resources. This information is then translated into a course syllabus, which is a written document that provides students with information about course expectations (e.g., objectives, assignments, grades, and timeline) and policies (e.g., attendance, late work, and academic integrity). It is important to emphasize that the curriculum is dynamic in nature rather than fixed (Christison & Murray, 2014; Kalu & Dyjur, 2018) as it is shaped by various factors including changing student needs and educational trends. Hence, curricular components must be systematically planned and regularly evaluated and revised to ensure their effectiveness in meeting student needs and the purpose they are designed for. This article offers a framework to guide the ELT curriculum review and revision process, which has been operationalized and continually refined in a multi-level intensive English language program. The proposed framework in this paper is grounded in backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, 2011), led and operated by teachers, and informed by various sources of accessible data.

## **2. Conceptual background**

### **2.1. Backward design**

As described by Wiggins and McTighe (2006, 2011), a backward design approach involves three phases: (1) identifying the desired outcomes, (2) determining appropriate assessment evidence, and (3) planning instruction and learning accordingly. An essential step in backward design is the diagnosis of student needs through needs analyses to inform the specification of student learning outcomes (SLOs) (Richards, 2017). Following a backward design approach to curriculum allows “lessons, units, and courses [to] be logically inferred from the results sought, not derived from the methods, books, and activities with which [teachers] are most comfortable” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, p. 14). Christison and Murray (2014) add that “unfortunately, in the field of ESL/EFL, very often curricula and/or textbooks are adopted from elsewhere, usually from an English-dominant country. It is no wonder, therefore, that they find minimal acceptance from teachers or learners” (p. 12). Applying backward design in curriculum planning and implementation has demonstrated to have a positive impact on the teaching and learning of English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners (e.g., Chaisaa & Chinokul, 2021; Hodaeian & Biria, 2015; Llerena, 2020; Yurtseven & Altun, 2016). Backward design is not exclusive to curriculum design as it has also been successfully employed to guide curriculum evaluation (e.g., Miller, Klassen, & Hardy, 2020; Paesani, 2017). The curriculum review and revision framework described in this article follows the principles of backward design. It first examines the desired results (course goal, objectives, and SLOs), then evidence of learning (assessments), and finally the learning plan (content).

### **2.2. Teacher-led approach**

Engaging teachers in the evaluation and revision of the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum is vital to optimize its effectiveness. Richards (2017) asserts that language teaching necessitates more than merely teaching a language. He explains that language teachers need to make decisions concerning student needs, identify the best ways to plan and organize course content to meet SLOs, determine teaching and assessment methods, and identify and create pedagogical materials. Christison and Murray (2014) argue that curriculum changes that result as top-down requirements without buy-in from teachers are “rarely diffused throughout the educational enterprise” (p. 11). Teachers are the ones that interact with the curriculum and plan ways to deliver and assess SLOs. Consequently, “if all aspects of English language instruction are not aligned with the reform, then it is rarely adopted” (Christison & Murray, 2014, p. 11).

In the backward design approach, teachers are viewed as designers who engage in “the crafting of curriculum and learning experiences to meet specified purposes” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, p.13). They are designers of assessment tools to diagnose needs, monitor progress, measure how well SLOs have been met, and, as a result, inform students, administrators, and other stakeholders (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). The curriculum review and revision framework presented in this article is led and operated by teachers. It provides opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively towards optimizing the curriculum and reflect on and adapt their teaching practices. Such engagement is central to professional development as “the conversations focus on the heart of teaching and learning” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, p. 27).

### **2.3. Data-informed approach**

A curriculum must be monitored periodically to ensure its effectiveness in achieving the purpose it is designed and offered for. Educational programs often conduct curriculum review for accreditation purposes, accountability, and/or as a means of continuous improvement. Several sources can be used to inform this process including assessment data, input from students and teachers, best practices and research, standards and/or guidelines by professional organizations (Christison & Murray, 2014; Macalister & Nation, 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Paesani, 2017). Assessment data in English language

programs is typically comprised of overall pass/fail rates for courses, levels, and the program as a whole in addition to enrolment numbers. It could also consist of data from specific assessment instruments or events (e.g., student writing portfolios, timed-writing exams, or oral presentations). Macalister and Nation (2020) state that “information gained from assessment is a useful source of data about the effectiveness of a course” (p. 11). Informal or formal input from students and teachers gathered through interactions, observations, interviews, or questionnaires/surveys is another valuable source of data. Information gathered from needs analyses, in particular, assists in evaluating whether exiting courses sufficiently attend to student needs (Richards, 2017). Keeping abreast of best practices and recent research through professional development and engaging in teacher-led research on a specific language skill from a learning, teaching, or assessment angle are also invaluable in guiding curricular improvements. Finally, national standards, language benchmarks, and guidelines set by professional organizations (e.g., *Common European Framework of Reference for Language-CEFR*) can also inform the process. Such resources provide “descriptions of the outcomes or targets students should be able to reach in different domains of curriculum content” and are often used to guide the specification of SLOs in backward design (Richards, 2013, p. 25).

### 3. The ELT curriculum review and revision framework

This section offers guidelines, procedures, tools, and sample curriculum review tasks. A holistic view of the process is provided in Figure 1.

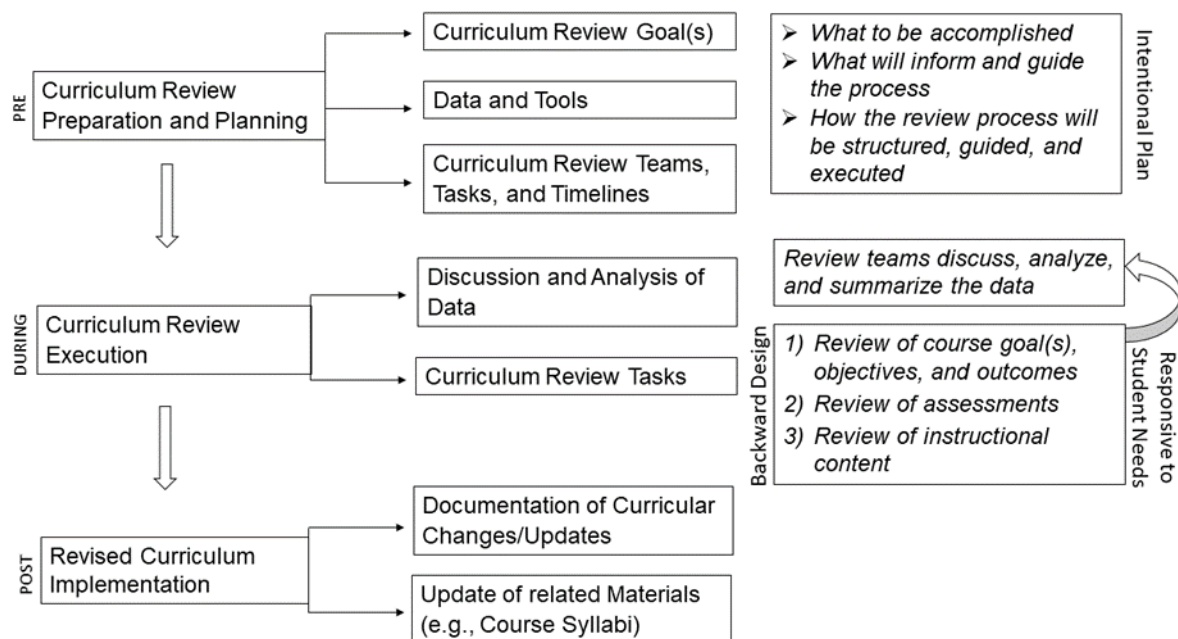


Figure 1. An Overview of the ELT Curriculum Review and Revision Framework: Pre, During, and Post

#### 3.1. Expectations and shared understanding

It is helpful for language programs to create a *written plan* that outlines when the curriculum review process is conducted, who is responsible for preparing for it, what the process is, who is involved in it, what resources are needed, and how it is documented. Having a written plan in place informs all stakeholders- including new hire- of expectations and standard procedures. This written plan is to be periodically reviewed and updated to respond effectively to programmatic needs. Additionally, a *shared understanding* of curricular elements needs to be established to ensure a consistent and

mutual interpretation and use of terms at the program level. This can be achieved through creating a guide, offering in-house professional development (e.g., brown bags), and/or briefly orienting instructors on what each curricular component entails before engaging in the curriculum review process. Table 1 offers a sample set of curricular elements. Note that some educational programs might have course/learning objectives in place but not SLOs or vice versa as such curricular elements may overlap, but subtle differences are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. A Set of Sample Curricular Components and their Explanations

Curricular Element	Definition	Example	Characteristics
Course Goal(s)	A general statement describing the overall intended outcome for the course	<i>In this course, students will improve their comprehension and production of spoken English at an upper-intermediate level.</i>	Broad, abstract, and long-term
Course Objectives	A set of statements outlining the intended consequences of instruction; what will be taught	<i>In this course, students will learn to prepare and deliver logically structured presentations using relevant content and appropriate visuals, body language, eye contact, volume, and speed.</i>	Intentions, teaching-centered, detailed, discrete knowledge and skills
Student Learning Outcomes	A set of statements outlining what students will know or can do as a result of instruction; evidence that learning took place	<i>Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to give oral presentations effectively.</i>	Products, learning-centered, succinct, overarching skills and knowledge
Formative Assessment	Ways of assessing progress, providing feedback, and informing teaching	Worksheets, journals, quizzes, discussions, mini oral presentations	Low stakes, ongoing, assist the learning process
Summative Assessment	Ways of measuring how well students have met course objectives/outcomes	Tests, projects, oral presentations	High stakes, end of units and course, determine if benchmarks have been reached

### 3.2. Curriculum review preparation and planning

Depending on a program structure and the roles in place, the curriculum review preparation and planning can be facilitated by a curriculum coordinator, a program director or assistant director, a standing curriculum committee, or a curriculum review task force. Furthermore, since this framework utilizes data to inform the review process, student achievement data (Table 2) needs to be compiled and analyzed for every semester using, for instance, Excel. Depending on the different roles available in a program, data compilation and analysis can be performed by an IT person or a staff or faculty member with some technical knowledge. Examining trends in pass/fail rates across courses and levels helps identifying classes with major inconsistencies in progression rates and then taking a closer look at the curriculum of those courses. Additionally, it is important to identify goals to have an intentional and efficient curriculum review process (e.g., will the entire curriculum or specific courses/levels be reviewed? Is it a routine review or are there any special circumstances such as a change in the program length, the structure of courses, student demographics, or concerns on student performance in

specific courses? After identifying the purpose of the curriculum review purpose, materials and tools to guide the process can be prepared accordingly (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample Materials and Tools for the Curriculum Review and Revision Process

Materials and Tools	Description
Curriculum Review Guide	An agenda, or a <a href="#">Gantt chart</a> , to guide the curriculum review session containing the goals, schedule, review teams, tasks, and timeframe
Student Achievement Dataset	A comprehensive summary of progression rates and enrollment numbers per course, level, semester, and year at least for the past 2-3 years to allow for identifying trends and making comparisons
Analysis of Student Achievement Dataset Form	Review teams use this form to analyze the dataset focusing on their assigned courses/levels and identify (a) any inconsistencies in progression rates across levels or courses and from session to session, (b) possible factors that can explain trends in the data, and (c) follow up actions with regard to the curriculum review
Summary of Student Evaluations	A snapshot of the most recent student evaluations (preferably from at least three semesters) highlighting students' feedback on course contents only not instructors
Curriculum Mapping Tool	A chart for mapping course objectives, SLOs, and assessments to ensure assessments are outcome-based and aligned with objectives/SLOs [see Elturki, 2020, p.15 for a <a href="#">sample</a> ]
Verb Wheel	A tool based on Bloom's taxonomy available <a href="#">online</a> to guide the choice of verbs when writing/revising objectives/SLOs and identifying learning activities in relation to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and knowledge
Research Highlights	A summary highlights findings from published research or faculty-driven research focusing on a specific aspect in the curriculum to be enhanced during curriculum review (e.g., writing within the disciplines, extensive reading, or vocabulary integration)
Progression of Topics and Skills Chart	A pre-prepared chart to be reviewed and updated as necessary containing the progression of topics and skills across three periods of a semester (beginning, middle, and end) for the courses that make up a level (e.g., what to be covered in level 5 Academic Reading, Academic Writing, and Academic Listening and Discussion during the beginning, middle, and through the end of a session) to ensure close coordination and smooth progression of topics [ <a href="#">click here for a sample</a> ]
Materials Review Chart	A chart to guide to what extent a course textbook aligns with objectives/SLOs. Review teams use the chart to map objectives/SLOs with textbook units/pages and pinpoint any gaps that need to be supplemented [ <a href="#">click here for a sample</a> ]
Post Curriculum Review and Revision Form	A form to be completed by the review teams after the curriculum review to summarize and justify changes/updates made to their assigned courses/levels and what informed those changes [ <a href="#">click here for a sample</a> ]

How to structure a curriculum review and revision session depends too on what needs to be accomplished and the size of the review teams. In a multi-level program, for example, to ensure smooth progression and *vertical* alignment across levels, a review team can be assigned the same course or skill from different levels. To illustrate, for a curriculum review that aims to look at lower levels, review teams can be structured as follows:

- Team A: Level 1, 2, and 3 Reading and Writing (RW)
- Team B: Level 1, 2, and 3 Listening and Speaking (LS)
- Team C: Level 1, 2, and 3 Grammar (G)

After those teams complete the curriculum review of their assigned courses, they form a new team consisting of a representative from Team A, B, and C to review the curriculum of a given level (e.g., Team A: Level 1 RW, LS, G) and its *horizontal* alignment within the level. This measure is particularly beneficial for language programs that put an emphasis on coordination of SLOs for the set of courses within a level. For example, if one of the course objectives in a Level 3 RW course is composing and comprehending compare/contrast text, the Level 3 G class may include an objective on the use of comparative and superlative forms. Likewise, a Level 3 LS course objective can reinforce the use of compare/contrast language in oral production and listening comprehension. Thus, having a

representative from each level ensures that language skills, when possible, are reinforced across the language domains.

Another variation of this structure is assigning a review team to the curriculum of a specific level. For instance:

- Team A: Level 1 RW, LS, G
- Team B: Level 2 RW, LS, G
- Team C: Level 3 RW, LS, G

After the teams complete the curriculum review and revision of their assigned level, they form a new team consisting of a representative for a specific course from every level (e.g., Team A: Level 1, 2, and 3). Examining a language curriculum horizontally and vertically ensures curricular alignment and that there is a smooth and linear progression in skills and knowledge within and across levels.

**3.3. Curriculum review and review execution: Sample tasks**

This subsection provides a sample curriculum review and revision tasks. Figure 2 offers a bird's eye view of a curriculum review and revision session.

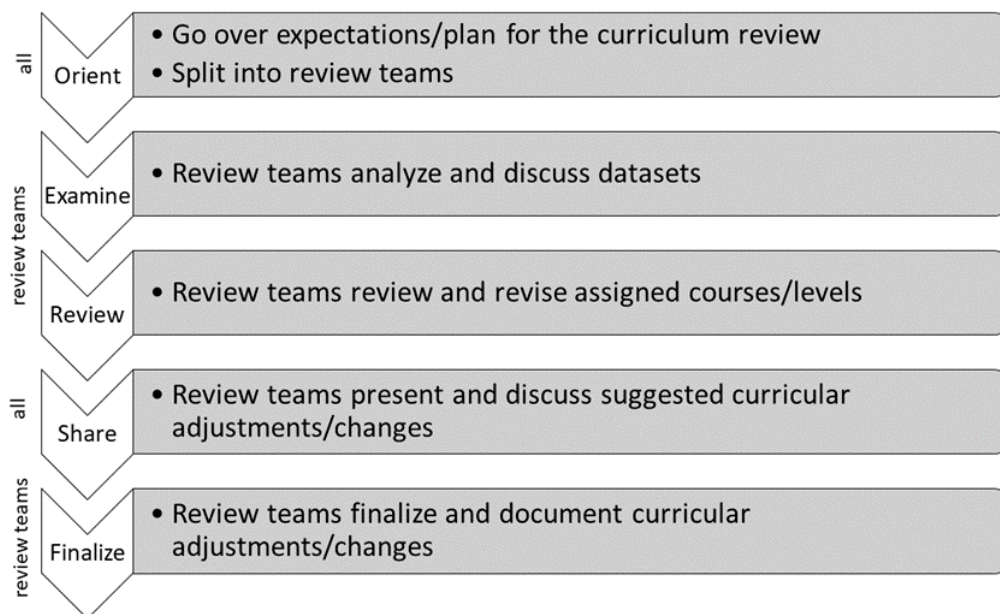


Figure 2. An Overview of a Curriculum Review and Revision Plan

A brief orientation meeting can be held before splitting into review teams to go over the agenda/guide, hand out any materials, and form review teams. Review teams need to be thoughtfully formed taking into account the level of experience with certain courses as well as group dynamics. Assigning roles to team members- such as facilitator, editor, timekeeper, and presenter- can make the process more efficient. The following are sample tasks that the review team complete in the order below following the backward design approach:



Figure 3. Order of Tasks Following the Backward Design Approach

- Task 1: Review of student achievement and student evaluation data
  - Examine the summary of progression rates from 2020-2021 and student evaluation data and for your assigned courses/level. Identify any inconsistencies in progression rates for your assigned level from one session to session and in comparison to data from other courses/levels in the *Analysis of Student Achievement Dataset Form* and note any trends in the summary of student evaluation data to be considered in the review.
- Task 2: Review course goals, objectives, SLOs, and then assessment events for your assigned level with regard to being measurable/assessable, clear, and well sequenced among and across levels and then make necessary revisions using track changes. For the process, please use the *Curriculum Mapping Tool* (see Table 2) and refer to the following guiding questions:
  - a. Does the course goal accurately and adequately capture the skills developed?
  - b. Are the course objectives and SLOs specific and focused (begin with an active verb)? [refer to the *Verb Wheel*]
  - c. Are the summative assessments outcome-based?
  - d. Can the SLOs be assessed and measured directly?
  - e. Are all SLOs addressed by assessments?
  - f. Are the course objectives and SLOs teachable within the semester length? [refer to the *Progression of Topic and Skills Chart*]
  - g. Does the sequencing of the course objectives and SLOs demonstrate a linear, smooth progression among and across levels? [refer to the *Progression of Topic and Skills Chart*]
  - h. Is the number of summative assessments reasonable?
- Task 3: Review and update the *Progression of Topic & Skills Chart* as needed using track changes.
- Task 4: Review required textbooks' alignment with course objectives and SLOs. Use the *Materials Review Chart* for this purpose.
- Task 5: Summarize and justify any changes/updates in the *Post Curriculum Review and Revision Form*.

After carrying out those tasks, a meeting can be held at which each review team presents proposed changes or modifications to the curriculum of their assigned courses/levels and explain the rationale behind those changes. This ensures that there is an agreement that the proposed changes are deemed necessary as course objectives/SLOs should be “collaboratively authored and collectively accepted” (Maki, 2010, p. 88). After this meeting, review teams can finalize the revision of the curriculum based on what was discussed and agreed upon.

### **3.4. Revised curriculum implementation**

Preferably, revisions by review teams are to be made to the original curriculum document electronically using track changes. The individual, committee, or task force responsible for coordinating and overseeing this process then finalizes those revisions and updates curriculum documents. The *Post Curriculum Review and Revision Forms* can be stored as documentation for the review process and also used for future curriculum and review sessions when needed. The implementation of the revised curriculum should be in accordance with the timeline specified in the curriculum review and revision written plan.

## **4. Conclusion**

The framework described here is flexible and can be adapted to better serve and fit a program's scope, structure, size, curriculum offerings, number of instructors, and session length. It is meant as an

inventory of resources and ideas to carry out curriculum review in a systematic manner guided by data and tools and operated by teachers. A wide range of procedures are offered, which could be overwhelming for a program commencing curriculum review for the first time. Curriculum review is an ongoing effort. It took several curriculum review and revision sessions to put those procedures in place, refine them, and develop materials and tools for the process. For a first-time curriculum review experience, I recommend planning a smaller number of tasks with a specific focus such as refining objective/SLO statements and mapping curriculum components. The ultimate goal of such processes is to cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and foster student success.

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